



# Hex You Very Much (Mistwhisper Falls Romances #1)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Lyra came to Mistwhisper Falls to renovate an inn—not accidentally unseal an ancient evil or bond herself to a broody alpha werewolf.

She was just the granddaughter, the outsider, the chaos witch with no formal training and a suitcase full of second chances. But the moment her palm touches the founder's rune buried beneath the inn's cellar, everything changes.

Power pulses through the town like a storm—awakening old magic, stirring something hungry beneath the falls, and tethering her to Cade Halloway, the town's impossibly hot, frustratingly protective pack alpha.

Now the supernatural council is watching her. The Mistbound is whispering her name. And the only way to fix the binding may require a bond that's deeper—and far more dangerous—than either of them are ready for.

She's supposed to save the town.

He's supposed to keep her from falling apart.

Too bad fate forgot to ask their opinion.

**Total Pages (Source):** 21

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:56 pm*

LYRA

The GPS had been lying to Lyra for the past forty minutes.

"Recalculating route," the mechanical voice announced for the seventh time, its tone somehow managing to sound both apologetic and smugly unhelpful. The little blue dot on her phone screen spun in confused circles before settling on a road that definitely hadn't existed three seconds ago.

"Oh, for the love of sage and sulfur," Lyra muttered, looping a strand of copper hair around her finger as she squinted through her windshield.

The mountain road ahead curved into mist so thick it looked like someone had dumped cotton batting across the asphalt.

Her ancient Honda Civic, packed to the point where she could barely see through the rear window, chugged up the incline with all the enthusiasm of a dying lawnmower.

The fog parted like theater curtains as she drove through it, revealing glimpses of towering pines and moss-covered stone formations that seemed too perfectly arranged to be natural.

A wooden sign materialized from the gray: "Welcome to Mistwhisper Falls - Population 847 - Elevation 3,200 feet - Founded 1847.

" Someone had added graffiti beneath in elegant script: "Where magic meets reality and buys it coffee. "

Lyra snorted a laugh. "Well, at least they have a sense of humor."

Her phone chimed with a new message from her mother: "Sweetheart, are you sure about this?"

It's not too late to come home. Your old job at the gallery is still—" Lyra swiped the notification away without reading the rest. She'd heard variations of that speech for the past month, ever since she'd announced her plans to renovate the inn her grandmother Vera had left her.

The same grandmother who'd died without speaking to her for eight years. The same grandmother whose final letter had been three sentences long: "The inn is yours now. Fix what I couldn't. The town needs you more than you know."

Cryptic old witch. Even in death, Vera couldn't resist being mysterious.

The road widened as Lyra entered what had to be the town proper, though "proper" seemed like a generous term.

Mistwhisper Falls looked like someone had taken a postcard from 1950 and dunked it in supernatural ambiance.

Victorian houses with gingerbread trim lined streets that curved with no apparent logic, their painted facades so vibrant they seemed to glow against the perpetual mist. Streetlamps flickered to life despite the fact that it was barely past noon, casting pools of warm amber light that made the fog dance.

A hand-painted sign pointed toward "Downtown District & Supernatural Services," which was either delightfully honest or the best tourist trap she'd ever seen.

Lyra parallel parked in front of Hartwell & Associates Law Office, a narrow building

wedged between a crystal shop and a place called "Moondrip Market" that had produce stacked outside despite the mist. Her amber eyes lit up as she spotted the vegetables—tomatoes that gleamed like rubies, carrots so orange they practically hummed with color, and herbs that made her magic tingle just looking at them.

The law office door chimed when she entered, a sound like tiny silver bells that seemed to linger longer than physics should allow. The receptionist, a woman who looked to be in her sixties with steel-gray hair and knowing eyes, looked up from her computer.

"Lyra Whitaker, I presume?" The woman's smile was warm but assessing. "I'm Margaret Hartwell. We've been expecting you."

"Have you now?" Lyra set her oversized purse on the counter, accidentally knocking over a pen holder. Three pens rolled across the floor, but instead of scattering randomly, they formed a perfect triangle. "Sorry, I'm like a walking chaos magnet. Always have been."

Margaret's eyebrows rose slightly. "Chaos magic. How refreshing. We haven't had one of those in town since—well, since your grandmother."

"Vera was a chaos witch?" Lyra blinked. That explained a lot, actually. The woman had always seemed to exist in the eye of some invisible storm, surrounded by beautiful disasters that somehow always worked out in the end.

"Among other things." Margaret pulled out a manila envelope thick with papers.

"Here are the keys to the Mist & Mirth Inn, along with the deed, insurance papers, and a list of local contractors who specialize in supernatural-friendly renovations.

You'll want to call them sooner rather than later—the inn has been empty for two

years, and old buildings with that much magical history tend to get. .. temperamental when neglected."

Lyra accepted the envelope, and the moment her fingers touched it, she felt a small shock of recognition. Magic recognized magic, and whatever was waiting for her at the inn had been calling to her long before she'd known she was coming.

"Is there anything I should know about the town? Any local customs or—" Lyra paused as a soft chiming filled the air. It wasn't coming from the door. Margaret was stirring her coffee with a spoon that glowed faintly blue.

"Just the usual small-town quirks," Margaret said, as if glowing cutlery was perfectly normal. "Most folks here are friendly enough, though we do value privacy. The supernatural community is well-integrated, but we prefer to keep our business... internal. I'm sure you understand."

Lyra nodded, though she wasn't entirely sure she did. Her magic had always been more instinct than education, much to Vera's frustration. "Is there somewhere I can grab lunch? I've been driving for hours, and my car's making sounds that suggest it might need a priest more than a mechanic."

"The Spellbound Sip is just down the street. Junie makes the best comfort food this side of the mountains, and her welcome muffins are legendary." Margaret's smile turned slightly mischievous. "Tell her I sent you. She'll take good care of you."

Twenty minutes later, Lyra pushed open the door to The Spellbound Sip and immediately felt like she'd stepped into someone's favorite dream.

The café was all mismatched furniture and hanging plants, with exposed brick walls covered in local art and enough candles to make a fire marshal weep.

The air smelled like cinnamon, coffee, and something indefinably magical—like the moment right before a thunderstorm, all potential and promise.

"You must be Vera's granddaughter."

Lyra turned to find a woman approaching with a coffee pot in one hand and a plate in the other.

She was maybe forty-five, with kind brown eyes and graying brown hair pulled back in a messy bun secured with what looked like knitting needles.

Her apron read "Blessed Be and Eat Your Vegetables" in cheerful script.

"Junie Matthews," the woman continued, setting the plate down at a corner table without being asked. "And before you say anything, yes, I knew you were coming. Word travels fast in a town this size, and Margaret called ahead. Sit, eat. You look like you haven't had a proper meal in days."

The muffin on the plate was enormous, studded with what looked like blueberries but sparkled slightly in the candlelight.

Lyra took a cautious bite and immediately felt tears prick her eyes.

The muffin tasted like her childhood kitchen on Sunday mornings, like her mother's laugh and the safety of being small enough to believe nothing bad could ever happen.

"What did you put in this?" Lyra managed, setting the muffin down before she started crying in earnest.

"Blueberries, lemon zest, and a touch of kitchen magic," Junie said matter-of-factly, pouring coffee into a mug that appeared to be handmade. "My welcome muffins

always taste like what you need most. Looks like you've been carrying some homesickness around."

"I left Portland three days ago to drive cross-country to a town I've never been to, to fix up an inn I've never seen, left to me by a grandmother who didn't speak to me for eight years.

" Lyra took another bite, savoring the complex emotions the muffin somehow managed to convey. "Homesickness seems reasonable."

"Vera was a complicated woman," Junie said gently, settling into the chair across from Lyra. "Brilliant, powerful, and absolutely terrible at apologies. But she loved you, honey. She talked about you all the time."

"She had a funny way of showing it." Lyra's voice came out sharper than she intended. "She cut me off completely after I graduated college. No calls, no letters, nothing."

"She was protecting you." Junie's voice carried the certainty of someone who knew more than she was saying. "This town, this place—it has a way of claiming people. Vera wanted you to have a choice about whether to come back."

"And now?"

"Now you're here." Junie smiled, and for a moment her eyes seemed to gleam with an inner light. "Which means you're ready."

Ready for what, Lyra wanted to ask, but something in Junie's expression suggested she wouldn't get a straight answer. Instead, she finished her coffee and muffin, paid for both despite Junie's protests, and gathered her courage for the next stop.

The Mist & Mirth Inn sat at the end of Founder's Row like a dowager empress who'd seen better decades.

The Victorian structure rose three stories against the backdrop of pine-covered mountains, its once-elegant gingerbread trim now chipped and faded.

The wraparound porch sagged slightly on one side, and several shutters hung at drunken angles.

Ivy had claimed most of the front facade, though whether it was regular ivy or something more supernatural was anyone's guess.

"Well," Lyra said to herself, climbing out of her car and stretching muscles cramped from hours of driving. "It's definitely got character."

The front door was painted a deep forest green that had faded to something closer to sage, and the brass nameplate read "Mist & Mirth Inn - Est. 1847" in elegant script. The same year the town was founded, Lyra noted. Vera's family had been here from the beginning.

The key turned easily in the lock, which was either a good sign or meant the door hadn't been properly secured in two years.

The hinges creaked as Lyra pushed inside, and she was immediately hit with the smell of dust, old wood, and something deeper, something that called to her magic, making it stir restlessly in her chest.

The entry hall was grand in the way of old buildings, with a sweeping staircase that curved up toward the second floor and hardwood floors that probably looked magnificent under all the dust. A reception desk sat to one side, its surface covered with a sheet that had once been white.



To her left, double doors opened into what was probably the main parlor.

To her right, a hallway disappeared toward what she assumed was the kitchen.

Lyra set her purse on the reception desk and pulled out her phone to take pictures for the insurance company.

The camera app opened, but instead of showing her the dusty entry hall, the screen displayed a view of the parlor—warm and welcoming, with a fire crackling in the hearth and fresh flowers on every surface.

She blinked, and the image returned to normal.

"Probably just tired," she muttered, though her magic was humming with increasing interest. Old buildings with strong magical histories sometimes retained impressions of their glory days. It wasn't unusual for sensitive people to catch glimpses of the past.

She wandered through the ground floor, taking mental notes.

The kitchen was surprisingly modern, probably updated within the last decade.

The parlor had good bones despite the dust and cobwebs.

A small library off the main hall made her heart skip—floor-to-ceiling bookshelves and a reading nook by the window that would be perfect on rainy days.

The dining room could seat twenty easily, and glass doors opened onto a back patio that overlooked the garden.

Or what had probably been a garden before two years of neglect turned it into a

jungle.

Through the overgrowth, she could see the glimmer of water—the falls the town was named for, most likely.

Lyra was examining the built-in china cabinet when she heard it: the unmistakable sound of footsteps on the floor above.

She froze, listening. The footsteps moved across the ceiling with purpose, as if someone was walking from the front of the building toward the back. They paused directly overhead, then started up again, this time moving toward what sounded like the staircase.

"Hello?" Lyra called out, her voice echoing in the empty room. "Is someone up there?"

The footsteps stopped.

Lyra waited, her heart beating faster than it should. She was alone in the building. She'd unlocked the front door herself, and there hadn't been any cars in the overgrown driveway. But the footsteps had been too steady, too purposeful to be settling wood or pipes.

"Margaret sent me," she called up the stairs, feeling slightly ridiculous but unwilling to investigate alone. "I'm Vera's granddaughter. Lyra."

Silence.

She pulled out her phone to call Margaret, but the screen showed no signal bars. Not unusual in the mountains, but the timing felt significant. Everything in Mistwhisper Falls felt significant, like the town itself was watching and waiting to see what she'd

do next.

The footsteps started again, this time descending the stairs.

Lyra backed toward the front door, her magic sparking involuntarily around her fingers. Whatever was upstairs was coming down to meet her, and she had the distinct feeling that this particular welcome committee wasn't going to offer her a muffin.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:56 pm*

CADE

Lyra woke the next morning with the kind of determination that usually preceded either great success or spectacular disaster.

She'd spent the night at Mistwhisper Falls' only bed and breakfast—a charming place called The Moonbeam Lodge run by a cheerful vampire who'd insisted on making her breakfast despite the sun streaming through the windows.

"Supernatural-friendly," she muttered, lacing up her combat boots and surveying the demolition supplies she'd picked up from the local hardware store.

The shop owner, a gruff man with suspiciously pointed ears, had given her a knowing look when she'd requested "the good stuff" and thrown in a pair of work gloves that supposedly repelled negative energy.

The inn looked less intimidating in the morning light, though no less mysterious. Whatever had been making those footsteps yesterday had either left or decided to stay quiet. Lyra had chosen to interpret the silence as a good sign.

She cranked up her music—a playlist titled "Renovation Rampage" that started with vintage rock and escalated to pure chaos—and got to work.

The first order of business was clearing out decades of accumulated furniture and debris.

Most of it was beyond saving, but she found a few gems: an ornate mirror that

hummed with protective magic, a set of crystal doorknobs that glowed softly when touched, and a wooden chest filled with what resembled spell components.

"Okay, Grandma Vera," Lyra said, hefting a particularly ugly lamp shaped like a ceramic duck. "I'm starting to get why you and Mom never saw eye to eye."

She'd been working for three hours when she realized her magic was making the job considerably easier than it should have been.

Boxes that should have required two people to move floated obediently behind her like oversized balloons.

Dust and debris swirled themselves into neat piles without her conscious direction.

Even the music seemed to be helping—the bass line was actually vibrating loose nails out of the walls.

"Well, that's about as useful as a chocolate teapot," she said to herself, then paused. Her magic had never been this responsive before. Usually, it took conscious effort and specific intent to make things happen. This felt more like the inn itself was eager to be renovated.

By noon, she'd cleared the entire first floor and was ready to tackle the cellar.

The basement access was through a door behind the kitchen that opened onto steep wooden stairs disappearing into darkness.

The air that drifted up smelled of earth and stone and something else—something that made her magic curl with interest.

"Right then," Lyra said, flicking on her phone's flashlight. "Let's see what mysteries

you're hiding down there."

The cellar was larger than she'd expected, with stone walls that looked original to the building and a dirt floor that was surprisingly level.

Shelves lined one wall, holding jars of preserved.

.. things she wasn't ready to identify. Another wall featured what seemed to be a wine rack, though the bottles were covered in dust so thick their labels were illegible.

But it was the floor that caught her attention. Beneath decades of accumulated grime, she could make out the edges of stones that had been deliberately placed. The pattern wasn't random—it looked almost like a mosaic, though she couldn't make out the design through the dirt.

"Huh. Wonder what you're supposed to be."

Lyra grabbed a broom from upstairs and started sweeping.

The more she cleared away, the more intrigued she became.

The stones were different colors—some dark gray, others pale blue, and a few that looked almost silver in the flashlight beam.

They'd been arranged in concentric circles around a central point, with symbols carved into some of them that made her eyes water if she looked too closely.

She was halfway through the cleaning when her broom hit something that definitely wasn't floor.

"What the—" Lyra knelt down and brushed away the remaining dirt with her hands.

Embedded in the center of the stone pattern was something that made her breath catch.

It looked like a piece of obsidian the size of a dinner plate, perfectly round and polished to a mirror shine.

But running through its center was a crack that thrummed with a rhythm all its own.

The crack looked fresh, as if something had struck the stone recently. But that was impossible—the cellar had been sealed when she'd arrived, and the layer of dust suggested no one had been down here in years.

Lyra sat back on her heels, studying the stone. Her magic was practically humming now, drawn to whatever was embedded in the floor. The crack seemed to pulse in rhythm with her heartbeat, and she could swear she heard something—a whisper so faint it might have been her imagination.

"Okay, mystery stone," she said, twirling a burnished curl in absent distraction. "What's your story?"

She reached out tentatively, intending to just touch the edge, see if she could get a sense of what kind of magic she was dealing with. Her grandmother had always said the best way to understand something magical was to listen to what it was trying to tell you.

The moment her palm made contact with the obsidian surface, the world exploded.

Power surged through her like lightning, wild and ancient and utterly uncontrolled.

Her chaos magic, usually as manageable as an enthusiastic puppy, roared to life with the force of a wildfire.

The stone beneath her hand blazed with light that turned the dark cellar bright as noon as though an ancient force stirred beneath the foundation of the inn.

Lyra tried to pull her hand away, but her palm seemed fused to the stone. Magic poured through her in waves that made her teeth ache and her vision blur. She could hear herself screaming, but the sound seemed to come from very far away.

The crack in the stone widened.

Miles away, in the middle of his morning patrol through the forest preserve, Cade Halloway stumbled as if he'd been punched in the chest. His wolf surged to the surface so fast he barely had time to brace himself, every instinct screaming that something was wrong.

Power rolled across the landscape like a shockwave, raising the hair on his arms and sending every animal within a five-mile radius into panicked flight. Birds exploded from the trees in black clouds. Deer crashed through underbrush in their desperation to escape. Even the insects fell silent.

Cade's phone buzzed with emergency calls—pack members checking in, town council members demanding answers he didn't have. But beneath the chaos of voices, he could hear something else. A call that bypassed his ears entirely and hit him somewhere deeper, more primal.

His mate was in danger.

The thought stopped him cold. He didn't have a mate. Had never found one, despite being thirty-two and pack alpha for five years and he has given up. His wolf had shown interest in precisely no one, much to the disappointment of every eligible female in a fifty-mile radius.



But that pull, that desperate need to run toward the source of the magical disturbance, felt like nothing else in his experience. It felt like coming home and losing everything all at once.

"Shit," Cade muttered, already sprinting toward his truck. His wolf wanted to shift and run flat-out, but he could move faster on four wheels than four paws. Besides, if his instincts were right, he was going to need opposable thumbs.

The magical pulse had come from the direction of town, somewhere near the old inn that had been empty since Vera Whitaker's death. But Vera's granddaughter was supposed to arrive this week—Margaret had mentioned something about renovations at the last council meeting.

Cade's truck ate up the miles between the preserve and Founder's Row, his knuckles white on the steering wheel.

The magical disturbance was tapering off, but he could still feel it like a low-grade fever in his bones.

Whatever had happened, it was big enough to wake things that should have stayed sleeping.

The inn's front door was standing open, which was either a good sign or a very bad one.

Cade could smell magic in the air—wild and chaotic and tinged with something ancient that made his wolf pace restlessly.

But underneath it was something else, something that made every protective instinct he possessed roar to life.

Honey and copper and summer storms. Female. Powerful. His.

"Hello?" he called, stepping through the front door. "Is anyone here?"

No answer, but the scent trail led toward the kitchen.

Cade followed it, his senses on high alert.

The inn felt different than it had two years ago—more alive, more aware.

Magic clung to the walls like residue, and he could see the ghostly impressions of recent spellwork in the way the dust had been disturbed.

The cellar door was open, and from the basement came a faint glow that definitely wasn't electric lighting.

Cade took the stairs three at a time, following the scent and the pull of something his wolf recognized even if his human brain was still catching up.

The cellar had been transformed—what had once been a storage space was now revealed as something far more significant.

Ancient stones formed a pattern on the floor.

In the center, a woman lay unconscious with her palm pressed against a cracked obsidian stone that pulsed with dying light.

She was beautiful in the way of summer storms—all wild copper curls and golden skin dusted with freckles. Even unconscious, she radiated power that made his wolf want to roll over and show his throat. But it was her scent that nearly brought him to his knees.

Mate. His wolf's voice was certain and smug. Finally.

"Oh, hell," Cade muttered, kneeling beside her and checking for a pulse. Strong and steady, though her skin was burning up. Whatever she'd touched, it had channeled enough power through her to light up half the county. "What did you do?"

He tried to pull her fingers free of the rune, though her palm seemed fused to its surface. The moment he touched her, though, her magic recognized his. The chaotic energy that had been crackling around her like static electricity calmed, drawn to the steady anchor of his wolf.

Her eyes snapped open, amber shot with gold, and focused on his face with surprising clarity.

"You have really nice eyes," she said conversationally, then passed out again.

Cade sat back on his heels, staring down at the unconscious woman who'd just turned his carefully ordered world upside down.

The stone under her palm was definitely a founder's rune—he'd heard enough stories from the elders to recognize one.

But founder's runes were supposed to be dormant, their power bound safely away from anyone who might accidentally trigger them.

Clearly, no one had informed Vera's granddaughter about that particular safety feature.

The rune's glow was fading, but the crack in its surface seemed to glow with an independent heartbeat. Whatever she'd awakened, it wasn't going back to sleep anytime soon. And if his instincts were right, this was just the beginning.

Cade gathered the unconscious witch into his arms, her magic humming contentedly against his skin, and headed for the stairs. He needed to get her somewhere safe, call the council, and figure out what the hell they were dealing with.

But first, he had to resist the urge to carry her straight to his den and keep her there until he was certain she was safe. His wolf was making increasingly persuasive arguments about the benefits of that particular plan.

"Easy there," he murmured to himself as much as to her. "Let's figure out what she's awakened before we start planning the claiming ceremony."

Though from the way his wolf was already mentally measuring her for a permanent place in their lives, Cade suspected that particular conversation was going to be more negotiation than decision.

Behind them, the cracked rune stone pulsed once more with fading light, and somewhere deep beneath the foundation of the inn, something ancient stirred in its sleep.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:56 pm*

LYRA

Cade's first mistake was thinking he could carry an unconscious chaos witch upstairs without consequences.

His second was underestimating how quickly she'd wake up.

Lyra's magic hummed against his skin like a living thing as he navigated the narrow cellar stairs, her weight surprisingly solid in his arms. She smelled like honey and copper pennies and something wild that made his wolf pace restlessly just beneath his skin.

Every instinct he possessed was screaming at him to find somewhere safe and defensible, preferably with only one entrance he could guard.

The inn's kitchen seemed like neutral territory—close enough to the cellar if something went wrong, but far enough from the founder's rune that her magic might settle.

Cade settled her onto one of the mismatched chairs around the old farmhouse table, noting the way her copper curls caught the afternoon light streaming through dust-moted windows.

She was beautiful in a way that hit him like a physical blow. Not the polished, careful beauty he was used to seeing at pack gatherings, but something wilder and more honest. Even unconscious, she radiated power that made his teeth ache.

His wolf was absolutely beside itself with smug satisfaction. Mate, it kept insisting. Finally. Claim her. Keep her.

"Shut up," Cade muttered under his breath, running a hand through his dark hair. The last thing he needed was his wolf deciding to make life decisions for both of them.

Lyra stirred, her amber eyes fluttering open and immediately focusing on his face with startling clarity. For a moment, they simply stared at each other—him frozen in place by the weight of recognition, her blinking in apparent confusion.

Then her gaze sharpened, taking in his unfamiliar face, the fact that she was no longer in the cellar, and the way he was standing way too close to her personal space.

"Okay," she said, her voice surprisingly steady for someone who'd just been magically knocked unconscious.

"So either I'm having the weirdest fever dream of my life, or there's a strange man in my kitchen.

" She paused, tilting her head. "Please tell me you're the fever dream, because the alternative means I need to find a weapon. "

Cade took a careful step back, raising his hands in what he hoped was a non-threatening gesture. "You're not dreaming. I'm Cade Holloway. I felt the magical surge and came to investigate."

"Felt it?" Lyra's eyebrows rose as she pushed herself upright in the chair. "From where, exactly?"

"The forest preserve, about fifteen miles northeast of here." He watched her process that information, saw the moment she realized the implications. "That was a hell of a

light show you put on down there."

"I didn't put on anything," Lyra said, though her defensive tone suggested she wasn't entirely convinced. "I just touched the stone and then—" She looked down at her palm, where a faint silvery mark now gleamed against her skin. "Oh. That's new."

Before Cade could respond, Lyra was on her feet and moving toward the kitchen drawers with purpose. She yanked one open, rummaged around for a moment, then turned back to face him with a butter knife clutched in her fist.

"Right," she said, pointing the dull blade in his general direction.

"Here's what's going to happen. You're going to explain who you are, how you got into my inn, and why you were touching me while I was unconscious.

And you're going to do it from over there.

" She gestured with the knife toward the far side of the kitchen.

Cade stared at her for a moment, then felt his mouth twitch despite himself. "You're threatening me with a butter knife."

"It's what was available," Lyra said matter-of-factly. "And I'm very creative with kitchen utensils when properly motivated."

His wolf found her bravado absolutely delightful, which was both inconvenient and completely inappropriate given the circumstances.

Cade forced himself to focus on the practical issues.

"Your front door was open. I could smell magic from the street, and when no one

answered.

.." He shrugged. "I followed the trail to the cellar and found you unconscious on the floor. "

"Following mysterious magical trails is just a normal Tuesday for you?"

"In this town? Pretty much." Cade crossed his arms, trying to ignore the way her scent was making it difficult to think clearly. "You're Vera's granddaughter. Lyra."

It wasn't a question, but she nodded anyway. "And you're...?"

"Pack alpha for this territory. Which makes your little light show my responsibility."

Lyra lowered the butter knife slightly. "Pack alpha. As in werewolf pack alpha?"

"Wolf shifter," Cade corrected automatically. "And before you ask, yes, we're integrated with the human community. No, we don't go around biting people. And yes, what you just did downstairs is going to cause problems."

"What kind of problems?"

Cade opened his mouth to explain about founder's runes and ancient seals and the delicate magical balance that kept Mistwhisper Falls hidden from the outside world, then stopped.

How did you explain centuries of supernatural politics to someone who'd clearly been kept in the dark about her own heritage?

"The kind that require a town council meeting and probably several very uncomfortable conversations," he said finally. "That stone you touched—it's been



dormant for over a century. Whatever you did to wake it up, it's going to have consequences."

"I didn't do anything," Lyra said, but her voice lacked conviction. "I just touched it. People touch things all the time without causing magical explosions."

"People, yes. Chaos witches with founder bloodlines, apparently not so much."

Lyra set the butter knife down on the counter with a decisive click. "Okay, that's the second time someone's mentioned founder bloodlines to me in two days. What does that even mean?"

Before Cade could answer, the front door chimed and footsteps echoed through the inn. "Lyra? Are you decent? Because I come bearing caffeine and answers to questions you didn't know you had."

"In here," Lyra called, then shot Cade a look that clearly said this conversation wasn't over.

A man appeared in the kitchen doorway carrying a cardboard tray with three coffee cups and wearing the kind of smile that suggested he knew exactly how much chaos he was walking into.

He was tall and lean, with sharp cheekbones and pale eyes that seemed to catch light like water.

His dark hair was perfectly tousled in a way that probably took effort, and he moved with the fluid grace of someone who'd never been clumsy in his life.

"Nico Beaumont," he said, setting the coffee tray on the table and extending a hand to Lyra. "I run The Gossamer Grimoire. And you, my dear, have had quite the exciting

afternoon."

Lyra shook his hand, then immediately pulled away with a small frown. "You're cold."

"Fae metabolism," Nico said cheerfully, as if that explained everything. "We run a bit cooler than most. Cade, looking particularly grim today. I take it you felt our new resident's magical debut?"

"Half the supernatural population within twenty miles felt it," Cade said, accepting one of the coffee cups with a nod of thanks. "What do you know about founder's runes?"

"Considerably more than either of you, I'd imagine." Nico settled into one of the kitchen chairs with feline grace. "Though I have to say, Lyra, your timing is impeccable. Most people manage at least a week in Mistwhisper Falls before they accidentally activate ancient magical artifacts."

"I'm an overachiever," Lyra said dryly, wrapping her hands around her coffee cup. The warmth seemed to ground her, and Cade noticed some of the chaotic energy around her settle. "So this founder's rune thing—it's important?"

"Important enough that it's been sleeping peacefully under your grandmother's inn for the better part of two centuries," Nico said.

"The founders of Mistwhisper Falls weren't just ordinary settlers, you see.

They were the three legendary entities of immense power of their time—a witch, a wolf, and a fae. They came here for a reason."

"What reason?" Lyra asked.

Nico's smile turned mysterious. "To bind something that needed binding. To seal something that needed sealing. The runes they left behind are part of that binding—locks on a door that was meant to stay closed."

Cade felt his wolf tense at the implications. "And now one of those locks is cracked."

"Cracked, but not broken," Nico said quickly. "Though I suspect that's more due to Lyra's particular magical signature than any inherent stability in the binding itself."

"My magical signature?"

"Chaos magic with a founder bloodline twist," Nico explained. "Your grandmother Vera was descended from the original witch founder. That's why the rune responded to you—it recognized you as family."

Lyra sat back in her chair, looking stunned. "Vera never told me any of this."

"Vera was protecting you," Cade said, surprising himself by speaking up. "Knowledge like this... it comes with responsibilities. Obligations."

"What kind of obligations?" Lyra's voice had gone carefully neutral, but Cade could smell the wariness radiating off her.

"The kind that tie you to this place," Nico said gently. "The kind that make it very difficult to leave."

Lyra stood up abruptly, pacing to the window that overlooked the overgrown garden. "I just wanted to renovate an inn. Fix up the place, maybe turn it into a successful business. I didn't sign up for ancient magical responsibilities."

"None of us sign up for what we are," Cade said, his voice rougher than he intended.

"But that doesn't change the reality."

She turned to face him, and something in her expression made his chest tighten. "And what reality is that?"

"That you're not just Vera's granddaughter anymore. You're a founder descendant who's awakened a rune that's been dormant for centuries. Whether you like it or not, you're part of this town's magical ecosystem now."

"And if I don't want to be?"

The question hung in the air like a challenge.

Cade felt his wolf surge beneath his skin, responding to what it perceived as a threat to their mate's safety.

The idea of her leaving, of walking away from Mistwhisper Falls and never coming back, sent a spike of something dangerously close to panic through his system.

His control, already strained from being in close proximity to her scent, began to slip.

"That's not really an option," he said, his voice dipped to a low rumble that made pack members step carefully around him.

Lyra's eyes narrowed. "Excuse me?"

"The rune is bound to you now. Leaving town would be..." Cade paused, trying to find a way to explain without sounding like he was threatening her. "Inadvisable."

"Inadvisable," Lyra repeated flatly. "As in dangerous, or as in you and your pack won't let me?"

Cade's wolf was pacing now, agitated by her obvious distress and his own inability to simply claim her and be done with it. The rational part of his mind knew he was handling this badly, but the scent of her magic and the pull of the mate bond was making it difficult to think clearly.

"As in the magical consequences could be severe," he managed. "For you and for the town."

"How convenient."

Nico cleared his throat delicately. "Perhaps we should table this discussion for now. Lyra's had quite enough revelations for one day, and Cade, you're looking a bit..." He paused, his pale eyes flicking to Cade's face. "Stressed."

Cade caught his reflection in the window and swore silently. His eyes had shifted from their normal forest green to the gold of his wolf, and his hands were clenched into fists to hide the way his nails had begun to extend into claws.

"I should go," he said abruptly, heading for the kitchen door.

"Wait," Lyra called after him. "We're not done talking about this."

Cade paused in the doorway, not trusting himself to turn around. "Yes, we are. For now."

"Like hell we are. You can't just drop a magical destiny bomb on me and then walk away."

"I can and I am." Cade's voice came out as more growl than speech. "Stay away from the seal, Lyra. Whatever you do, don't touch it again until we figure out what we're dealing with."

"Or what?"

Cade turned then, knowing it was a mistake even as he did it.

Lyra was standing with her hands on her hips, copper curls escaping from her ponytail and amber eyes blazing with frustrated defiance.

She looked magnificent and dangerous and utterly unaware of the effect she was having on his rapidly fraying self-control.

"Or I'll have to stop you," he said quietly.

The threat hung between them like a live wire. Lyra's magic sparked visibly around her fingers, flaring in rhythm with her feelings, and Cade felt his wolf respond in kind. The air in the kitchen grew thick with supernatural tension.

"I'd like to see you try," Lyra said, her voice deadly calm.

Cade's control snapped.

For a heartbeat, he let his wolf surface completely—eyes blazing gold, power radiating from him in waves that made the windows rattle. Lyra took an involuntary step back, her magic flaring in response to the perceived threat.

Then Cade got himself back under control, shoving his wolf down with an effort that left him shaking.

"Stay away from it," he repeated, his voice carefully controlled. "I mean it."

He left before either of them could respond, the front door slamming shut behind him with enough force to rattle the entire inn.

In the kitchen, Nico sipped his coffee and watched Lyra stare at the empty doorway.

"Well," he said finally. "That went about as well as expected."

"Is he always that charming?" Lyra asked, her voice slightly breathless.

"Oh, my dear," Nico said with obvious amusement. "You haven't seen anything yet."

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:56 pm*

CADE

Lyra lasted exactly forty-seven minutes after Cade's dramatic exit before her curiosity won the battle against common sense.

She'd spent those forty-seven minutes pacing the inn's main floor, ostensibly cleaning but mostly working herself into a righteous fury.

Who did he think he was, storming into her inherited property and issuing orders like some kind of supernatural dictator?

And what was with that whole intimidation display—the golden eyes and the way the windows had rattled when he'd lost his temper?

More importantly, why had her magic responded to his presence like it recognized something familiar?

Nico had made his excuses and left shortly after Cade's departure, but not before pressing a business card into her hand. "For when you inevitably decide to ignore the alpha's very reasonable advice," he'd said with that knowing smile. "Call me before you do anything spectacularly dangerous."

Now, as afternoon shadows stretched across the kitchen floor, Lyra found herself staring at the cellar door with the kind of focus that usually preceded her most spectacular mistakes.

"He said stay away from the rune," she muttered, twisting a copper curl around her



finger. "He didn't say anything about not looking at it."

It was a flimsy justification and she knew it, but her magic had been humming restlessly ever since she'd woken up in Cade's arms. The silvery rune on her palm seemed to pulse with its own rhythm, and every instinct she possessed was pulling her back toward the cellar.

Besides, it was her inn. Her grandmother's legacy. If there was some kind of ancient magical artifact buried in the basement, didn't she have a right to understand what she was dealing with?

"Just a quick look," Lyra told herself, grabbing a flashlight from the kitchen drawer. "No touching. Just... observation."

The cellar felt different when she descended the stairs.

The air was charged with residual energy from her earlier magical explosion, and the stone mosaic on the floor seemed to shimmer in the flashlight beam.

But it was the sigil left by the founders in the center that drew her attention like a magnet.

The obsidian stone was still cracked down the middle, but the fissure no longer pulsed with light.

Instead, it seemed to absorb the beam of her flashlight, creating a pool of absolute darkness so intense it seared into her vision.

The symbols carved around its perimeter were clearer now, as if her magical contact had somehow sharpened their definition.

Lyra knelt beside the rune, careful to keep her hands well away from its surface.

Up close, she could see that the symbols weren't random—they formed a pattern that reminded her of circuit boards or maybe astronomical charts.

Lines connected various points, creating a network of relationships that her chaos magic instinctively tried to interpret.

"What were you meant to do?" she asked the stone, as if it might answer. "And why did you react to me like that?"

The silence stretched for several minutes before Lyra noticed something that made her heart skip. The crack in the stone wasn't just a fissure—it was shaped like something. A tree, maybe, or a river system. The more she stared at it, the more it looked like a map.

"Son of a hex," she breathed, leaning closer. "You're not just a lock, are you? You're a key."

That's when she noticed the second thing that should have sent her running upstairs: the silvery sigil on her palm was glowing.

Not brightly, just a soft luminescence that matched the wavelength of the symbols around the rune's edge. As she watched, fascinated despite herself, the glow intensified slightly, as if responding to her proximity to the stone.

"Okay, that's probably bad," Lyra said, but she didn't move away.

Her magic was practically singing now, recognizing something in the ancient artifact that her conscious mind couldn't quite grasp.

It felt like standing on the edge of a vast library and knowing that all the answers she'd ever wanted were just within reach.

The sigil on her palm pulsed once, twice, then settled into a steady glow that illuminated the stone's surface in ways her flashlight couldn't. New symbols became visible in the rune's depths—not carved but somehow embedded in the obsidian itself, as if they'd been written in light and frozen in stone.

"Holy sage," Lyra whispered, reaching out instinctively to trace one of the newly visible patterns.

The moment her fingertip made contact with the stone's surface, the world exploded into sensation.

This time, though, there was no violent surge of uncontrolled power. Instead, knowledge flowed into her mind like water filling a vessel—images, emotions, and memories that weren't her own but somehow felt familiar anyway.

She saw three figures standing around the rune in this very cellar, but the cellar was different—newer, cleaner, lit by torches that cast dancing shadows on stone walls.

A woman with copper hair and amber eyes that looked disturbingly like Lyra's own.

A man who moved with predatory grace and eyes that flashed gold in the torchlight.

And a third figure, tall and ethereal, with pale skin and dark hair and features that seemed to shift when she tried to focus on them.

The founder's trinity. Witch, wolf, and fae, working together to bind something that thrashed and raged beneath the stone floor.

Lyra could feel its hunger, its desperate desire to break free and reclaim what it believed was rightfully its. The thing beneath the rune wasn't just dangerous—it was ancient beyond measure and absolutely furious about being contained.

But the founders had been clever. They hadn't just built a prison; they'd built a lock that could only be opened by their own bloodlines working together.

Three keys for three locks, with safeguards built in to prevent any single descendant from accidentally releasing what they'd worked so hard to contain.

The vision shifted, showing her the years that followed.

The founders aging and dying, their descendants spreading across the country but always maintaining some connection to Mistwhisper Falls.

The rune sleeping peacefully beneath the inn, its power held in careful balance by protections that had held for over two centuries.

Until today.

Until her.

The knowledge struck her like a blow: she hadn't just cracked the rune's surface. She'd awakened it. And in awakening it, she'd begun a process that couldn't be undone without the help of the other founder bloodlines.

The wolf and the fae. Like Cade. Like Nico.

"Oh," Lyra breathed, understanding flooding through her. "Oh, no."

She attempted to break contact with the stone, yet it was too late. The rune had

recognized her, claimed her, marked her as one of its three keys. Power flowed up through her fingertips—not violent this time, but inexorable, like tide coming in.

The silvery mark on her palm began to burn.

Not with heat, but with a cold fire that seemed to rewrite her very DNA.

She could feel the magic changing her, connecting her to the rune and through it to the sleeping thing beneath the inn.

The markings etched onto her palm spread, creating delicate trceries that spiraled up her wrist like living tattoos.

Lyra opened her mouth to scream, but no sound came out. The power was too vast, too ancient, too utterly beyond anything her chaos magic was equipped to handle. She was drowning in sensation, lost in the weight of centuries and the terrible responsibility that came with founder blood.

That's when she notices the creak of footsteps on the cellar stairs.

"Lyra!" Cade's voice, sharp with panic and something akin to fury. "What did you do?"

She tried to answer, tried to explain, but the words wouldn't come.

The link between her and the rune was complete now, unbreakable, and she could feel it pulling at something deep in her chest. Her magic, her life force, her very sense of self—all of it flowing into the ancient stone and the sleeping entity beneath.

Strong arms wrapped around her waist, hauling her backward. The moment Cade touched her, though, everything changed.

His wolf's power slammed into the connection like a dam breaking. Suddenly she could breathe again, think again, exist as something more than just a conduit for ancient magic. The burning in her palm subsided to a manageable ache, and the world stopped spinning quite so violently.

But Cade wasn't unaffected by the contact.

At the first spark of contact between them, Lyra felt his wolf surge to the surface with an intensity that made her earlier magical explosion look like a gentle breeze.

Power radiated from him in waves that made the cellar walls vibrate, and she could feel his human control slipping away like water through her fingers.

"Cade," she gasped, still clinging to his arms. "You need to let go."

"Can't," he growled, his voice deeper than it had been upstairs, rougher. "The connection—I can feel what you're feeling. What you're bound to."

His eyes were pure gold now, no trace of green left in them. When he spoke, she could see fangs that definitely hadn't been there a moment ago. "The thing under the rune. It's aware of you now. Aware and interested."

Lyra shivered at the hunger she'd sensed in the vision, the patient malevolence that had been waiting beneath the inn for so long. "How bad is 'interested'?"

"Bad enough that you're not staying here alone tonight," Cade said, then seemed to realize what he'd just said. His grip on her loosened slightly, though he didn't let go completely. "I mean?—"

"You mean you're going into full alpha protection mode," Lyra finished, surprised by how unsurprised she was by the prospect. Something about being in his arms felt

right in a way that should have been alarming but somehow wasn't.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:56 pm*

"Something like that." Cade's voice was still rough, but some of the wildness had faded from his eyes. "Can you stand?"

"I think so." Lyra tested her legs, grateful when they held her weight. The silvery marks on her palm and wrist had stopped spreading, settling into an intricate pattern that looked almost like circuitry. "The rune—it's different now."

They both looked down at the obsidian stone.

The crack was still there, but it no longer looked like damage.

Instead, it seemed purposeful, like a door that had been opened just a crack.

Light leaked through the fissure—not the harsh white light from before, but something softer and more complex, like moonlight filtered through water.

"It's claimed you," Cade said, his voice carefully neutral. "I can smell it on your magic."

"Claimed me how?"

Before Cade could answer, footsteps echoed on the stairs again. Nico appeared in the cellar doorway, took one look at the scene, and sighed dramatically.

"Well," he said, settling onto the bottom step with practiced ease. "I see we've moved past the 'look but don't touch' phase of supernatural crisis management."



"She's marked," Cade said without preamble. "The rune's bound to her now."

"I can see that." Nico's pale eyes studied the patterns on Lyra's palm with professional interest. "Quite elegantly done, actually. Much more sophisticated than the usual founder's mark."

"The usual founder's mark?" Lyra held up her hand, staring at the silvery trceries. "This happens to other people?"

"Not for about two hundred years," Nico said cheerfully.

"But theoretically, yes. Each founder bloodline carries the potential for bonding with their ancestral rune.

Most people never get close enough to trigger it, and those who do usually have the good sense not to touch ancient magical artifacts with their bare hands. "

"So what does this mean?" Lyra gestured at her marked palm. "Am I stuck here now? Magically bound to the inn forever?"

"Not exactly." Nico rose from the step and moved closer to examine the rune itself. "The mark creates a connection, not a leash. You're tied to the rune's purpose now, which means you're tied to keeping the seal strong."

"What seal?"

"The one that's been keeping something very old and very hungry locked beneath this inn for the past two centuries," Nico said matter-of-factly. "The same something that's been stirring ever since you first touched the rune."

Dread washed the color from her face. "Please tell me you're joking."

"I'm afraid not." Nico's expression turned serious. "The founders didn't just build a town here, Lyra. They built a prison. And you've just volunteered to be one of its wardens."

"Volunteered?" Lyra's voice rose an octave. "I didn't volunteer for anything! I just touched a stone!"

"An ancient magical artifact that your bloodline was specifically designed to interface with," Nico corrected gently. "The choice was made the moment you inherited founder blood. Touching the rune just... activated your inheritance."

Cade's arm tightened around her waist, and Lyra realized she was swaying on her feet. The weight of responsibility, of ancient magic and terrible purpose, was settling over her like a lead blanket.

"I can't do this," she whispered. "I'm not equipped for ancient seals and magical prisons. I make pottery explode when I'm nervous."

"Your chaos magic is actually perfect for this," Nico said, surprising her. "The seal requires constant small adjustments to maintain stability. Chaos magic is inherently adaptable, able to respond to changing conditions without conscious direction."

"That doesn't make me feel better."

"It should." Cade's voice was quiet but certain. "You're not doing this alone."

Lyra looked up at him, startled by the unshakable certainty in his tone. "What do you mean?"

"The founders' binding required three bloodlines," Nico explained. "Witch, wolf, and fae. The seal is stronger when all three are present and working together."

"You're saying we're all connected to this thing now?"

"We always were," Cade said. "We just didn't know it until you woke everything up."

Lyra stared down at the rune, at the soft light leaking through its crack, and felt the weight of centuries pressing down on her shoulders. Her grandmother's legacy wasn't just an inn—it was a responsibility that stretched back to the founding of Mistwhisper Falls itself.

"Holy sage," she breathed. "What have I gotten myself into?"

"Something much larger than any of us expected," Nico said. "But also something that might finally bring balance back to this town."

"Balance?"

"The seal has been weakening for decades," Nico explained. "Without active founder bloodlines to maintain it, it's been slowly degrading. Your awakening the rune might actually be the key to strengthening it again."

Lyra looked between them—the grumpy wolf shifter who'd carried her to safety and the mysterious fae who seemed to know far more than he was telling—and felt something settle in her chest. Fear, yes, but also a strange sense of rightness.

Maybe this was what she'd been looking for without knowing it. A place to belong. A purpose beyond just fixing up an old inn.

"Okay," she said, surprised by how steady her voice sounded. "Where do we start?"

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:56 pm*

LYRA

The emergency town council meeting was called for seven o'clock sharp the next morning, which Lyra discovered was apparently the supernatural equivalent of being summoned to the principal's office.

She'd spent a restless night at The Moonbeam Lodge, her dreams filled with visions of ancient bindings and hungry things stirring beneath stone floors.

The silvery marks on her palm had pulsed gently all night, like a heartbeat she couldn't ignore.

Every time she'd started to drift off, she'd felt something vast and patient testing the edges of its prison, and she'd jerked awake with her magic coiled through her hands.

Now, standing outside Mistwhisper Falls Town Hall at six fifty-eight in the morning, Lyra wondered if it was too late to get back in her car and pretend none of this had ever happened.

The building itself was a study in supernatural bureaucracy—a Victorian structure that had been lovingly maintained but clearly adapted for non-human needs.

The windows were tinted just dark enough to accommodate light-sensitive species, and she could see what looked like reinforced doorframes designed to handle above-average strength.

A discrete sign by the entrance read "Supernatural Community Services - All Species

Welcome. "

"At least they're upfront about it," Lyra muttered, checking her phone for the third time. Seven o'clock exactly. Time to face whatever passed for justice in a town where werewolves had official paperwork.

The reception area was surprisingly normal—comfortable seating, generic office plants, and a water cooler that hummed quietly in the corner.

The only hint that this wasn't a typical municipal building was the receptionist, a woman who appeared to be in her forties with silver-streaked hair and eyes that reflected light like a cat's.

"Lyra Whitaker?" the woman asked, her voice carrying the faint accent of someone who'd learned English as a second language. "I'm Diana Moonwhisper. The council is ready for you."

"Great," Lyra said, trying to project more confidence than she felt. "I don't suppose you could give me a hint about what I'm walking into?"

Diana's smile was sympathetic but not particularly reassuring. "Elder Ruth has been awake since four AM researching founder protocols. I'd suggest being very respectful and very honest."

"Noted." Lyra followed Diana down a hallway lined with what she assumed to be official portraits of previous council members. Some looked human. Others definitely didn't. "Quick question—is there any chance this is going to end with torches and pitchforks?"

"Oh, no," Diana said cheerfully. "We haven't used torches in decades. Much too dangerous with all the supernatural fire hazards."

Lyra wasn't sure if that was meant to be reassuring.

The council chamber was smaller than she'd expected, with a semicircular arrangement of chairs facing a single seat that was clearly meant for whoever was being questioned.

Five people were already seated when Diana ushered her in, and Lyra immediately understood why Cade had warned her this wasn't going to be a friendly chat.

Elder Ruth Blackthorne sat in the center chair like a queen holding court.

She was exactly what Lyra would have pictured if someone had said "hereditary witch"—silver hair braided with ribbons that seemed to shimmer with their own light, sharp dark eyes that missed nothing, and an air of authority that probably intimidated supernatural creatures twice her size.

She was knitting what appeared to be a scarf, but the needles moved faster than should have been humanly possible.

To her right sat Sheriff Maya Torres, a woman in her mid-thirties with observant brown eyes and the kind of posture that suggested she could handle any trouble that walked through the door.

Her badge gleamed silver against her dark uniform, and Lyra caught a glimpse of what looked like protective charms worked into the metal.

On Ruth's left was a man who introduced himself as Councilman Bradford, though he looked young enough to be in college. His handshake was cold enough to make Lyra's teeth ache, and when he smiled, she caught a glimpse of fangs.

The remaining two council members were less immediately identifiable—a middle-

aged woman with prematurely gray hair who radiated the kind of calm that suggested powerful magic, and an elderly man whose presence made Lyra's chaos magic stir restlessly in her chest.

At the side, a police officer, was staring her down. Leo Maddox per the nametag on his chest. He clearly didn't like her. Another officer grabbed the man's attention and they walked out of the room.

"Miss Whitaker," Elder Ruth said without looking up from her knitting, breaking through her thoughts. "Please, sit down. We have a great deal to discuss."

Lyra settled into the lone chair facing the council, acutely aware that she was outnumbered five to one by people who'd probably been dealing with supernatural politics since before she was born. "I'm guessing this isn't a welcome-to-the-neighborhood meeting."

"Not exactly." Ruth's needles clicked steadily as she worked. "It's come to our attention that you've had some... difficulties... adjusting to life in Mistwhisper Falls."

"By difficulties, you mean accidentally activating an ancient magical artifact and possibly weakening a centuries-old binding?" Lyra asked. "Because if so, then yes, I've had some difficulties."

Sheriff Torres leaned forward slightly. "We appreciate your honesty, Miss Whitaker. It makes this conversation much easier."

"What exactly is this conversation?" Lyra asked. "Am I being charged with something? Magical vandalism? Supernatural reckless endangerment?"

"Nothing quite so formal," Ruth said, finally looking up from her knitting.

"But your actions have consequences that extend beyond your personal situation.

Mistwhisper Falls exists in a delicate balance, Miss Whitaker.

That balance has been maintained for over two centuries through careful management of our magical resources and strict adherence to certain. .. protocols."

"Protocols I wasn't aware of because no one bothered to mention them before I inherited the inn."

"Your grandmother was supposed to prepare you," the gray-haired woman said, speaking for the first time. "Vera's failure to educate you about your heritage doesn't absolve you of responsibility for its consequences."

Lyra felt her temper start to rise. "My grandmother cut me off eight years ago. I found out about the inn through a lawyer's letter. If you want to blame someone for my ignorance, maybe start with the people who've been keeping secrets instead of the person who was deliberately kept in the dark."

"Careful, Miss Whitaker," Ruth said, her voice carrying a warning. "You're speaking to the council about matters you don't fully understand."

"Then explain them to me," Lyra shot back. "Because from where I'm sitting, it looks like I've inherited a magical responsibility no one thought to tell me about, and now you're all upset that I didn't magically know how to handle it."

Before anyone could respond, the chamber door opened and Cade walked in carrying a manila folder thick with paperwork. He was wearing what Lyra was beginning to recognize as his official alpha face—controlled, professional, and about as welcoming as a brick wall.



"Sorry I'm late," he said, settling into a chair that appeared to have been saved for him. "I was finishing the incident report."

"Incident report?" Lyra asked.

Cade opened the folder and pulled out a form that looked like it had been designed by someone with a very serious attitude toward supernatural bureaucracy.

"Standard procedure for any magical disturbance that registers above a Category Three on the Thorne Scale.

Your little light show yesterday clocked in at a Category Seven. "

"Is that bad?"

"For context," Sheriff Torres said dryly, "a Category Three is what happens when someone accidentally sets their kitchen on fire with magic. A Category Seven is what happens when someone accidentally awakens ancient protective wards across half the county."

"Oh." Lyra slumped in her chair. "That does sound bad."

"It gets worse," Cade continued, pulling out more paperwork. "I've got reports of magical disturbances from as far away as the state line. Every supernatural in a fifty-mile radius felt what you did. Some of them are asking questions."

"What kind of questions?" Elder Ruth's knitting needles had stopped moving, which somehow seemed more ominous than when they'd been clicking.

"The kind that come from people who'd like to know why one of the most magically stable towns in the region suddenly had a power surge visible from the next county,"

Cade said.

"I've fielded calls from three different pack alphas, a coven of witches from Asheville, and someone claiming to represent the Regional Supernatural Authority. "

The temperature in the room seemed to drop several degrees. "The RSA?" Councilman Bradford asked, his fangs more visible now. "They haven't shown interest in Mistwhisper Falls since the founding."

"They're showing interest now," Cade said grimly. "Which means we need to get this situation under control before they decide to investigate personally."

Lyra looked around the room, noting the way everyone seemed to tense at the mention of the RSA. "I'm guessing that would be bad?"

"The Regional Supernatural Authority exists to maintain the masquerade," Ruth explained. "They ensure that supernatural communities remain hidden from human awareness. When a town like ours attracts their attention, it's usually because someone has been careless with their magic."

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:56 pm*

"Or because someone has awakened something that was meant to stay sleeping," the elderly councilman added, speaking for the first time. His voice carried an accent Lyra couldn't place, and when he looked at her, she felt like he was seeing far more than just her surface thoughts.

"Which brings us to the matter at hand," Ruth said, setting down her knitting and folding her hands in her lap. "Miss Whitaker, you've awakened a founder's rune and bound yourself to its purpose. That makes you, whether you like it or not, a guardian of this town's most important secret."

"And if I don't want to be a guardian?"

"Then you leave," Cade said bluntly. "Tonight. And you never come back."

Lyra reeled from the sudden statement like a physical blow. She'd been in Mistwhisper Falls for barely two days, but the thought of leaving already felt wrong in a way she couldn't explain. "And if I stay?"

"Then you accept the responsibilities that come with founder blood," Ruth said. "You learn to control your magic. You help maintain the seal. And you follow the protocols that keep this town safe."

"What protocols?"

Cade pulled another form from his folder and slid it across to her. "Standard magical disturbance warnings. No unauthorized spellwork above Category Two. No experimentation with unknown magical artifacts. No solo magical practice until

you've been cleared by a qualified instructor."

Lyra read through the form, her temper rising with each restriction. "This is ridiculous. You're basically putting me under magical house arrest."

"We're keeping you from accidentally unleashing something that could destroy half the state," Sheriff Torres said reasonably. "There's a difference."

"Is there?" Lyra stood up, sparks danced across her fingertips in response to her emotional state. "Because it sounds to me like you're punishing me for something I didn't know I was doing."

"Sit down, Miss Whitaker," Ruth said, her voice carrying a command that made people obey without thinking.

Lyra remained standing. "No. I don't think I will. I've listened to your concerns, and I understand the seriousness of the situation. But I'm not signing away my autonomy because I had the audacity to inherit magic I didn't know I had."

Cade's eyes flashed gold. "You don't understand what you're dealing with."

"Then explain it to me like I'm an adult instead of treating me like a child who can't be trusted with sharp objects," Lyra shot back.

"I touched the rune. It's bound to me now.

That makes me part of this whether any of us likes it or not.

So maybe instead of trying to control me, you should be figuring out how to work with me. "

"Work with you?" Cade stood as well, and suddenly the room felt much smaller. "You've been in town for two days and you've already destabilized protections that have been in place for centuries. Why exactly should we trust you with anything more complicated than making coffee?"

"Because like it or not, Wolfman, you're stuck with me," Lyra said, her voice dropping to match his challenging tone.

"The rune chose me. Your precious seal needs me.

So you can either help me figure out how to do this right, or you can keep treating me like a problem that needs to be managed.

But I guarantee you won't like how that works out. "

They stood facing each other across the small chamber, magic and dominance crackling between them. Lyra's chaos magic was reacting instinctively to her heart, making the air shimmer with heat, while Cade's wolf was clearly fighting to surface.

"Enough," Ruth said sharply, and both of them stepped back as if they'd been slapped.

"This posturing is accomplishing nothing.

Miss Whitaker, you will sign the magical disturbance protocols.

Mr. Halloway, you will provide whatever assistance she requires to learn proper magical control.

And both of you will remember that your personal feelings are secondary to the safety of this community. "

Lyra and Cade glared at each other for another moment before Lyra grabbed the pen and signed the paperwork with more force than was strictly necessary. "Fine. But I'm not agreeing to be babysat indefinitely."

"The restrictions will be lifted once you've demonstrated adequate control," Ruth said calmly, returning to her knitting. "In the meantime, I suggest you focus on learning everything you can about your new responsibilities."

"And I suggest you focus on not burning down the inn," Cade muttered, gathering his paperwork.

"Oh, bite me," Lyra snapped.

Cade's eyes went pure gold for a moment, and his voice dropped to a growl. "Careful what you offer, Sunshine."

The temperature in the room spiked as their magic responded to the challenge, and Sheriff Torres cleared her throat loudly. "Perhaps we should adjourn this meeting before someone accidentally melts the furniture."

Lyra grabbed her copy of the signed protocols and headed for the door, pausing only to look back at Cade. "For the record, Alpha boy, telling me I can't do something is pretty much guaranteed to make me want to do it more."

"Good to know," Cade said, his tone deceptively mild. "I'll keep that in mind when I'm writing up your next violation report."

Lyra left the building before she could say something that would probably get her arrested for threatening a public official. But as she made her way slowly back to the inn, her mind was already spinning with plans.

If the council wanted to treat her like she couldn't be trusted with her own magic, fine. She'd show them exactly how much control she actually had. And if a certain grumpy wolf shifter thought he could intimidate her into compliance, he was about to learn just how stubborn a chaos witch could be.

By the time she reached the inn, Lyra had decided her first order of business would be setting up proper wards around the property. Not because the council had told her to be careful, but because she wanted to make sure certain unwanted visitors knew they weren't welcome without an invitation.

Especially unwanted visitors with golden eyes and an attitude problem.

"Let's see how you like being locked out, Wolfman," she muttered, pulling her supplies from the trunk of her car. "Time to find out just how effective chaos magic can be when it's properly motivated."

### CADE

L yra discovered the forced proximity clause in her magical inheritance exactly eighteen hours after the council meeting, when she tried to take a shower alone and nearly electrocuted herself.

She'd spent the previous evening methodically warding the inn's perimeter with the kind of focused determination that usually preceded either breakthrough or breakdown.

Salt circles at every entrance, protective herbs tucked into window frames, and sigils carved into strategic doorframes with a knife she'd found in Vera's spell supplies.

The wards weren't just meant to keep out unwanted supernatural visitors—they were a statement of independence, a magical middle finger to anyone who thought they could tell her what to do with her own property.

The protective enchantments had felt solid and stable as she'd worked, her chaos magic surprisingly cooperative as it wove through the familiar patterns. She'd gone to bed feeling smugly satisfied, convinced she'd just solved her wolf shifter problem with good old-fashioned magical engineering.

She should have known it wouldn't be that simple.

The first sign of trouble came when she stepped into the inn's clawfoot bathtub and every piece of electrical equipment in the room started sparking.



The lights flickered wildly, the hair dryer spontaneously turned on, and her phone started playing music at random intervals.

By the time she'd grabbed a towel and fled the bathroom, the mirror was fogged with condensation that seemed to move in patterns that hurt to look at directly.

"What the actual spell?" Lyra muttered, poking her head back into the bathroom cautiously. The electrical chaos had stopped the moment she'd left the room, but she could feel something hovering just on the edge of her awareness—a presence that felt protective and disapproving in equal measure.

A vibration broke her focus—her phone lighting up a message, though she was fairly certain she hadn't given anyone her number yet. The message was from an unknown sender and contained only five words: "Ancient magic requires ancient solutions."

"Nico," Lyra said to no one in particular in the hallway. "I'm going to strangle that smug fae with his own cryptic warnings."

She tried three more times to shower alone, with increasingly dramatic results.

The second attempt shorted out the inn's electrical system entirely.

The third triggered something akin to a magical feedback loop that made every piece of metal in the bathroom glow cherry red.

The fourth attempt was interrupted by the fire alarm, though there was no actual fire—just the scent of ozone and something that reminded her disturbingly of brimstone.

By ten in the morning, Lyra had admitted defeat and called The Spellbound Sip.

"Junie?" she said when the older woman picked up. "It's Lyra. I hate to ask, but do you happen to have shower facilities that don't try to electrocute chaos witches?"

"Oh, honey," Junie said, and Lyra could hear the sympathy in her voice. "The proximity protocols kicked in, didn't they?"

"The what now?"

"Founder's magic comes with built-in safeguards," Junie explained. "When you're bonded to something as powerful as a rune seal, the magic tries to protect its investment. That means making sure you're not alone when your power levels are fluctuating."

"My power levels are fluctuating?"

"Every day for the first few weeks, probably. Your magic is trying to adapt to the rune connection. It's a bit like magical puberty—messy, unpredictable, and absolutely miserable for everyone involved."

Lyra sank into one of the kitchen chairs, still wearing yesterday's clothes and feeling like she hadn't slept in a week. "Please tell me there's a way to turn it off."

"Not exactly," Junie said carefully. "But the protocols usually accept magical proximity from other supernatural species. Especially those with compatible power signatures."

"Compatible how?"

"Well, founder bloodlines tend to resonate with each other. Wolf, witch, and fae magic were designed to work together, so?—"

"Oh, no," Lyra interrupted. "No, no, no. I am not asking Cade Halloway to babysit me because my magic is having some kind of supernatural temper tantrum."

"It's not babysitting," Junie said reasonably. "It's just... companionship. Until your power stabilizes."

"How long does that take?"

"Hard to say. Could be days. Could be weeks. Vera's adjustment period lasted about three months, but she was particularly stubborn about accepting help."

Lyra dropped her forehead to the kitchen table with a thunk. "I'm doomed."

"You're dramatic," Junie corrected. "There's a difference. Now come down to the café and get some breakfast. I'll call Cade and let him know about the situation."

"Junie, no?—"

But the line had already gone dead.

Forty-five minutes later, Lyra was halfway through a stack of pancakes that tasted like comfort and resignation when Cade walked into The Spellbound Sip.

He was wearing work clothes—faded jeans and a flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up—and he moved with the easy confidence of someone who belonged wherever he happened to be standing.

"Morning, Sunshine," he said, settling into the chair across from her without being invited. "I hear you're having some technical difficulties."

"Junie called you." It wasn't a question.

"Junie called me," Cade confirmed. "Along with half the pack. Apparently your magical tantrums are causing interference with electronics all over town."

Lyra set down her fork with more force than necessary. "They're not tantrums. They're... adjustments."

"Uh-huh." Cade's green eyes held a hint of amusement that made her want to throw something at him. "What kind of adjustments involve shorting out the traffic light on Main Street?"

"That wasn't me."

"The traffic light that started working again the moment I got within three blocks of the inn?"

Lyra glared at him. "Coincidence."

"Right." Cade flagged down Junie and ordered coffee, black.

"So here's the deal. Your magic thinks you need a babysitter, and apparently I'm the lucky volunteer.

We can either fight it for the next however many weeks and deal with constant magical chaos, or we can work together and minimize the damage. "

"Option three," Lyra said sweetly. "I lock myself in the inn and you stay far, far away."

"Already tried that, remember? You nearly burned down the bathroom."

"I didn't burn anything. I just... energized the plumbing."

Cade's mouth twitched in what might have been a suppressed smile. "Energized the plumbing. Is that what we're calling it?"

"Look, Alpha boy, I don't like this any more than you do. But I'm not going to apologize for having magic that doesn't come with an instruction manual."

"I'm not asking you to apologize," Cade said, accepting his coffee from Junie with a nod of thanks. "I'm asking you to be practical. Your magic is tied to mine now, whether we like it or not. Fighting it is just going to make things worse for both of us."

Lyra studied his face, looking for any sign that he was enjoying this turn of events. But his expression was carefully neutral, professional in the way that suggested he was treating this like any other pack responsibility.

"Fine," she said finally. "But we're setting ground rules."

"Such as?"

"Such as this is temporary. Such as you don't get to boss me around just because you're proximity support. And such as we keep things strictly business."

"Agreed," Cade said without hesitation. "Anything else?"

"Yeah. You're helping me fix the inn. If you're going to be hanging around anyway, you might as well make yourself useful."

Something shifted in Cade's expression—a hint of satisfaction that suggested he'd been hoping she'd say exactly that. "Deal."

Two hours later, Lyra was beginning to understand why half the women in

Mistwhisper Falls probably had crushes on their local alpha.

Cade had arrived at the inn with a truck full of lumber and the kind of easy competence that made difficult repairs look effortless.

He'd taken one look at the sagging front porch, made a sound of professional disapproval, and immediately started diagnosing structural problems with the focused intensity of someone who actually knew what he was doing.

"The support beam here is rotted through," he said, running his hands along the porch's foundation. "And these floorboards need to be replaced entirely. When's the last time anyone did maintenance on this place?"

"Probably not since Vera died," Lyra admitted, trying not to notice the way his flannel shirt stretched across his shoulders when he bent to examine the foundation. "I don't think she was much for home repair."

"No, she was more of a 'fix it with magic and hope for the best' type," Cade said dryly. "I replaced her kitchen sink three times in five years."

"You knew my grandmother?"

"Everyone knew Vera. She was..." Cade paused, clearly searching for diplomatic phrasing. "Memorable."

"That's one word for it." Lyra settled on the porch steps, content to watch him work. There was something hypnotic about the way he moved—economical and precise, without any wasted motion. "What was she really like? I only knew her when I was little, and then she cut us off."

Cade straightened, wiping his hands on a rag. "Brilliant. Stubborn. Absolutely

ruthless when it came to protecting this town." He paused. "And scared, I think. Especially toward the end."

"Scared of what?"

"Of not being strong enough to hold the seal. Of dying and leaving it unprotected." Cade's green eyes met hers. "Of what would happen if someone unprepared inherited her responsibilities."

The words hit harder than they should have. "Someone like me, you mean."

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to." Lyra picked at a splinter in the porch railing. "Everyone keeps talking about how important this founder stuff is, but nobody seems to think I'm capable of handling it."

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:56 pm*

"That's not true."

"Isn't it? The council wants to put magical restrictions on me. You think I need constant supervision. Even Nico talks to me like I'm a child playing with grown-up magic."

Cade paused, silence stretching between them, then moved to sit beside her on the steps. "Can I tell you something?"

"Depends on whether it's going to make me feel worse about myself."

"When I became alpha, I was twenty-seven years old and absolutely terrified," Cade said, his voice matter-of-fact.

"My father died in a car accident, and suddenly I was responsible for the safety and well-being of forty-three pack members.

I had no training, no preparation, and no idea what I was doing. "

Lyra looked at him sideways. "What happened?"

"I screwed up. A lot. Made decisions based on fear instead of wisdom.

Nearly got two pack members killed because I was too proud to ask for help.

" Cade's hands clenched into fists. "It took me three years to figure out that being strong enough to lead didn't mean being strong enough to do everything alone. "



"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because power isn't about being perfect from day one. It's about being willing to learn, to adapt, to do whatever it takes to protect the people who depend on you." Cade turned to look at her directly. "Your magic chose you, Lyra. Not because you were prepared, but because you were capable."

Something warm unfurled in Lyra's chest at the unwavering belief in his voice. "You really believe that?"

"I wouldn't be here if I didn't."

They sat in comfortable silence for a moment, until Lyra realized she was staring at the way afternoon sunlight caught the gold flecks in his green eyes. She cleared her throat and stood up quickly. "Right. Well. These floorboards aren't going to replace themselves."

"Actually, they might," Cade said, his tone lighter now. "I've seen some impressive household magic in this town."

"Please. I can barely make toast without setting off smoke alarms."

"That's just a matter of practice." Cade stood as well, and Lyra tried not to notice how close he was standing. "Magic responds to confidence as much as technique."

"Easy for you to say. You probably came out of the womb knowing how to control your wolf."

"Not even close." Cade's smile was rueful. "First time I shifted, I got stuck halfway for three hours. Had to have the pack healer come detangle me from my own transformation."

The mental image was so ridiculous that Lyra burst out laughing. "Seriously?"

"Scout's honor. My mother took pictures."

"Please tell me you still have them."

"Absolutely not. They're classified pack embarrassment."

Their laughter faded into something warmer, more connected, and Lyra found herself studying the way Cade's entire face changed when he smiled.

He looked younger, less burdened by alpha responsibilities, and she caught a glimpse of what he might have been like before duty and loss had taught him to carry the world on his shoulders.

"We should probably get back to work," she said, though she made no move to step away.

"Probably," Cade agreed, not moving either.

The afternoon heat was building, and after an hour of heavy lifting, Cade pulled off his flannel shirt and tossed it onto the porch railing.

Lyra tried very hard to focus on the lumber measurements she was supposed to be checking, but it was difficult to concentrate when her peripheral vision kept catching glimpses of broad shoulders and the kind of muscle definition that suggested he did more than just run through the forest for exercise.

"Hand me that level?" Cade asked, and Lyra reached for the tool without thinking.

Their fingers brushed as she passed it to him, and the contact sent a jolt of electricity

up her arm that wasn't due to her unstable magic. Cade felt it too—she could tell by the way his pupils dilated and his breathing changed.

"Thanks," he said, his voice rougher than it had been a moment before.

"No problem," Lyra managed, though her heart was beating fast enough to power the inn's electrical system.

They worked in increasingly charged silence for another hour, the air between them thick with awareness and the kind of tension that made every accidental touch feel significant.

Lyra found herself hyperaware of every movement he made, every shift in his breathing, every time his attention focused on her with the kind of intensity that felt like she was the most interesting thing in his world.

It was when he was positioning a replacement support beam that disaster struck.

The beam was heavier than expected, and when Cade adjusted his grip, a splinter of wood caught the edge of his palm and opened a gash that immediately started bleeding.

"Shit," he muttered, setting the beam down and examining the cut.

"Let me see," Lyra said, moving closer before she could think better of it.

Cade held out his hand, and Lyra found herself cradling his much larger palm in both of hers. The cut wasn't deep, but it was bleeding steadily, and she could feel the warmth of his skin against her fingers.

"It's not bad," she said, though she made no move to let go. "But it should be

cleaned."

"I'll be fine. Wolf healing, remember?"

"Still." Lyra looked up to find Cade watching her with an expression she couldn't quite read. "I have a first aid kit inside."

They stood there for a moment, her hands wrapped around his, both of them acutely aware of the intimacy of the contact. Lyra could feel Cade's pulse under her fingertips, strong and steady, and when she looked up, his green eyes had gone dark with something that made her mouth go dry.

"Lyra," he said, her name coming out like a warning and a plea all at once.

That's when her magic decided to make its opinion known.

Power sparked through the space around them like visible electricity, drawn by their proximity and the emotional charge crackling in the air.

Lyra's phone, sitting on the porch railing, started buzzing frantically before the screen went completely black.

The inn's lights flickered in sequence, and somewhere inside, something that sounded like a smoke alarm started beeping.

They sprang apart as if they'd been burned, both of them breathing hard.

"Well," Lyra said, her voice shaky. "That's... new."

Cade was staring at his hand, where the cut had already stopped bleeding. "Your magic. It's..."

"Completely out of control around you," Lyra finished. "Yeah, I noticed."

"That's not what I was going to say."

"What were you going to say?"

Cade looked at her for a long moment, then seemed to think better of whatever he'd been about to reveal. "Nothing. We should get back to work."

But as they returned to their respective tasks, both of them carefully maintaining distance, an unshakable sense told her something fundamental had just shifted between them.

The forced proximity protocol might have brought them together, but what she'd felt when she touched him was entirely separate from magical necessity.

And from the way Cade kept glancing at her when he thought she wasn't looking, she suspected he'd felt it too.

CADE

The magical explosions started three days after the porch incident and showed no signs of stopping.

Lyra had woken that morning to find every light bulb in the inn had blown overnight, leaving behind a constellation of shattered glass and the acrid smell of burned filaments.

Her morning coffee had literally boiled over before she'd even turned on the stove, and when she'd tried to take a shower, the water had come out scalding hot despite the temperature setting being firmly in the lukewarm range.

By noon, she'd accidentally shorted out Junie's espresso machine, caused every piece of electronic equipment in Moondrip Market to start playing different radio stations simultaneously, and somehow managed to make the fountain in the town square begin spouting water in perfect spirals that defied several laws of physics.

"This is getting ridiculous," Lyra muttered, standing in the middle of her kitchen and staring at the pile of her belongings that had apparently rearranged themselves while she was out.

Her books were stacked in perfect height order, her clothes had sorted themselves by color, and every piece of jewelry she owned was now arranged in concentric circles on the counter like some kind of magical mandala.

Her phone buzzed with yet another apologetic text to a local business owner whose

electronics had been affected by her proximity. This one was from the hardware store, where apparently every power tool had turned on at once when she'd walked past the building.

"Right," Lyra said to the quiet room. "Time to admit defeat and ask for help."

She found Cade at his workshop, a converted barn on the outskirts of town that smelled of sawdust and motor oil and something indefinably wild. He was bent over a custom cabinet, his attention focused on precise measurements, and he didn't look up when she knocked on the open door.

"If you're here to apologize for whatever electronic chaos happened downtown today, don't bother," he said without looking up. "I already heard about the hardware store incident."

"Actually, I'm here to ask for help," Lyra said, leaning against the doorframe. "My magic is getting worse, not better. I need someone to teach me control before I accidentally level a city block."

Cade set down his measuring tape and finally looked at her. "I'm not a witch, Lyra. I can't teach you spellwork."

"I don't need spellwork. I need grounding techniques. Wolf magic is all about control and instinct, right? Maybe some of those principles transfer."

"Wolf magic isn't something you learn," Cade said carefully. "It's something you are."

"Then teach me to be something other than a walking magical disaster," Lyra said, frustration creeping into her voice. "Please. I'm running out of options, and the proximity protocol thing isn't helping. If anything, being around you makes my magic

more volatile."

He didn't speak right away, studying her face with the kind of focus that made her think he was reading her thoughts. "Why me? Nico's got more experience with teaching magic to non-fae."

"Because you're the one my magic responds to," Lyra said honestly. "And because I trust you not to let me accidentally hurt someone."

Something shifted in Cade's expression at her words. "Alright. But we do this my way, following my rules."

"What rules?"

"No arguing with my methods. No shortcuts. And no touching anything I tell you not to touch."

Lyra rolled her eyes. "I'm not a child, Cade."

"No, you're a chaos witch with unstable power levels and a tendency to act first and think later," Cade said bluntly. "Which makes you significantly more dangerous than a child."

"Gee, thanks for the confidence boost."

"I'm not here to boost your confidence. I'm here to keep you from accidentally killing yourself." Cade wiped his hands on a rag and moved toward the workshop door. "Meet me at the forest preserve entrance at sunset. And wear something you don't mind getting dirty."

"Where are we going?"



"Somewhere your magic can't short-circuit anything important," Cade said. "And somewhere I can shift if things go wrong."

Six hours later, Lyra found herself following Cade along a trail that seemed to exist more as a suggestion than an actual path.

The forest around Mistwhisper Falls was unlike any woodland she'd experienced—older, wilder, with an awareness that made her feel like she was being observed by invisible eyes.

Ancient oaks and towering pines created a canopy so thick that twilight had arrived early, and the air hummed with the kind of ambient magic that made her chaos energy stir restlessly.

"How much further?" she asked, stepping carefully over a fallen log that appeared to be growing luminescent mushrooms.

"Not far," Cade said, moving through the forest with the easy confidence of someone who knew every tree personally. "There's a clearing ahead that's been used for magical training for about as long as the town's existed."

"Used by who?"

"Pack members learning to control their shifts. Witches practicing new spells. Anyone who needs space to work with volatile magic without worrying about collateral damage."

They walked in comfortable silence for another ten minutes before the trees opened into a circular clearing that took Lyra's breath away.

The space was roughly thirty feet across, ringed by ancient stones that seemed to

radiate their own inner light.

Moss covered most surfaces in a carpet so lush it looked like green velvet, and in the middle of the clearing, a natural spring bubbled up from the earth to form a small pool that reflected the early stars.

"Holy sage," Lyra breathed. "This place is incredible."

"It's one of the original sacred sites," Cade explained, settling onto one of the moss-covered stones. "The founders used it for their most important workings. The earth here is saturated with centuries of careful magic."

Lyra moved right in the heart of the clearing, immediately feeling the difference in the ambient energy. Her chaos magic, which had been crackling restlessly all day, suddenly settled into something calmer and more focused. "I can feel it. The magic here—it's different."

"Grounded," Cade said. "Stable. That's what we're going to teach your magic to be."

"How?"

"Sit," Cade instructed, patting the stone beside him. "First lesson is learning to feel the difference between chaotic energy and controlled energy."

Lyra settled onto the stone, acutely aware of Cade's proximity and the way her magic hummed in response to his presence. "Okay. Now what?"

"Close your eyes. Take a deep breath. Tell me what you feel."

Lyra obeyed, letting her awareness expand beyond the immediate. "The stones are warm. There's water moving underground, lots of it. The trees are... old. Really old."

And there's something else, something that feels like..."

"Like what?"

"Like home," Lyra said, opening her eyes in surprise. "Like this place recognizes me."

"It does," Cade said simply. "Your grandmother brought you here when you were little. Before the falling out with your family."

"I don't remember that. How did you know that?"

"I heard from the others. You were maybe four years old."

But magic remembers, even when the conscious mind doesn't." Cade shifted to face her more directly.

"That sense of recognition, of belonging—that's what grounded magic feels like."

Chaos magic isn't about imposing your will on the world.

It's about finding your place in the natural flow of energy and working with it instead of against it. "

Lyra considered this, trying to reconcile the concept with her lifetime of magical mishaps. "But chaos magic is supposed to be unpredictable. It's right there in the name."

"Chaos doesn't mean random," Cade corrected. "It means responsive to change, adaptive, flexible. Chaos magic works best when it's allowed to flow naturally instead of being forced into rigid patterns."

"So I've been doing it wrong this whole time?"

"You've been trying to control something that doesn't want to be controlled. There's a difference." Cade stood and moved to the center of the clearing, where moonlight was beginning to filter through the canopy above. "Come here. I want to try something."

Lyra joined him beside the small spring, where the reflected moonlight created patterns that seemed to shift and dance on the water's surface. "What now?"

"Put your hands on the ground. Palm down, fingers spread. Feel the earth beneath you."

Lyra knelt and pressed her palms to the moss-covered earth, immediately feeling a pulse of energy that seemed to rise from deep underground. "Okay. I can feel... something. Like a heartbeat, but slower."

"That's the earth's natural rhythm," Cade explained, settling beside her in a similar position. "Every living thing has a frequency, a natural pattern of energy. Chaos magic works best when it synchronizes with those natural rhythms instead of fighting them."

"How do I synchronize?"

"Stop trying so hard," Cade said, his tone shifted into a patient tone of someone used to teaching stubborn students. "Your magic wants to flow. Let it."

Lyra tried to relax, letting her awareness sink deeper into the connection with the earth. Almost immediately, her magic began to settle, drawn by the stable energy of the sacred site. For the first time in days, she felt truly calm.

"Better?" Cade asked.

"Much better. It's like... like my magic was holding its breath, and now it can finally exhale."

"Good. Now try channeling that energy upward, but slowly. Don't force it—just guide it."

Lyra focused on the sensation of grounded energy, carefully encouraging her magic to flow upward through her body. Light began to gather around her hands, soft and golden, completely unlike the violent sparks she'd been producing for days.

"Holy sage," she breathed. "It's working."

"Keep going. Let the light grow, but maintain the connection to the earth."

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:56 pm*

The golden light intensified, spreading from her hands to create a soft aura around her entire body. It felt incredible—like every cell in her body was singing in harmony. For the first time since touching the founder's rune, her magic felt truly hers.

"This is amazing," Lyra said, looking up at Cade with wonder. "Why didn't anyone teach me this before?"

"Because most people don't have access to a sacred site with centuries of stabilizing magic," Cade said, but his tone was warm with approval. "And because most people aren't stubborn enough to keep trying after the first few explosions."

Lyra laughed, and the sound seemed to make her magic dance. The gold-tinged magic bled from her skin and pulsed in rhythm with her heartbeat, and she felt more in control than she had since arriving in Mistwhisper Falls.

"Can you teach me more?" she asked. "I want to learn everything."

"We'll work on it," Cade promised. "But for now, try to maintain the connection while you stand up."

Lyra rose carefully, keeping her awareness focused on the grounding energy of the earth. The light glowed gold around her hands and flickered but didn't disappear, and she felt a surge of triumph at the small success.

"Look at that," she said, holding up her glowing hands. "I'm actually doing magic without destroying anything."

"Don't get cocky," Cade warned, but she could see the hint of a smile tugging at his mouth.

"Too late," Lyra said cheerfully. "I'm absolutely getting cocky. This is the first time my magic has ever done what I wanted it to do."

She was so focused on maintaining the golden light that she didn't notice Cade moving closer until he was standing directly in front of her, his green eyes dark in the moonlight.

"Lyra," he said, his voice lower than usual.

"Yeah?"

"You're beautiful when you're working magic."

The words slammed into her like a physical touch, sending heat spiraling through her chest. Her magic responded to the emotional shift, the golden light around her hands intensifying until it cast dancing shadows across Cade's face.

"Cade," she said, his name coming out breathier than she'd intended.

He was close enough now that she could see the gold flecks in his eyes, could smell the scent of pine and something wild that seemed to cling to his skin. When he reached up to brush a copper curl away from her face, she felt her magic surge in response to the contact.

"I know this is complicated," he said quietly. "I know we're supposed to be keeping things professional."

"Very professional," Lyra agreed, though she made no move to step away.

"But I can't stop thinking about what happened on the porch. About how your magic felt when it touched mine."

"It felt like coming home," Lyra said honestly. "Like finding something I didn't know I was looking for."

Cade's hand was still cupping her cheek, his thumb tracing the line of her cheekbone with careful precision. "I've never felt anything like it."

"Neither have I."

They were leaning closer now, drawn together by something that felt bigger than choice or logic or any of the very good reasons they both had for maintaining distance. Lyra could feel Cade's breath against her lips, could see the way his pupils had dilated until his eyes looked almost black.

"We shouldn't," he said, but he didn't pull away.

"Probably not," Lyra agreed, rising up on her toes to close the distance between them.

Their lips were maybe an inch apart when her magic decided to express its opinion.

Power flared around her hands like a miniature sun, bright enough to turn night into day for a split second. The surge of energy was so sudden and so intense that it singed the ends of Cade's hair and left him blinking spots from his vision.

"Son of a hex!" Lyra yelped, jumping backward and nearly tripping over her own feet.

Cade stood frozen for a moment, one hand raised to touch his now-noticeably shorter eyebrows, before he started laughing. Not the polite chuckle she might have



expected, but a full-bodied laugh that made his eyes crinkle at the corners.

"Did I just—" Lyra began, mortified.

"Singe my eyebrows? Yeah, you did." Cade was still laughing, apparently finding the situation hilarious instead of embarrassing.

"Oh my god, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to?—"

"Lyra," Cade interrupted, his laughter subsiding but his smile remaining. "It's fine. They'll grow back."

"But I nearly set you on fire!"

"Nearly being the operative phrase." Cade moved closer again, seemingly unbothered by the prospect of further magical singeing. "Besides, it's good to know your magic has strong opinions about timing."

"This isn't funny," Lyra protested, though she could feel her own lips twitching with suppressed laughter.

"It's a little funny."

"It's embarrassing."

"It's perfect," Cade said, and there was something in his voice that made her look up at him sharply. "Perfectly, chaotically you."

Before Lyra could figure out how to respond to that, Cade's expression changed. His head tilted slightly, and she could see his entire body tense in the way that meant his wolf was alerting to something.

"What is it?" she asked.

"We're not alone," Cade said quietly, a new tension crept into his voice and a commanding tone that meant alpha business. "Someone's watching from the treeline."

Lyra followed his gaze but saw nothing except darkness between the trees. "Are you sure?"

"Positive. And whoever it is, they've been there for a while."

The romantic atmosphere of the clearing evaporated, replaced by tension and the awareness that their private moment had been anything but private. Lyra's magic, still running high from the near-kiss, began to crackle around her fingers again.

"Should we leave?" she asked.

"Not yet," Cade said, though his posture remained alert. "But lesson's over for tonight."

As they gathered their things and prepared to leave the clearing, she couldn't shake the unease that clung to her, whispering that something significant had just been interrupted.

The magic lesson had been a success, and the almost-kiss had been.

.. well, it had been something she definitely wanted to try again, preferably without the risk of accidental combustion.

But as they walked back through the forest, both of them hyperaware of the other's presence and the sexual tension that seemed to crackle between them like visible electricity, Lyra couldn't help wondering who had been watching them.

And more importantly, what they'd seen.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:56 pm*

LYRA

The whispers started the night after the forest clearing, soft and insistent, like voices carried on wind that wasn't there.

Lyra first noticed them while she was washing dishes in the inn's kitchen, a sound so faint she might have dismissed it as water in the pipes or settling wood if not for the way her magic stirred restlessly in response.

The voices seemed to be coming from somewhere below, threading up through the floorboards with words she couldn't quite catch.

She turned off the water and listened, but the whispers stopped the moment she focused on them, leaving only the ordinary night sounds of an old building.

"Probably just tired," she told herself, though her magic disagreed with prickling awareness along her skin.

The fog arrived an hour later.

Lyra first noticed it through the kitchen window—a thick, silvery mist that seemed to roll uphill from the direction of the falls. But fog didn't move against gravity, and it certainly didn't move in the deliberate, purposeful way this particular weather system was approaching the inn.

She stepped onto the back porch for a better look and immediately felt her breath catch.

The fog wasn't just defying physics; it was moving with intention, flowing around obstacles like water but maintaining coherent shapes that looked almost like figures.

As she watched, mesmerized, the mist seemed to reach toward the inn with tendrils that stretched and grasped before dissipating.

Her phone vibrated and the screen flashed with an incoming message from Cade: "Stay inside. Lock the doors. Don't go near the cellar."

"Why not?" she texted back, though something in her chest was already pulling her toward the basement stairs.

"Just don't. I'm on my way."

But the pull was getting stronger, and the whispers were getting louder, and Lyra found herself moving toward the cellar door despite every instinct that told her to listen to Cade's warning.

The voices were clearer now, rising from the darkness below with words that made her founder's brand tingle: "Daughter of magic. Blood of the binding. Come home."

"Home," Lyra repeated, her hand already on the doorknob. The word felt right in a way that should have been alarming but somehow wasn't. Whatever was calling to her felt familiar, welcoming, like family she'd forgotten she had.

The cellar stairs creaked under her feet as she descended, each step taking her deeper into air that thrummed with ancient power. The founder's rune was glowing again, its cracked surface pulsing with soft blue light that illuminated the stone mosaic in patterns she hadn't noticed before.

But it wasn't the rune that drew her attention. It was the voices.

"Founder," they whispered, the sound coming from everywhere and nowhere. "We have waited so long."

"Who are you?" Lyra asked the darkness, settling beside the rune as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"We are the first," the voices replied, and suddenly Lyra could see them—translucent figures gathered around the edges of the cellar, watching her with eyes that held centuries of patient waiting. "We are the guardians who came before."

The spirits of the original founders. Lyra knew this with the same bone-deep certainty that told her the inn was truly home, that Mistwhisper Falls was where she belonged, that the magic flowing through her veins was legacy as much as power.

"What do you want?" she asked, though part of her already knew.

"To finish what we started," the witch founder said, stepping forward from the group.

She looked exactly like the vision Lyra had experienced when she'd first touched the rune—copper hair, amber eyes, features that could have been Lyra's own if viewed in an antique mirror. "To seal what must be sealed."

"The binding beneath the falls grows weak," added the wolf founder, a man whose presence made Lyra think of Cade—the same predatory grace, the same protective intensity. "Without living blood to anchor it, the prison will not hold."

"Prison?" Lyra leaned forward, her mark pulsing in rhythm with the rune's glow. "What's imprisoned?"

"Something that should never have been," the fae founder said, their voice carrying harmonics that hurt to hear. "Something that feeds on chaos and grows strong on

discord. We bound it when the world was younger, but bindings require renewal."

"Renewal how?"

"Three bloodlines," the witch founder explained. "Three powers working as one. As we did. As you must."

The pull Lyra felt toward the rune intensified, and she found herself reaching out to touch its cracked surface.

The moment her palm made contact, visions flooded her mind—flashes of the original binding, of power so vast and hungry it had taken the triad of formidable supernatural focus of their age to contain it.

She saw the sacrifice they'd made, pouring their life force into a seal that would hold for centuries but would eventually weaken without their bloodlines to maintain it.

"I don't know how," Lyra said, her voice barely a whisper. "I don't know what I'm doing."

"You will learn," the founders said in unison. "You must learn. The time grows short."

That's when the sound behind her broke the spell—heavy, urgent, radiating the kind of controlled panic that meant Cade was in full alpha protection mode.

"Lyra!" His voice cut through the spiritual atmosphere like a blade. "Step away from the rune. Now."

But she couldn't move. The connection between her and the stone had deepened, and she could feel something vast stirring beneath the inn's foundation.

Not the imprisoned entity—something else.

Something that recognized her presence and was reaching up through layers of earth and magic to touch her mind.

"I can't," she said, though whether she was speaking to Cade or the founders, she wasn't sure. "It won't let me go."

Cade took the stairs three at a time, his wolf so close to the surface that his eyes blazed gold in the rune's light. The moment he reached the cellar floor, though, everything changed.

The founders' spirits turned toward him with recognition and approval. The wolf founder stepped forward, studying Cade with eyes that held centuries of accumulated wisdom.

"Blood of my blood," the ancient wolf said. "You have grown strong."

Cade's human control slipped for a moment, and Lyra caught a glimpse of something wild and primal in his expression. "You're not supposed to be here. The dead should stay dead."

"We are not dead," the witch founder corrected gently. "We are the memory of the binding, held in the stones until our purpose is fulfilled."

"Your purpose was fulfilled two hundred years ago."

"Our purpose," the fae founder said with a smile that held too many teeth, "was to ensure the prison would hold for as long as necessary. That purpose continues through you."



The air in the cellar was growing thick with competing energies—the ancient power of the founders, the primal strength of Cade's wolf, and Lyra's chaos magic responding to all of it like a tuning fork struck too hard.

The rune beneath her palm was burning now, not with heat but with cold fire that seemed to rewrite her DNA with every pulse.

"Cade," she said, her voice strained. "Something's happening. I can feel it—the thing beneath the inn. It's waking up."

He was beside her in an instant, his hand covering hers on the rune's surface. As soon as his skin met hers, the spiritual maelstrom in the cellar exploded into something far more immediate and urgent.

Power flowed between them like liquid lightning, their founder bloodlines recognizing each other and fusing into something stronger than either could achieve alone.

Lyra could feel Cade's wolf through the connection, wild and protective and absolutely devoted to keeping her safe.

His thoughts and memories brushed hers, unfiltered and raw—the weight of alpha responsibility, the loneliness of command, the careful control that kept his wilder nature in check.

And he could feel her—the chaos of her magic, the warmth of her laughter, the stubborn determination that made her fight for what she believed in even when she was terrified.

"The bond awakens," the founders said in unison, their voices filled with satisfaction. "As it was meant to."

"What bond?" Lyra gasped, though she could feel it forming—invisible threads of connection that tied her magic to Cade's wolf, her chaos to his control, her heart to his in ways that wasn't their choice and everything to do with destiny.

"The mating bond," Cade said, his voice rough with strain and tinged with what could only be longing. "Founder bloodlines are meant to work together. To balance each other."

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I," Cade admitted. "But I can feel it. The pull. The need to—" He cut himself off, jaw clenched with the effort of maintaining control.

The need to what, Lyra wanted to ask, but the words died in her throat as Cade's grip on her hand tightened and she felt the full force of his wolf's attention focus on her.

The founders' spirits were still watching, their ancient magic amplifying every sensation, every emotion, every desperate need that had been building between them since the moment they'd met.

"The bloodlines call to each other," the witch founder said softly. "As they always have. As they always will."

Lyra tried to pull her hand away from the rune, to break the connection that was making it impossible to think clearly, but Cade's fingers were wrapped around hers and he wasn't letting go.

"Don't," he said, his voice barely human. "Don't fight it."

"Fight what?"

"This. Us. What we are."

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:56 pm*

The bond between them pulsed like a heartbeat, and suddenly Lyra understood what was happening.

The magical connection wasn't just about power or destiny or ancient responsibilities.

It was about them—about the way her chaos magic calmed in his presence, about the way his wolf had recognized her as mate before his human mind had caught up, about the electricity that sparked between them every time they touched.

"Cade," she said, his name coming out like a prayer.

"I know," he said, and then he was kissing her.

The kiss was desperate and claiming and nothing like the gentle almost-contact they'd shared in the forest clearing.

This was all hunger and need and the kind of supernatural recognition that bypassed rational thought entirely.

Lyra's magic exploded around them in waves of golden light, and Cade's wolf surged so close to the surface that she could feel fangs against her lips.

The founders' spirits faded into the background as more immediate concerns took over.

Cade's hands were in her hair, on her waist, pulling her closer as if he could somehow merge them into one being through sheer force of will.

Lyra's magic was singing, wrapping around them both in spirals of power that made the air shimmer with heat.

"This is insane," she gasped against his mouth.

"Completely," Cade agreed, pressing her back against the cellar wall. "But I can't stop."

"Don't stop," Lyra said, and the words came out fiercer than she'd intended. "Don't you dare stop."

The bond between them flared brighter, and suddenly stopping wasn't an option for either of them.

Cade's hands were everywhere—tangling in her hair, skimming along her sides, pulling at the fabric of her shirt with an urgency that suggested he'd been thinking about this for far longer than the few days they'd known each other.

Lyra's magic was responding to every touch, every kiss, every ragged breath. Golden light flickered along her skin like living jewelry, and she could feel her power twining with his until she couldn't tell where her magic ended and his wolf began.

"Lyra," Cade said against her throat, his voice rougher than she'd ever heard it. "Tell me to stop. Tell me this is too fast, too complicated, too?—"

"It's all of those things," Lyra interrupted, her hands already working at the buttons of his flannel shirt. "And I don't care."

The admission seemed to snap something in Cade's control.

One moment he was a man teetering on the edge of restraint.

The next, he was all heat and hunger, a storm breaking loose.

His hands gripped her like she was the only thing tethering him to this world, dragging her flush against him, his mouth claiming the curve of her neck with a groan that was nearly a growl.

"Fuck, Lyra," he rasped against her skin. "I've been trying to stay away—trying to be good—but you make me forget everything."

Her fingers fisted in his shirt, yanking him closer, because she didn't want good. Not now. Not after everything. "Then forget," she whispered, breathless. "I want all of you."

His wolf surged forward in answer, and suddenly she was lifted off the ground, her legs wrapping around his waist on instinct as he pinned her against the cool stone wall.

The chill of the rock was nothing compared to the heat rolling off Cade's body.

He was fire and want and something deeper—something that felt like home.

Lyra gasped when his hips pressed between her thighs, his cock already thick and hard against her clothed center. Even through their clothes, it made her whimper.

"Feel that?" he growled, rutting against her slowly, deliberately. "That's what you do to me. Every time you breathe, every time you look at me like you don't know how fucking gorgeous you are—it drives me insane."

Her back arched. "Then do something about it."

That was all the permission he needed.

Their mouths met in a crash of tongues and teeth, the kiss messy and consuming. Cade kissed like he fought—dominating, demanding, but with a reverence that made her ache. His hand slipped beneath her sweater, splaying wide over her ribs before dragging up to cup her breast.

"No bra?" he murmured, voice wrecked with arousal as his thumb grazed her nipple. "You trying to kill me, witch?"

"Maybe," she managed, though the word was broken by a moan when he took the peak between his fingers, pinching just hard enough to make her gasp.

"Say you want this," he growled. "Say you want me."

"I do," she breathed. "I've wanted you even before I understood why. I want your mouth, your cock, your wolf—I want all of it."

A sound tore from his throat. Animal. Worshipful.

Then they were moving—staggering across the cellar until he found a thick, timeworn rug and laid her down like she was something sacred.

Magic shimmered through the air, humming with the echo of the founders, but Cade's presence made it feel safe, grounded.

Their clothes vanished with impatient hands and careless magic—flannel tossed aside, leggings peeled down, boots kicked across the room.

And then she was bare beneath him, bathed in the rune's ethereal blue glow, her skin kissed with golden light that sparked at every brush of his touch.

"You're so beautiful it hurts," Cade murmured, tracing reverent fingers down the

curve of her hip, the inside of her thigh. His voice was low and wrecked and far too sincere. “I don’t think I’m ever going to be able to stop needing you.”

“Then don’t,” she said, threading her fingers into his hair, guiding his mouth where she wanted him.

He kissed a path down her body—between her breasts, across her stomach—pausing just long enough to breathe her in.

And then his mouth was on her pussy, hot and wet and greedy.

Lyra cried out, back bowing off the rug as he licked her like he was starved.

His tongue swirled over her clit, firm and unrelenting, while his fingers slid through her folds, dipping inside her with maddening control.

“Gods,” she gasped, fingers tightening in his hair. “Cade—fuck—don’t stop?—”

He didn’t. He groaned against her, the sound vibrating through her clit like thunder.

Every flick of his tongue pushed her higher, the bond between them glowing hot and gold in the space between their bodies.

Her magic pulsed out, responding to his touch, illuminating the shadows and setting the rune aglow.

“I can taste your magic,” Cade growled, lifting his head just enough to meet her eyes. His lips were wet with her, his gaze burning. “It’s everywhere. Inside me. Wrapped around my cock even when I’m not inside you yet.”

“Then do it,” she begged, dragging him up her body, her legs wrapping around him



again. “I need you, Cade. Now.”

He growled—something wild and possessive and not entirely human—then guided his cock to her entrance, pressing just the head inside her soaked pussy.

“Look at me,” he demanded.

She did—and then he thrust into her in one slow, devastating stroke.

Her mouth fell open in a soundless cry as he filled her, thick and hard and perfect. Her body stretched around him, claimed him, welcomed him like she’d been made for this.

“Fuck, Lyra,” he gritted, buried to the hilt. “You feel like fucking heaven.”

She couldn't speak—her body too full, too overwhelmed. He stayed there for a breathless moment, their foreheads pressed together, the magic between them pulsing like a shared heartbeat.

“Say it again,” he murmured, voice trembling with restraint. “Tell me you want this.”

“I want you,” she whispered, her fingers dragging down his back. “I want you deeper.”

His control shattered.

He moved inside her with a rhythm that was both desperate and worshipful. Each thrust sent pleasure spiraling through her, and her magic surged in response, coiling around him, merging. Cade growled her name, grinding deeper, angling his hips to hit that spot inside her that made her sob.

They didn't stay in one position long.

Cade flipped her onto her hands and knees, dragging her hips back to meet him as he plunged into her from behind, his cock slamming into her with a force that made the rune flare and the air tremble.

His hand wrapped around her throat, not tight, but grounding—his breath hot against her shoulder as he whispered, “You’re mine. Every inch. Every moan. Say it.”

“I’m yours,” she gasped, wrecked and radiant and utterly undone. “Always.”

His thrusts faltered for a moment, like the words hit something raw in him. Then he pulled out, flipped her onto her back again, and drove back into her with a groan that sounded like relief.

“I’m not going to last,” he warned, panting, “Not when you’re squeezing me like this. Fuck, baby, you’re milking my cock.”

“Then come,” she said, pulling him down to kiss her—deep and filthy and tender all at once. “Come with me.”

And she did—seconds later, her climax crashing through her in a blinding burst of gold and white.

Her pussy clenched around him, pulling him deeper, and with a broken curse, Cade followed, thrusting once, twice more before burying himself deep and groaning her name into the space between her collarbone and throat.

He collapsed against her, both of them panting, their bodies still humming with aftershocks. Magic crackled in the air around them, soft and satisfied now, and the rune beneath the rug gave off a content glow.

Afterward, they clung to each other in the darkness of the cellar, both breathing hard and trying to process what had just happened.

Lyra's magic was still humming contentedly, wrapped around Cade's wolf energy like they'd been designed to fit together.

The branding on her palm was glowing steadily, no longer painful but somehow complete.

"Holy sage," Lyra breathed, her forehead pressed against Cade's shoulder. "What did we just do?"

Cade was quiet for a long moment, his arms tightening around her as if he could hold onto this moment forever. Then, gradually, she felt him starting to withdraw—not physically, but emotionally. The warmth in his expression faded, replaced by something that looked disturbingly like panic.

"Cade?" she said, suddenly uncertain. "Are you okay?"

"I—" He stopped, running a hand through his hair in the gesture she'd learned meant he was struggling with something. "This shouldn't have happened."

The words hit Lyra like cold water. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I just claimed you against a cellar wall because some ancient spirits told us we were supposed to be together," Cade said, his voice flat with self-recrimination. "I lost control. Completely."

"We both lost control," Lyra said, trying to keep the hurt out of her voice. "That's not the same thing as?—"

"Isn't it?" Cade was already reaching for his discarded clothes, not meeting her eyes. "You felt the bond forming. You know what that means."

"I know it felt right," Lyra said quietly. "I know I've never felt anything like it."

"That's the problem." Cade's voice was getting more distant with every word. "You can't trust what you felt down here. The founder magic, the spirits, the rune—it's all designed to push bloodlines together. What happened between us might not have been real."

The suggestion stung worse than any physical blow. "It felt real to me."

"Did it? Or did it feel like magic?"

Lyra stared at him, trying to understand how they'd gone from the most intense connection she'd ever experienced to this cold stranger who was acting like what they'd shared had been some kind of supernatural accident.

"Get dressed," Cade said, his tone carefully neutral. "I'll drive you back to the B&B."

"I'm staying here," Lyra said, lifting her chin defiantly. "This is my inn."

"Not tonight. Not after—" He gestured vaguely at the space between them. "Not until we figure out what the bond means and whether it can be broken."

"Broken?" The word came out sharper than Lyra had intended. "You want to break it?"

"I want to make sure we have a choice about it," Cade said, but he still wouldn't meet her eyes. "Founder bonds are... complicated. Binding. I won't trap you in something you didn't choose freely."

With that, he was gone, leaving Lyra alone in the cellar with the fading glow of the rune and the devastating realization that the most perfect moment of her life had apparently been nothing more than supernatural manipulation.

At least, according to the man who'd just walked away from her like she meant nothing at all.

CADE

Lyra woke up in her lonely bed at The Moonbeam Lodge feeling like she'd been emotionally hit by a supernatural freight train.

Four days had passed since the cellar incident, and Cade had managed to avoid her so completely that she was starting to wonder if he'd left town entirely.

No morning appearances at the inn. No concerned texts about her magical stability.

No gruff offers to help with repairs. Just radio silence and the growing certainty that whatever had happened between them had been a mistake of catastrophic proportions.

At least according to him.

Her founder's mark had settled into a steady, warm pulse that felt less like a brand and more like a heartbeat she couldn't ignore.

The inn itself seemed more responsive to her presence now—doors opening at her approach, lights flickering on without switches being touched, the old building humming with contentment that suggested it approved of recent developments even if its former protector's descendant had fled like she carried the plague.

"Bastard," Lyra muttered into her coffee, which was probably unfair since she'd known Cade for less than a week and he didn't actually owe her anything beyond basic supernatural politeness.

The problem was, the bond she'd felt forming between them hadn't faded.

If anything, it had grown stronger, like a golden thread connecting her heart to someone who was doing his damndest to pretend she didn't exist. Every time she thought about him—which was embarrassingly often—she felt an answering echo somewhere in her chest, as if part of him was still with her whether he wanted to be or not.

Her phone buzzed with a text from an unknown number: "Meet me at the bookstore. We need to talk. - N"

"Finally," Lyra said, downing the rest of her coffee and grabbing her jacket. If anyone had answers about founder bonds and ancient magical responsibilities, it would be Nico.

The Gossamer Grimoire looked exactly like what would happen if someone gave a bibliophile unlimited resources and a complete disregard for conventional retail practices.

Books were stacked in towering piles that defied physics, hanging plants created jungle-like corners perfect for reading, and the air smelled of old paper and laced with something literal magic.

A sign by the register read "Cursed Books - Second Floor - Browse at Your Own Risk. "

Nico was waiting for her in what appeared to be the store's consultation area—a cozy nook with mismatched armchairs and a tea service that had clearly been designed for serious conversations.

He looked up from an ancient tome when she entered, his pale eyes holding the kind

of sympathy that suggested he already knew why she was there.

"You look terrible," he said without preamble, gesturing for her to sit in the chair across from him.

"Gee, thanks. Really know how to make a girl feel special."

"I'm fae, darling. We're not known for sugar-coating unpleasant truths." Nico poured tea into a cup that appeared to be made of crystal and starlight. "Earl Grey with a touch of calming herbs. You look like you need it."

Lyra accepted the tea gratefully, immediately feeling some of the tension in her shoulders ease. "Is there anything in this town that isn't magical?"

"The tax collector," Nico said solemnly. "Completely mundane, unfortunately. Now, shall we discuss why you're radiating the kind of emotional turmoil that's been making every empath in a five-mile radius avoid downtown?"

"Cade's been avoiding me," Lyra said, deciding there was no point in pretending this was about anything else. "Ever since what happened in the cellar."

"Ah." Nico's expression grew knowing. "The bond finally snapped into place, did it?"

"You knew that was going to happen?"

"I suspected. Founder bloodlines and mates have been gravitating toward each other for centuries, even when the individuals involved don't know what they are." Nico set down his own teacup and leaned forward slightly. "The question is, how much do you actually know about your heritage?"

"Apparently nothing," Lyra said bitterly. "Everyone keeps talking about founder



bloodlines and ancient responsibilities, but no one's bothered to explain what any of it actually means."

"Then let me enlighten you." Nico rose and moved to one of the towering bookshelves, returning with a leather-bound volume that looked old enough to have been personally inscribed by the founders themselves.

"This is the complete history of Mistwhisper Falls, including the parts that don't appear in any official records. "

He opened the book to a page filled with intricate drawings and text written in multiple languages.

Lyra could make out a map of the town, but with additional landmarks that didn't exist in the modern version—strange symbols marking locations that seemed to pulse with their own energy even in illustration form.

"In 1847," Nico began, his voice taking on the cadence of someone telling a story that had been repeated countless times, "three of the most powerful supernatural beings in North America came to this valley. They weren't settlers or pioneers—they were hunters."

"Hunting what?"

"Something that had been terrorizing supernatural communities across the continent for decades.

An entity so ancient and malevolent that it predated most of the magic we understand today.

" Nico turned the page to reveal an illustration that made Lyra's magic recoil

instinctively.

"They called it the Mistbound, because it fed on the life force of magical beings and left behind only empty husks wrapped in unnatural fog. "

The drawing showed a creature that seemed to shift between forms—sometimes humanoid, sometimes a writhing mass of shadow and hunger, always surrounded by tendrils of mist that reached out like grasping fingers.

"The founders tracked it here," Nico continued, "to this valley where the natural magic was strong enough to contain it. But containment required sacrifice."

He turned to the next page, showing the three founders standing around what was clearly the rune now buried beneath the inn.

But in this illustration, they weren't just working magic—they were pouring their very life essence into the binding, their faces drawn with the exhaustion of people giving everything they had.

"They didn't just trap the Mistbound," Nico said quietly. "They bound it with their own souls, creating a seal that would hold as long as their bloodlines survived and remained connected to this place."

"Connected how?"

"Through bonds like the one you've just formed with Cade. You're chosen mates, it also doesn't help that he's a werewolf.

Founder bloodlines are drawn to each other because the magic requires balance—chaos magic from the witch line, protective instincts from the wolf line, and strategic thinking from the fae line.

When the bloodlines are properly bonded, the seal remains strong. "

Lyra stared at the illustration, pieces of a puzzle she hadn't known she was solving clicking into place. "And when they're not bonded?"

"The seal weakens. Gradually at first, then more rapidly as the Mistbound becomes aware that its prison is failing.

" Nico's expression grew grave. "Your grandmother was the last active witch founder until you arrived.

She spent the final years of her life pouring her own energy into maintaining the seal, but it wasn't enough.

Single bloodline magic can only hold for so long. "

"That's why she cut off contact with my family," Lyra realized. "She was protecting me from having to make the same choice."

"And ensuring you'd have the option to claim your heritage when you were ready.

" Nico closed the book carefully. "Unfortunately, the Mistbound has been stirring more frequently in recent years.

Your grandmother's death weakened the seal significantly, and your arrival has. .. accelerated the timeline."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning the rune you cracked wasn't just a magical artifact. It was the first lock on a three-part prison. The Mistbound is already testing the boundaries of its

containment."

Lyra felt a chill rushed through her veins. "How long do we have?"

"Hard to say. Could be months. Could be weeks. The entity grows stronger as the seal weakens, and stronger entities are better at breaking magical constraints."

"And Cade knows all this?"

"Cade knows enough to understand that founder bonds aren't just romantic convenience—they're the key to keeping something unspeakably dangerous locked away.

" Nico's pale eyes were sympathetic but unflinching.

"Which is probably why he's trying so hard to convince himself that what happened between you was just magical manipulation. "

"Was it?" The question came out smaller than Lyra had intended. "The bond, what we felt—was any of it real?"

"What do you think?"

"I think it was the most real thing I've ever experienced," Lyra said honestly. "But I also think Cade's convinced himself it was all supernatural coercion, and nothing I say is going to change his mind."

"Perhaps not," Nico agreed. "But there are other ways to prove your worth to the community."

"Such as?"

Nico's smile held a hint of mischief. "Such as showing everyone that you're not just Vera's unprepared granddaughter stumbling through magical crises. You're a founder descendant who belongs in this town and is capable of contributing to its welfare."

"How do I do that?"

"By being yourself. By opening your inn and welcoming the community. By proving that you're not going anywhere, regardless of what certain stubborn alpha wolves might prefer."

The idea took root in Lyra's mind like a seed finding fertile ground. She'd inherited the Mist & Mirth Inn for a reason, and it hadn't been so she could hide away feeling sorry for herself while Cade avoided her like she carried a contagious disease.

"The inn isn't ready for guests," she said, though she was already mentally cataloging what would need to be done.

"It doesn't need to be perfect. It just needs to be welcoming." Nico leaned back in his chair, looking pleased with himself. "Besides, nothing says 'I belong here' quite like throwing a party that brings the entire supernatural community together."

"A party?"

"A gathering. An open house. A chance for people to see that the inn is alive again and that its new owner is someone worth knowing."

"Nico's eyes glittered with the kind of anticipation that suggested he was already planning guest lists."

"Say, this weekend? Casual, friendly, the sort of thing that would draw a crowd."

Lyra found herself nodding before she'd fully processed the implications. "This weekend. Right. I can do this weekend."

"Excellent. I'll spread the word through the usual channels."

"Usual channels?"

"Supernatural gossip network. More efficient than social media and twice as reliable." Nico stood, extending a hand to help her up. "One word of advice, though."

"What's that?"

"Don't invite Cade directly. Let him hear about it from someone else and make his own choice about whether to attend."

"You think he'll come?"

"I think he's miserable without you and looking for an excuse to stop being noble about the whole situation," Nico said with the confidence of someone who'd been observing supernatural relationship drama for centuries. "Sometimes pride just needs a convenient excuse to surrender."

As Lyra walked back toward the inn, her mind buzzing with plans and possibilities, she felt something shift in her chest. Her connection to Cade was still there, still singing with potential, but it no longer felt like a source of rejection and confusion.

Instead, it felt like a promise. A connection that existed whether he wanted to acknowledge it or not.

If Cade thought he could avoid her indefinitely, he was about to learn just how persistent a chaos witch could be when she set her mind to something. And if the

town needed proof that she belonged in Mistwhisper Falls, she'd give them a gathering they'd never forget.

The Mist & Mirth Inn was about to come alive again, with or without the approval of one stubborn alpha wolf.

Though privately, Lyra was hoping for "with."

### LYRA

The Mist & Mirth Inn had never looked better, which wasn't saying much considering it had been empty for two years, but Lyra was proud of what she'd accomplished in seventy-two hours of manic preparation.

She'd spent the first day frantically cleaning, her magic cooperating for once to help with tasks that should have taken a full crew.

Dust swirled itself into convenient piles, windows sparkled without cleaner, and cobwebs dissolved at her touch like they'd been waiting for permission to disappear.

The inn seemed eager to be welcoming again, its old bones settling into configurations that felt more alive than they had since Vera's death.

The second day had been devoted to decorating and food preparation, with assists from half the supernatural business community.

Junie had arrived with enough baked goods to feed a small army, muttering about "that girl working herself to exhaustion" while producing casseroles that smelled like comfort and belonging.

The florist—a dryad who grew her own inventory in the shop's backyard—had provided arrangements that literally glowed with health and vitality.

Even the local brewery had donated several kegs of their supernatural-friendly ale, which apparently didn't have the same effects on non-human metabolisms as regular



alcohol.

Now, as the sun set on Saturday evening and the first guests began arriving, Lyra stood in the inn's main parlor wearing her best dress—a flowing emerald number that made her copper hair look like fire—and tried to calm her nerves.

"You look beautiful," Junie said, appearing at her elbow with a glass of something that sparkled faintly in the lamplight. "And the inn looks like home again."

Lyra accepted the drink gratefully, noting the way it tasted like confidence and moonlight. "I just hope people actually show up."

"Oh, honey," Junie laughed. "You've got supernatural beings arriving from three counties over. Word spread that the founder inn was hosting again, and everyone wants to see what Vera's granddaughter is made of."

As if summoned by her words, the front door chimed and a group of people entered that made Lyra grateful for Nico's crash course in supernatural species identification.

The leader was clearly a vampire—pale skin, perfectly styled hair, and the kind of charisma that made everyone in the room automatically turn to look at him.

Behind him came a family of shifters, their easy confidence and protective group dynamic marking them as pack members even in human form.

"Miss Whitaker?" The vampire approached with a smile that managed to be charming without showing fangs. "Marcus Blackwood from the Asheville coven. We've heard wonderful things about the inn's reopening."

"Thank you for coming," Lyra said, falling back on the social skills her mother had drilled into her during countless gallery openings. "Please, make yourselves at home."

Food's in the dining room, drinks are wherever you can find them."

Marcus's smile widened. "Ah, the informal approach. How refreshingly honest."

Within an hour, the inn was filled with the kind of eclectic crowd that could only exist in a place like Mistwhisper Falls.

Witches clustered around the fireplace, sharing gossip and spell recipes.

A group of what appeared to be local fae had claimed the library, where they were examining Vera's book collection with the intensity of scholars finding lost manuscripts.

The pack shifters had gravitated toward the back patio, where they could keep an eye on both the party and the forest beyond.

Lyra moved through the crowd, playing hostess and trying not to think about the conspicuous absence of one particular guest. Cade hadn't appeared, despite the fact that half his pack was here and several people had asked about their alpha's whereabouts.

"He's watching from the forest," Finn Cooper said quietly, appearing at her side with the timing that suggested he'd been monitoring her mood.

Cade's beta was younger than she'd expected, with easy brown eyes and the kind of smile that probably got him out of trouble on a regular basis. "Has been for the past hour."

"I didn't ask about Cade," Lyra said, though her heart did something complicated at the confirmation that he was nearby.

"Didn't have to. You've been checking the door every five minutes." Finn's expression was sympathetic but amused. "For what it's worth, he wants to be here. He's just being an idiot about the whole founder bond thing. Or for the werevolves, it's a mating bond."

"You know about that?"

"Pack bonds work differently than founder bonds, but the basic principles are the same.

When you find your other half, fighting it just makes everyone miserable.

" Finn took a sip of his beer, which appeared to be glowing faintly green.

"He'll come around. Alphas are stubborn, but they're not stupid. "

Before Lyra could respond, a commotion near the front door drew her attention. Elder Ruth had arrived, along with most of the town council, and the energy in the room shifted to something more formal and assessing.

"Showtime," Finn murmured. "Good luck."

Ruth moved through the crowd like a queen inspecting her domain, her sharp eyes taking in every detail of the inn's restoration and the gathered guests. When she reached Lyra, her expression was carefully neutral.

"Miss Whitaker," she said, accepting a cup of Junie's mulled cider. "An impressive turnout."

"Thank you," Lyra said, trying to project confidence she didn't entirely feel. "I wanted to show the community that the inn is ready to be part of Mistwhisper Falls

again."

"And what role do you see yourself playing in our community?"

The question was clearly a test, and Lyra could feel multiple conversations pausing as people waited for her answer.

She thought about everything Nico had told her about founder responsibilities and the ancient ward beneath the waterfall, about the weight of heritage she'd inherited along with the inn.

"Whatever role the town needs me to play," she said finally. "I'm not going anywhere, Elder Ruth. This is my home now."

Something shifted in Ruth's expression, a hint of approval that she quickly masked. "We shall see. Time will tell us what you're truly made of."

"I hope so," Lyra said honestly. "I'm still figuring that out myself."

Ruth's smile was small but genuine. "At least you're honest about it. That's more than many can claim."

The formal tension eased after that, and the party settled into the comfortable chaos of a successful gathering. Lyra found herself relaxing for the first time in days, moving through her inn and feeling like she finally understood what home was supposed to feel like.

She was refilling the drink station when Diana Moonwhisper approached, her cat-like eyes holding concern.

"You might want to check the back garden," Diana said quietly. "Something's got the

sensitive types spooked."

Lyra followed Diana's gaze toward the patio doors, where she could see several guests clustering near the windows and peering out into the darkness with obvious unease.

"What kind of something?"

"Lights where there shouldn't be lights. And sounds that don't match anything that should be living in those woods."

Lyra set down the pitcher she'd been holding and made her way through the crowd to the back patio. A small group had gathered at the railing, including Marcus Blackwood and a witch she'd been introduced to as Sage Thornfield.

"What are we looking at?" Lyra asked, joining them at the railing.

"The falls," Marcus said, pointing toward the distant glow of water tumbling over stone. "They're... different tonight."

Lyra followed his gaze and immediately understood the concern.

Hush Falls, which she'd glimpsed through the overgrown garden during her first tour of the inn, was glowing.

Not with reflected moonlight or electric illumination, but with an eerie blue-green phosphorescence that seemed to pulse in rhythm with something she couldn't identify.

"Has it ever done that before?" she asked.

"Never," Sage said, her voice tight with worry. "The falls are supposed to be dormant. Whatever's causing that glow, it's not natural."

As if responding to her words, the glow intensified, and Lyra could swear she heard something carrying on the night air. Not quite music, not quite voices, but something that made her founder's mark tingle with recognition.

"I need to get closer," she said, already moving toward the garden path.

"Lyra, no," Marcus caught her arm. "If something's awakened down there, approaching it alone would be?—"

"I'm not alone," Lyra said, gesturing to the gathered crowd. "And I'm the founder descendant. If something's wrong with the falls, it's my responsibility to investigate."

She pulled free from Marcus's grip and headed down the garden path, her magic stirring restlessly as she approached the source of the glow. Behind her, she could hear the sounds of people following, though she suspected most of them were keeping a respectful distance.

The path through Vera's overgrown garden was treacherous in the dark, but Lyra's magic seemed to guide her steps around obstacles she couldn't see.

Twisted rose bushes reached out like gnarled fingers, and something that could be poison ivy that glowed softly in patches that formed patterns too deliberate to be natural.

When she reached the clearing where Hush Falls tumbled into a natural pool, Lyra's breath caught in her throat.

The water was definitely glowing, but that wasn't what held her attention.

It was the way the light seemed to be moving beneath the surface, swirling in patterns that reminded her of the founder's markings in the cellar.

And it was the voice she could now clearly hear, rising from the depths of the pool with words that bypassed her ears and spoke directly to her soul.

"Daughter of magic," the voice said, and Lyra knew with bone-deep certainty that it was the same entity that had been whispering to her in the cellar. "Come home to us."

"Who are you?" she called out, moving closer to the pool's edge.

"We are the bound. We are the waiting. We are the hunger that grows with every passing moon."

The Mistbound. Lyra knew it without being told, the same way she'd known the founders' spirits were trying to help her. But this voice was different—older, hungrier, filled with a patient malevolence that made her magic recoil in instinctive fear.

"You're supposed to be sealed," she said, though she continued walking toward the water.

"Seals weaken. Bindings fray. And daughters of founding blood call to us whether they mean to or not."

Lyra was at the pool's edge now, staring down into water that glowed like liquid starlight. Somewhere in the depths, she could see shapes moving—not quite human, not quite animal, but definitely aware and definitely watching her.

"What do you want?"

"Freedom. Power. The magic that flows in your veins."

The pull was getting stronger now, and Lyra found herself leaning forward over the water. Her reflection stared back at her, but it wasn't quite right—her eyes were glowing the same blue-green as the pool, and her skin had taken on a translucent quality that made her look more spirit than human.

"Just a taste," the voice whispered. "Just a touch. Let us remember what magic feels like."

Lyra's hand was reaching toward the water before she consciously decided to move. The glowing surface looked so inviting, so peaceful. It would be so easy to just trail her fingers through the light, to make contact with whatever was calling to her from the depths.

"Lyra!"

Cade's voice cut through the supernatural compulsion like a blade, and suddenly she could think clearly again. She was leaning so far over the pool that another inch would have sent her tumbling into the glowing water with a presence so vast and hungry waiting just beneath the surface.

Strong arms wrapped around her waist, hauling her backward from the pool's edge. Cade's scent surrounded her—pine and leather and something wild that made her magic settle immediately.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he demanded, his voice rough with panic and terror.

"I heard voices," Lyra said, though now that she was away from the water, the compulsion was fading. "Something was calling to me."



"Something was trying to drown you," Cade corrected grimly, pulling her further from the pool. "The Mistbound feeds on magical energy. If you'd touched that water..."

He didn't finish the sentence, but Lyra could imagine the implications. Around them, the gathered party guests were maintaining a respectful distance, though she could feel their attention focused on the glowing pool and the drama unfolding beside it.

"It knew my name," she said quietly. "It called me daughter of founding blood."

"Because that's what you are. And that's what makes you vulnerable to its influence."

"Cade's arms were still around her, and Lyra could feel the tremor in his hands that suggested his wolf simmered just beneath his skin."

"The stronger your connection to the founder magic becomes, the more attractive you are as a power source."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning we need to get you away from here before it tries again." Cade finally released her, though he stayed close enough to catch her if she tried to return to the water. "And meaning the seal is weaker than we thought."

As if responding to his words, the glow in the pool pulsed once more, then began to fade. Within moments, Hush Falls looked like nothing more than an ordinary waterfall reflecting ordinary moonlight.

But Lyra could still feel the entity's attention like a weight against her skin, and she knew this was far from over.

"The party," she said suddenly, remembering the crowd of guests back at the inn.

"Will understand," Cade said firmly. "Nothing's more important than keeping you safe."

The words held more weight than a simple statement of protective duty, and when Lyra looked up at him, she saw something in his green eyes that made her heart skip.

"Cade," she started to say.

"Later," he said, but his voice was gentler than it had been in days. "Right now, we need to get you somewhere that thing can't reach you."

As they retraced her steps toward the inn, Lyra couldn't shake the feeling that the evening had changed more than just her relationship with the town's supernatural community.

It had also changed something fundamental between her and Cade, whether he was ready to admit it or not.

CADE

The emergency council meeting was called for seven AM the morning after the Hush Falls incident, which meant Lyra woke to find half the supernatural community already gathered in the town hall parking lot by the time she arrived with coffee she definitely needed and answers she definitely didn't have.

She'd spent a restless night at The Moonbeam Lodge, her dreams filled with glowing water and voices that called her name with hungry patience.

Every time she'd started to drift off, she'd felt that pull again—the same compulsion that had nearly drawn her into the pool.

The founder's sigil on her palm had pulsed steadily all night, like a heartbeat that wasn't quite in sync with her own.

Now, walking into the council chamber and seeing the grim faces of people she'd been laughing with just hours before, Lyra felt the weight of responsibility settling over her shoulders like a lead blanket.

"Miss Whitaker," Elder Ruth said without preamble. "Please, sit down. We have a great deal to discuss."

The formal arrangement from her first council meeting had been abandoned in favor of a more urgent configuration.

Chairs were arranged in a loose circle, with Elder Ruth presiding but not dominating.

Sheriff Torres sat to her right, looking like she'd been up all night coordinating some kind of supernatural emergency response.

Councilman Bradford was there, along with several faces Lyra didn't recognize but who radiated the kind of authority that suggested they were important in ways she didn't understand yet.

And there was Cade, sitting directly across from her with an expression that gave nothing away but eyes that tracked her every movement.

"The incident at Hush Falls last night represents a significant escalation," Ruth began, her knitting needles clicking steadily as she worked on a scarf in shades of gray and silver.

"The Mistbound has never been able to project its influence beyond the immediate vicinity of the falls.

The fact that it could call to you from the inn suggests the seal is deteriorating faster than we anticipated. "

"How much faster?" Lyra asked, trying to keep her voice steady.

"Hard to say precisely," said the woman Lyra didn't recognize, who had the kind of sharp intelligence that suggested she was used to being the smartest person in the room.

"I'm Dr. Elena Vasquez, professor of supernatural history at Asheville University.

I've been researching the original binding for the past fifteen years. "

"And?"

"And based on what I witnessed last night, I'd estimate we have weeks rather than months before the Mistbound achieves enough freedom to begin hunting again."

The words hit the room like stones dropped in still water, creating ripples of tension that Lyra could feel even without magical sensitivity.

"Hunting how?" Sheriff Torres asked, though her tone suggested she already suspected the answer.

"The same way it hunted before the founders contained it," Dr. Vasquez said grimly. "By draining the life force from magical beings until only empty husks remain. The fog incidents we've been seeing around town aren't random weather phenomena—they're hunting expeditions."

Lyra felt the blood drain from her face. "People could die because of what I did."

"People could die because an ancient entity is trying to break free from a prison that was always meant to be temporary," Ruth corrected firmly. "Your awakening of the rune accelerated the timeline, but it didn't create the problem."

"Then what do we do about it?"

"That," Ruth said, setting down her knitting and fixing Lyra with a stare that seemed to see straight through to her soul, "depends on how much you're willing to sacrifice for this community."

The words hung in the air like a challenge, and Lyra found herself sitting straighter in her chair. "What kind of sacrifice?"

"The original binding required three founder bloodlines working in perfect harmony," Dr. Vasquez explained, pulling out a thick folder of documents.

"But harmony isn't just about magical compatibility.

It's about emotional and spiritual connection.

The founders weren't just allies—they were bonded to each other in the deepest possible way. "

"Bonded how?"

"Mated," Ruth said bluntly. "All three of them, in a triad that combined their powers and tied their life forces together. The seal wasn't just held by their individual magic—it was held by the strength of their combined bond."

Lyra's founder's mark gave a particularly strong pulse, and she pressed her palm against her thigh to hide the glow. "You're saying they were all romantically involved with each other?"

"I'm saying they were bound by magic, emotion, and physical connection in ways that made them stronger together than they could ever be apart," Ruth said. "And I'm saying that kind of bond is what's required to repair the seal."

"But there are only two active founder bloodlines," Councilman Bradford pointed out. "The fae line has been dormant for decades."

"Actually," said a familiar voice from the doorway, "that's not entirely accurate."

Nico stepped into the chamber with the kind of dramatic timing that suggested he'd been listening from the hallway. His usual air of amused detachment was gone, replaced by something more serious and infinitely more dangerous.

"Nico Beaumont," he said, inclining his head toward the council. "Descendant of the

fae founder line, and apparently the third piece of this particular puzzle."

The room erupted in surprised murmurs and sharp questions, but Lyra found herself staring at Nico with a mixture of understanding and betrayal. "You knew. This whole time, you knew what we were dealing with and you didn't tell me."

"I told you what you needed to know when you needed to know it," Nico said, settling into an empty chair with fluid grace. "Overwhelming you with the full scope of the situation on your first week in town seemed counterproductive."

"So now what?" Sheriff Torres asked, cutting through the growing tension. "We have three founder bloodlines in the same room. What does that mean for the seal?"

"It means we have options," Dr. Vasquez said, consulting her notes. "But those options require a level of cooperation and connection that..." She paused, glancing between Lyra, Cade, and Nico. "Well, that doesn't currently exist."

"Meaning?" Lyra asked, though she was starting to suspect she didn't want to know the answer.

"Meaning the three of you need to form a triad bond," Ruth said matter-of-factly. "Magical, emotional, and physical. The same kind of connection that held the original seal."

The silence that followed was so complete Lyra could hear her own heartbeat. She looked at Cade, whose expression had gone carefully blank, then at Nico, who was studying his hands with unusual intensity.

"That's not happening," Cade said finally, his voice flat with finality.

"Cade," Ruth began.

"No." He stood abruptly, his chair scraping against the floor. "I won't force Lyra into a magical arrangement she doesn't want just because some ancient binding requires it. And I sure as hell won't share her with someone else, bond or no bond."

The possessive edge in his voice made Lyra's magic flare with interest, but his words stung more than they should have. "Shouldn't that be my choice to make?"

"Not when you're being pressured into it to save the town," Cade shot back. "Not when the decision is being made for you by people who think supernatural necessity trumps personal autonomy."

"And what's the alternative?" Dr. Vasquez asked. "Let the Mistbound break free and start hunting again? Hope we can evacuate the supernatural population before it escapes the valley?"

"There has to be another way."

"There isn't," Ruth said firmly. "The founders tried everything else before resorting to the triad bond. Solo magic isn't strong enough. Allied magic isn't stable enough. It has to be bonded magic, or the seal won't hold."

Cade's hands clenched into fists, and Lyra could see the struggle playing out across his features. "Then we're asking them to sacrifice their freedom for our safety. How is that any different from what the Mistbound wants to do?"

"Because we're asking, not taking," Nico said quietly. "And because the alternative is much worse than magical polyamory."

"Is it?" Cade's green eyes flashed gold. "Because from where I'm sitting, it looks like we're trading one form of imprisonment for another."



Lyra felt something cold settle in her stomach as she listened to them debate her fate like she wasn't sitting right there. "Excuse me," she said, her voice cutting through the argument.

Everyone turned to look at her, and she could see the moment they realized how their discussion had sounded from her perspective.

"Are you actually going to ask what I want?" she continued, her magic beginning to spark around her fingers. "Or are you just going to keep arguing about what's best for me like I'm not capable of making my own decisions?"

"Lyra," Cade started.

"No, I'm talking now." She stood, and the air around her began to shimmer with heat. "You want to know what I think? I think you're all so busy protecting me from having to make hard choices that you're forgetting I'm the one who has to live with the consequences."

"We're trying to find a solution that doesn't require you to sacrifice your autonomy," Dr. Vasquez said carefully.

"My autonomy?" Lyra laughed, and the sound held edges that made several council members shift uncomfortably in their seats.

"I gave up my autonomy the moment I touched that rune.

I gave it up when I inherited founder blood.

I gave it up when I decided to stay in this town instead of running away from magical responsibility. "

Her magic was building now, responding to her emotional state with the kind of dangerous instability that had been plaguing her for days. The lights in the chamber began to flicker, and she could see people exchanging worried glances.

"So here's what's going to happen," Lyra continued, her voice held a command that brooked no argument she hadn't known she possessed.

"You're going to stop debating my life like I'm not here.

You're going to give me all the information—all of it, not just the parts you think I can handle.

And then you're going to let me make my own choice about what I'm willing to sacrifice to keep this town safe. "

"Lyra," Ruth said, her voice holding a warning.

"I'm not finished." The magic around Lyra intensified, and now the windows were starting to rattle.

"I'm especially tired of you," she said, pointing at Cade, "acting like I'm some fragile flower who can't handle the reality of what we're dealing with.

You think the bond between us is some kind of magical coercion?

Fine. Maybe it is. But that doesn't mean you get to make unilateral decisions about whether or not we explore it. "

Cade's eyes had gone completely gold, and she could see his wolf struggling against his human control. "I'm trying to protect you."

"I don't need protection," Lyra snapped. "I need partnership. I need someone who trusts me to make my own choices instead of making them for me."

"And if your choice gets you killed?"

"Then that's my choice to make!"

The words rang out so powerfully it cracked the windows, and suddenly everyone in the room was on their feet. Magic crackled through the air like lightning, and Lyra could feel mark on her palm burning with intensity that suggested she was about to lose control completely.

"That's enough," Ruth said, she spoke with the steady power of someone used to being obeyed that made even Lyra's chaotic magic pause. "Miss Whitaker, you need to calm down before you bring the building down around our ears."

"I need everyone to stop treating me like a child," Lyra shot back, but she could feel her magic starting to settle slightly.

"Then stop acting like one," Cade said, and the sentence slammed into her like a slap.

The silence that followed was broken only by the sound of Lyra's chair hitting the floor as she stood so abruptly it toppled over.

"You know what?" she said, her voice deadly quiet. "You're right. I have been acting like a child. I've been waiting for permission to make my own decisions, hoping someone else would tell me what's right."

She moved toward the door, her magic still sparking dangerously around her. "Well, I'm done waiting. I'm done asking permission. And I'm done listening to people who think they know what's best for me better than I do."

"Where are you going?" Sheriff Torres asked.

"To make my own choice," Lyra said without looking back. "And to deal with the consequences myself."

She was out the door before anyone could stop her, leaving behind a room full of shocked faces and the lingering scent of ozone.

Behind her, she could hear Cade start to follow, but Ruth's voice stopped him.

"Let her go," the elder said quietly. "She needs time to process, and you need time to figure out whether you're going to keep fighting this bond or accept what it means."

Lyra didn't wait to hear his response. She was already walking away, her magic snapped and sparked across her like visible armor and her mind made up about at least one thing.

She was done being protected from her own life.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:56 pm*

LYRA

Lyra's emotions destabilized her magic further the moment she walked back into the inn after storming out of the council meeting.

The building seemed to sense her distress immediately, responding to her chaotic energy like a supernatural tuning fork.

Pictures rattled in their frames without any wind to move them.

The floorboards creaked in harmonies that sounded almost musical, if music could be made of frustration and desperate confusion.

Even the ancient grandfather clock in the hallway began chiming random hours, as if time itself was responding to her emotional turmoil.

"This is exactly what they're talking about," Lyra muttered to the empty inn, the air around her fingers shimmered with power. "I can't even be upset without breaking things."

She tried going to the kitchen, thinking that making tea might help her calm down, but the moment she touched the kettle, it began boiling without being turned on.

The refrigerator started cycling through temperatures fast enough to make the compressor whine in protest. When she opened the cabinet to get a mug, every piece of dishware inside began rattling like it was caught in an earthquake.

"Son of a hex," Lyra said, backing away from the chaos she was creating just by existing.

The glowing rune etched into her skin was burning now, pulsing with increasing intensity as her emotional state fed back into the magical systems of the inn.

She could feel something responding deep beneath the building—not the Mistbound, but the rune itself, drawing power from her distress and amplifying it back through the building's bones.

That's when she felt the pull toward the cellar.

It wasn't the hungry compulsion she'd experienced at Hush Falls—this felt more like a summons from something that wanted to help rather than harm.

The founder's rune was calling to her, not with malevolence but with the promise of understanding, of answers to questions she was finally desperate enough to ask.

Lyra descended the cellar stairs with her magic sparking around her like a personal aurora.

The rune was glowing when she reached the basement floor, its blue light pulsing in rhythm with the mark on her palm.

But the crack that had appeared when she'd first touched it was wider now, branching across the obsidian surface like a spider web of silver fractures.

"Great," she said, settling beside the stone. "I broke the magical prison lock. That's definitely going to look good on my supernatural resume."

The moment her palm touched the rune's surface, though, the chaos in her mind didn't

still the way it had before.

Instead, power began pouring out of her in waves that was unrelated to what was actually happening.

Her magic, already destabilized by her emotional turmoil, found the rune's amplifying effect and exploded outward enough to send a tremor to the cellar walls.

"No, no, no," she gasped, trying to pull her hand away from the stone, but the connection had deepened beyond her ability to break. Magic flowed through her like a river in flood, wild and chaotic and completely beyond her control.

The crack in the rune widened further, branching across its surface with sounds like breaking glass.

Each new fracture released another pulse of ancient power, and Lyra could feel something vast stirring beneath the inn's foundation—not the Mistbound, but the binding itself, straining against forces it was never meant to contain.

The inn above began to shake, the old Victorian structure groaning as magic poured through it in ways its builders had never anticipated.

Dust rained from the ceiling, and somewhere upstairs, she could hear the sound of things falling over as the entire building began to resonate with unstable energy.

That's when she heard footsteps on the stairs, and Cade's voice cutting through the magical chaos like a blade.

"Lyra! What the hell?—"

He stopped at the bottom of the stairs, taking in the scene with the kind of rapid

assessment that suggested he'd dealt with magical emergencies before.

Lyra was kneeling beside the rune with her palm fused to its surface, power crackling around her like visible electricity.

The cellar walls were vibrating hard enough to shower dust from the ceiling, and the ancient stone was developing new cracks by the second.

"I can't control it," she said, her voice strained with effort. "The magic—it's too much. I'm going to bring the building down."

Cade moved toward her without hesitation, though she could see his wolf struggling against the assault of chaotic energy. "Let me help."

"You can't touch me," Lyra warned. "The feedback will?—"

But Cade was already kneeling beside her, his hands covering hers on the rune's surface. The moment their skin made contact, everything changed.

His wolf surged forward so intensely it made his bones crack and his muscles ripple.

Golden light blazed from his eyes as his human form began to shift, revealing glimpses of the predator that lived beneath his careful control.

Fangs elongated. Claws extended. His entire presence became something wilder and more primal than anything Lyra had experienced.

But instead of adding to the chaos, his wolf's power provided an anchor point for her spiraling magic. The steady, grounded energy of his shifted form drew her chaotic power like a lightning rod, giving it direction and purpose instead of letting it flail destructively.



"Better?" he asked, though his voice had dropped to a growl that was more animal than human.

"Much better," Lyra breathed, feeling her magic settle into patterns that worked with his instead of against everything around them.

That's when the bond between them snapped fully into place.

Not the tentative connection they'd felt before, but the complete, overwhelming fusion of two souls recognizing their perfect match.

Lyra could feel Cade's wolf as if it were part of her own spirit—protective, devoted, fierce with love that went beyond rational thought.

She could sense his memories, his fears, the careful walls he'd built to keep people at a distance and the way those walls crumbled completely when it came to her.

And he could feel her—the bright chaos of her magic, the stubborn determination that made her fight for what she believed in, the loneliness she'd carried her entire life until she'd found this place and these people who understood what it meant to be different.

"Lyra," he said, her name coming out like a prayer.

"I know," she whispered, because she could feel what he was feeling, could sense the way the bond was rewriting fundamental parts of who they were. "I can feel it too."

The magic flowing between them stabilized, but it was no longer entirely under their conscious control.

Power pulsed back and forth like a shared heartbeat, wolf energy and chaos magic

finding perfect balance in their connection.

The cellar stopped shaking, but the rune beneath their joined hands was glowing brighter than ever.

"The seal," Cade said, his shifted senses apparently picking up something she couldn't detect. "It's responding to the bond."

Lyra could feel it too—the way their combined magic was feeding into the rune, strengthening the binding that held the Mistbound in its prison.

But she could also feel the cost. Every pulse of power that flowed into the seal drew energy from both of them, and she wasn't sure how long they could sustain it.

"How long do we have to—" she started to ask, but the question was cut off by a sound that made both of them freeze.

The crack in the rune was spreading again, but this time it wasn't caused by her uncontrolled magic. Something was pushing against the seal from the other side, testing the boundaries of its prison with patient, deliberate pressure.

"It knows," Cade said quietly. "It can sense that the bond is forming, and it's trying to break free before we can strengthen the binding."

"Can it do that?"

"I don't know. But we need to?—"

The rune cracked again, a fracture so deep it seemed to go all the way through the stone. Ancient power leaked through the gap, carrying with it the scent of something hungry and old and absolutely malevolent.

Above them, the inn's lights began to flicker in patterns that suggested something was trying to communicate. And from somewhere deep beneath the foundation, Lyra could hear the Mistbound's voice, no longer distant and ethereal but close enough to make her bones ache.

"Soon," it whispered, the words seeming to come from the stone itself. "Soon we will be free, and the daughters of magic will feed our hunger as they were always meant to do."

Lyra met Cade's eyes, seeing her own determination reflected in his golden gaze. The bond between them was complete now, unbreakable, but it might not be enough. The seal was failing faster than they could repair it, and the entity beneath the inn was growing stronger with every passing moment.

"We need help," she said quietly. "We need to find another way."

"There has to be another way," Cade agreed, his voice carrying the fierce conviction that had made him an alpha. "I won't share you with anyone, bond or no bond. And I won't ask you to sacrifice what we have for some ancient interpretation of how magic is supposed to work."

"Then we figure out a different solution," Lyra said, though she could feel the weight of responsibility pressing down on both of them. "We find a way to make this work without giving up what matters most."

The rune pulsed once more beneath their joined hands, its light flickering like a dying flame. Through their bond, Lyra could feel Cade's determination matching her own—they would find another way, no matter what the council believed about ancient requirements.

But first, they had to survive whatever the Mistbound was planning to do next.

And somewhere in the darkness beneath Mistwhisper Falls, something ancient and patient began to laugh.

CADE

The magical storm arrived at sunset, rolling over Mistwhisper Falls like the wrath of ancient gods made manifest in wind and lightning.

Lyra felt it building before she saw it—a pressure in the air that made her mark burn and her magic twist restlessly in her chest. She was in the inn's main parlor, surrounded by research books Nico had delivered that morning along with a note that simply read "Knowledge is power.

Use it wisely." She'd been trying to understand the intricacies of triad bonding, hoping to find some alternative to the path everyone seemed determined to push her down.

The first rumble of thunder made every window in the inn rattle simultaneously.

"That's not natural," Lyra said to the empty room, moving to the front windows to peer out at the approaching storm.

The clouds were wrong—too dark, too uniform, moving against the prevailing wind patterns.

Lightning flickered within them, but it was the wrong color, cycling through purples and greens that belonged in aurora displays rather than mountain thunderstorms.

Her phone buzzed with an emergency alert: "SUPERNATURAL WEATHER EVENT. SEEK SHELTER IMMEDIATELY. AVOID CONTACT WITH

ELECTRICAL SYSTEMS."

"Well, that's specific," Lyra muttered, but she was already moving away from the windows as the first drops of rain began to fall. Except it wasn't quite rain—the droplets glowed faintly as they hit the glass, leaving trails of phosphorescence that pulsed in rhythm with her heartbeat.

The storm reached the inn with enough energy to make the entire building shudder.

Wind howled around the Victorian structure, finding every gap and weakness in the aged construction.

The lights flickered once, twice, then went out entirely, leaving Lyra in darkness broken only by the eerie glow of the storm's lightning.

But it was the voices that made her blood run cold.

They came with the wind, dozens of them, speaking in languages she didn't recognize but somehow understood.

Ancient words of hunger and binding and the promise of freedom that had been denied too long.

The Mistbound was riding the storm, using the chaotic energy to push against the boundaries of its prison.

"This is my fault," Lyra said to the darkness, her magic sparking involuntarily in response to her distress. Every surge of power made the storm intensify, as if her chaos energy was feeding the supernatural weather system. "I'm making it worse just by being here."

The rational part of her mind knew she should call for help, should reach out to Cade through the bond that connected them or contact the town council.

But the growing certainty that she was the problem, that her very presence in Mistwhisper Falls was endangering everyone she'd come to care about, made her reach for her car keys instead.

The inn fought her every step toward the door.

The front entrance wouldn't open, despite the fact that she could feel no magical lock holding it closed. The back door's handle came off in her hand. Even the windows seemed to resist her attempts to force them open, as if the building itself was trying to keep her inside where she'd be safe.

"I'm not staying," Lyra told the inn, her voice raised to carry over the howling wind. "I'm not going to be responsible for what happens when that thing breaks free."

The house's response was immediate and dramatic. Every light fixture blazed to life despite the power outage, the grandfather clock began chiming midnight despite the fact that it was barely past seven, and from somewhere in the walls came a sound like groaning that might have been protest or pain.

That's when the foundation began to crack.

Lyra felt it through the soles of her feet—a tremor that started small but grew with each pulse of her panicked magic.

Dust rained from the ceiling as the building's bones began to shift under forces they were never designed to withstand.

The inn was connected to the founder's rune in the cellar, and the rune was connected

to her, and the feedback loop was tearing the entire structure apart.

"Stop," she said, pressing her hands against the nearest wall. "Please, just let me go. I'm trying to protect everyone."

But the inn's magic was older than her understanding and bound by purposes she'd only begun to grasp. It wouldn't let her leave, and her presence was destroying it from the inside out.

The sound of splintering wood echoed through the parlor as one of the support beams cracked.

Somewhere upstairs, glass shattered as windows gave way to the building's distress.

The magical storm outside intensified in response, lightning striking so close that the thunder was instantaneous and deafening.

Lyra was still trying to force the front door when she heard the truck.

Engine noise cut through the storm's chaos, followed by the slam of a vehicle door and heavy footsteps on the porch. The front door, which had refused to budge for her, swung open the moment Cade touched the handle.

He was soaked from the supernatural rain, his dark hair plastered to his skull and his clothes clinging to his frame.

But it was his eyes that made Lyra's breath catch—they were blazing gold with wolf fire, and his entire presence radiated the kind of controlled panic that meant his human restraint was hanging by threads.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he demanded, taking in her car keys and



the desperate way she was standing by the door.

"Leaving," Lyra said, lifting her chin defiantly. "Before I bring this whole town down around everyone's ears."

"That's not happening."

"Look around, Cade!" Lyra gestured at the chaos surrounding them—the cracked walls, the fallen plaster, the way the very air seemed to vibrate with unstable energy.

"I'm destroying everything I touch. The storm, the inn, the seal below the falls—it's all connected to me, and I can't control any of it. "

"So you're running away?"

"I'm being responsible," Lyra snapped. "I'm removing the source of the problem before more people get hurt."

Cade stepped further into the parlor, and immediately the inn's distress seemed to ease slightly. His wolf's presence provided a grounding influence that her magic instinctively responded to, and Lyra could feel some of the chaotic energy bleeding away.

"You think you're the problem?" he asked, his voice dipped into a rasp that meant the beast inside him was barely leashed. "You think removing yourself from the equation will somehow fix everything?"

"Won't it?"

"No, Lyra. It'll make everything infinitely worse.

" Cade moved closer, and she could see the lightning reflecting in his golden eyes.

"The bond between us isn't just emotional or magical—it's structural.

You're part of the seal now, part of the binding that holds the Mistbound in its prison.

If you leave, if you break that connection, the whole thing collapses. "

"Then we'll find another way," Lyra said desperately. "There has to be something else, some other solution that doesn't require me to?—"

Her words were cut off by a sound like breaking glass, but magnified a hundredfold. The rune in the cellar had cracked again, and this time the fracture was deep enough to let something through.

Mist began seeping up through the floorboards—not the natural fog of the mountains, but something gray and writhing that moved with purpose. Where it touched, the wooden floors began to blacken and decay, as if the very presence of the Mistbound's influence was corrosive to living things.

"Too late," a voice whispered from everywhere and nowhere. "The binding fails. The prison opens. Soon we feast on the magic of this place."

Lyra's magic flared in response to the threat, but instead of her usual golden chaos energy, what emerged was something darker and more volatile.

The founder's sigil on her palm blazed with light so intense it burned into her vision, and she could feel power building inside her that was far beyond anything she'd experienced before.

"Lyra," Cade said urgently, "you need to calm down. The more energy you put out,

the faster the seal deteriorates."

"I can't," she gasped, her entire body beginning to glow with uncontrolled magic. "It's too much. I can't hold it back."

The inn groaned around them as another support beam cracked. Upstairs, something heavy crashed to the floor, and the mist creeping through the floorboards was spreading faster now, reaching for anything that contained life or magic.

"Then don't hold it back," Cade said, stepping directly into the path of her chaotic energy. "Channel it through me. Use the bond."

"I'll hurt you."

"You'll hurt everyone if you don't try." Cade held out his hands, palms up, his expression resolute despite the danger. "Trust me, Lyra. Trust us."

The word "us" hit her like a physical blow, carrying with it the weight of everything they'd shared and everything they could be if she just stopped running from the connection between them.

"I'm scared," she admitted, her voice barely audible over the storm's fury.

"I know," Cade said gently. "I'm scared too. But I'm not scared of you, or the bond, or what we might become together. I'm only scared of losing you."

The confession hung between them like a lifeline, and Lyra felt something shift in her chest. Not just the magical bond, but something deeper and more fundamental—the recognition that she wasn't facing this alone.

"You won't lose me," she said, reaching for his outstretched hands. "Not if I can help

it."

The moment their skin touched, the connection between them blazed to life strong enough to make the air shimmer. But this time, instead of chaos, there was harmony. Cade's wolf energy wrapped around her magic like a stabilizing framework, giving her power direction and purpose.

The supernatural storm outside began to calm, its fury diminishing as the energy source that had been feeding it was channeled into more constructive patterns. The mist seeping through the floor retreated, unable to maintain its hold in the face of their combined strength.

But the inn was still failing around them, its structure compromised by the magical stresses it had endured.

"We need to get to the cellar," Cade said, his voice strained with the effort of maintaining their connection. "If we can reinforce the rune directly, we might be able to stabilize everything."

"Together?"

"Together," Cade confirmed, and the word carried promise that went far beyond their immediate crisis.

They made their way through the failing inn hand in hand, their combined magic holding back the worst of the structural damage. But Lyra could feel time running out—not just for the building, but for the seal beneath it and possibly for Mistwhisper Falls itself.

At the cellar stairs, she paused to look back at the parlor where she'd tried so desperately to leave.

"I was really going to run," she said quietly.

"I know," Cade replied. "But you didn't. When it mattered, when people needed you, you stayed and fought."

"How did you know to come?"

Cade's smile was rueful but warm. "Because I finally figured out that I'd rather risk everything with you than be safe without you. Because I love you, Lyra Whitaker, founder bond or no founder bond."

The words hit her like sunlight breaking through storm clouds, and for the first time since the crisis began, Lyra felt genuinely hopeful.

"I love you too," she said, and meant it with every fiber of her being.

Behind them, the Mistbound whispered its frustration into the darkness, but its voice was growing fainter as their bond grew stronger.

The real battle was just beginning, but no matter what came, they'd meet it as one.

### LYRA

The cellar felt different when they descended the stairs together—not the chaotic maelstrom of uncontrolled magic that had characterized Lyra's previous visits, but something calmer and more purposeful.

The founder's rune still glowed with blue-white light, its surface spider-webbed with cracks that leaked ancient power, but the frantic energy that had been building toward catastrophic failure had settled into something more manageable.

"It's responding to us," Lyra said, still holding Cade's hand as they approached the stone. "The bond—it's stabilizing everything."

"For now," Cade agreed, though his expression remained tense. "But we need to do more than just stabilize it. We need to repair the damage."

The inn groaned around them as another tremor shook the foundation, reminding them both that time was running short. Above their heads, the supernatural storm continued to rage, though its fury had diminished since they'd joined their magic together.

"How do we repair something this old?" Lyra asked, kneeling beside the rune. "I barely understand how it works, let alone how to fix it."

"The same way the founders did originally," Cade said, settling beside her. "With intention, sacrifice, and absolute trust in each other."

His words carried weight that went beyond the immediate crisis, and Lyra found herself studying his profile in the rune's ethereal glow. "You mean the bond. The complete bond."

"I mean choosing each other," Cade said, turning to meet her eyes. "Not because magic is forcing us to, not because the town needs us to, but because we want to. Because what we have is worth fighting for."

The distinction mattered in ways Lyra was only beginning to understand.

Everything that had happened between them so far had been colored by external pressures—magical compulsions, supernatural necessity, the weight of responsibilities neither of them had asked for.

But this moment, here in the cellar with the storm raging above and the ancient seal failing beneath, felt like the first time they were truly choosing each other freely.

"The founders' bond wasn't just about power," Lyra said, understanding beginning to dawn. "It was about trust. About being willing to share everything—magic, emotion, even vulnerability."

"Especially vulnerability," Cade agreed. "Magical bonds require truth, Lyra. Complete honesty about who we are and what we want."

"And what do you want?"

Cade's green eyes had gone dark with intensity, and when he spoke, his voice carried the rough edge which was a sign his wolf lurked close very close to the surface.

"I want you. Not just for tonight, not just until this crisis passes, but for as long as you'll have me."

I want to build something real with you, something that exists because we choose it to exist."

The words hit Lyra in the heart, body and soul, sending warmth spiraling through her chest and making her magic sing in harmony with his wolf's energy. "Even knowing what it means? What we'll have to share?"

"Especially knowing what it means." Cade reached up to cup her face in his hands, his thumbs tracing the line of her cheekbones with careful precision.

"I've spent years convinced I was better off alone, that caring about someone meant giving them the power to destroy me.

But you've already destroyed me, Lyra. You've taken apart everything I thought I knew about myself and put it back together in ways that make me stronger. "

"Cade," she breathed, leaning into his touch.

"I love your chaos," he continued, his voice dropping to the intimate rumble that made her bones melt.

"I love your stubbornness and your courage and the way you threaten people with butter knives when you're scared.

I love that you stayed in this town even when everything about it should have sent you running.

And I love that you're willing to sacrifice yourself to protect people you've known for less than two weeks. "

Tears pricked Lyra's eyes at the conviction in his voice.



"I love you too. I love your grumpiness and your overprotectiveness and the way you carry everyone else's welfare on your shoulders like it's your personal responsibility.

I love that you see something in me worth protecting, even when I can't see it myself.  
"

"Then let me show you," Cade said, and the words carried the weight of ancient ritual and modern promise alike.

When he kissed her this time, it was nothing like the desperate claiming in the cellar that had started their bond.

This was reverent, deliberate, a conscious choice to open themselves completely to each other.

Lyra could feel Cade's wolf through the connection, no longer a separate entity but an integral part of who he was—protective, devoted, fierce with love that went beyond rational thought.

Their magic began to merge as they kissed, wolf energy and chaos power weaving together in patterns that felt both ancient and utterly new.

The founder's mark on Lyra's palm blazed with warmth that spread up her arm and through her entire body, and she could feel Cade's wolf responding with equal intensity.

"Not here," he said against her mouth, pulling back enough to speak. "Not on a stone floor with the world falling apart around us. You deserve better."

"The world is falling apart around us," Lyra pointed out, though she was already letting him help her to her feet. "And I'm not sure we have time for romance."

"We make time," Cade said firmly. "This matters too much to rush."

They made their way upstairs to her bedroom—the room she'd claimed as her own in the inn's residential wing. It was simply furnished but comfortable, with a four-poster bed that had probably been there since Vera's time and windows that looked out over the garden toward the falls.

The supernatural storm was still visible through the glass, lightning fracturing the sky in patterns that definitely weren't natural. But here, in this room with its thick walls and protective wards, the chaos felt distant and manageable.

"Are you sure about this?" Lyra asked as Cade closed the door behind them. "The complete bond—there's no taking it back once it's formed."

"I've never been more sure of anything in my life," Cade said, moving toward her with the fluid grace that marked him as predator even in human form. "Have you?"

Lyra considered the question seriously, thinking about everything that had brought them to this moment. The magical disasters, the supernatural politics, the weight of responsibilities she'd never asked for—all of it had led to this choice, this person, this love that felt bigger than both of them.

"No," she said finally. "I've never been sure of anything. But I'm sure of you."

Her statement seemed to break something in Cade's careful control.

He crossed the room in three powerful strides, his eyes burning, his jaw tight with emotion.

When he gathered her into his arms, it wasn't just lust—it was desperation threaded with reverence, the aching vulnerability of a man who'd almost lost everything and

still couldn't believe she'd chosen him.

Their lips met in a kiss that was part vow, part plea—slow and deep and searching, as if they were trying to memorize each other from the inside out.

Cade's hands framed her face, then slid into her curls, cupping the back of her head as he deepened the kiss, his tongue sweeping into her mouth with a growl that made her toes curl.

"I need you," he murmured, his voice thick, gravelly. "Need to feel you under me. Around me. Mine."

Lyra's breath caught. "I'm yours," she whispered, because it was true—not because of the bond, or the magic, or the prophecy that had tangled their lives, but because her heart had decided it before her mind had even caught up.

Cade groaned like the words shattered something inside him. His mouth found the curve of her neck, kissing and nipping his way down as his hands slid beneath her shirt. The warmth of his touch made her shiver.

"You smell like lightning and sage," he growled against her skin, dragging her shirt over her head. "Like home."

He dropped it to the floor and stepped back just enough to look at her. The lust in his gaze was thick, palpable, almost feral. But behind it was something softer. Worshipful.

"You're the most beautiful fucking thing I've ever seen."

He cupped her breasts, thumbs brushing over her nipples until they peaked under his touch. Lyra arched, gasping as her magic pulsed outward in golden waves.

“Your power is all around me,” he said, voice low and reverent. “It’s like your body sings for me.”

“It’s because of you,” she breathed, pulling his shirt up and over his head. “You make me feel safe. Seen. Desired.”

Cade kissed her again, harder now, all teeth and tongue and coiled hunger. He walked her backward until her knees hit the bed, then eased her down onto the mattress, following her with his body. The old four-poster creaked slightly beneath their weight, the wood fragrant with lavender and memory.

He took his time undressing her, peeling away her leggings and panties with deliberate care, as if each inch of revealed skin deserved a prayer. Lyra trembled under the attention, her thighs already slick with arousal, her breath coming fast.

Cade settled between her legs, pressing a kiss to her hip, then to her lower belly. “Open for me, sweetheart.”

She did—spread wide, shameless, aching. The second his mouth met her pussy, she cried out, fingers tangling in the sheets.

“Oh gods—Cade?—”

He groaned like her taste was his salvation. His tongue flicked over her clit, then flattened, then circled with maddening precision. He licked her like he knew exactly what she needed—alternating soft swipes with firmer pressure, coaxing her open, urging her higher.

“Fuck, baby, you’re dripping,” he said against her, voice hoarse. “You taste like magic.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:56 pm*

Her hips bucked when he slipped two fingers inside her, curling just right. The stretch made her moan, but it was the way he looked up at her while his mouth worshipped her that unraveled her completely—eyes green fire, lips slick with her arousal.

“Please,” she gasped. “I need?—”

“I know what you need.” He thrust his fingers deeper, scissoring them slowly, his tongue relentless. “You’re going to come for me like this first. I want to feel you break apart on my tongue.”

And she did.

Her climax hit like lightning—bright and scorching, magic exploding from her skin in a flash of golden light. Cade didn’t stop, licking her through it, moaning like her pleasure was his own.

When she finally collapsed back onto the pillows, panting and boneless, he kissed his way up her body, slow and worshipful.

“You okay?” he asked softly, brushing hair from her damp cheek.

Lyra smiled, dazed. “That was just the beginning, wasn’t it?”

“Oh, sweetheart.” Cade pressed his cock against her slick entrance, not pushing in yet, just letting her feel how hard he was. “That was me saying hello.”

Then he slid inside her.

Slow. Deep. Devastating.

Lyra gasped, her fingers digging into his shoulders as he filled her inch by thick, stretching inch.

“Oh fuck,” she whispered. “You’re—Cade, you’re so big?—”

“Shh,” he murmured, rocking his hips once he was fully seated. “Let me feel you. Let me take my time.”

And gods, he did.

He moved inside her with long, deliberate strokes, grinding his hips to hit that sweet spot that made her toes curl. Their eyes locked. No pretenses. Just raw need and the kind of soul-deep connection that made her feel naked in every way that mattered.

“You feel like heaven,” he gritted, sweat beading on his brow. “Tight. Wet. Fucking perfect.”

She clenched around him. “Don’t stop. Please don’t stop.”

His rhythm shifted, faster now, harder. The headboard thudded softly against the wall as the bond between them flared—wolf to chaos, protector to storm. Magic danced along their skin, golden and green and humming with energy.

But Cade wasn’t done.

He pulled out suddenly, flipping her onto her hands and knees.

“Need to see this sweet ass bounce on my cock,” he growled, guiding her hips back toward him.

He slammed back in, making her cry out as the new angle lit her up from the inside.

“Cade—gods?—”

“That’s it, baby. Take it. You were made for this—made for me.”

He reached around to rub her clit in tight, slick circles, his other hand gripping her waist possessively.

The sounds in the room were primal—skin on skin, breathless moans, the rhythmic creak of the bed, and the low growl of Cade’s wolf riding the edge of control.

“I’m close,” Lyra gasped. “Cade—please?—”

He pulled her up against his chest, fucking her deep from behind as one hand came to wrap around her throat, holding her gently, anchoring her.

“Come with me,” he rasped. “Let go. Let me have all of you.”

When they climaxed, it was like a star collapsing. Magic detonated outward, flaring through the room, the bed, the inn. Every light in Mistwhisper Falls flickered in unison as the full bond clicked into place—unbreakable, irrevocable, divine.

Cade held her through it, arms wrapped tight around her body, their breathing harsh, their skin slick. They stayed like that for long minutes—entwined, overwhelmed, utterly claimed.

Afterward, they lay entwined in the aftermath of completion, both breathing hard and glowing with the residual energy of fully bonded magic. Lyra could feel the connection between them like a golden thread that would never break, tying her heart to his in ways that went far beyond the physical.

"Holy sage," she breathed against his shoulder. "Is it always like that?"

"I don't know," Cade admitted, his arms tightening around her. "I've never been bonded before. But if it is, I understand why the founders were willing to sacrifice everything to maintain their connection."

"Speaking of which," Lyra said, reluctantly pulling back to look at him, "we should probably check on the seal. All that magical energy we just released?—"

"Strengthened it," Cade finished, his voice carrying the certainty of someone whose enhanced senses could detect things she couldn't. "I can feel it through the bond. The rune is stable again, at least for now."

"For now?"

"The damage is still there," Cade explained, tracing the founder's mark on her palm with gentle fingers. "We've bought time, but we haven't solved the underlying problem. The seal needs all three founder bloodlines to be permanently repaired."

"So we talk to Nico but I can't do it, we must find another way," she said. "We figure out how to make this work."

"Yes, we will find another way. I'm sure Nico doesn't want to do it, too. Maybe we're misinterpreting something," Cade agreed. "But not tonight. Tonight, the seal is stable, the storm is clearing, and I want to hold my mate without worrying about the fate of the world."

As if summoned by his words, the supernatural storm outside began to dissipate, its unnatural lightning fading to ordinary rain. Through the window, Lyra could see the first hints of dawn breaking over the mountains, painting the sky in shades of pink and gold that spoke of new beginnings.



"Look," she said, pointing toward the window. "It's over."

Cade followed her gaze, then pulled her closer against his side. "No," he said quietly. "It's just beginning."

And as they watched the sun rise over Mistwhisper Falls, Lyra felt the truth of those words settle into her bones. The crisis had passed, but their story—their real story—was just getting started.

But whatever came next, they'd handle whatever followed, side by side. Bonded, committed, and stronger than either of them had ever imagined possible.

The future, whatever it held, looked bright indeed.

### CADE

One month after the storm, Lyra woke to the sound of coffee brewing and the scent of something that smelled suspiciously like Junie's famous blueberry pancakes wafting up from the inn's kitchen.

She stretched languorously in the four-poster bed, her body humming with the contentment that came from a full night's sleep uninterrupted by magical crises or supernatural emergencies.

The bond with Cade was a warm, steady presence in her chest, and through their connection, she could feel his quiet satisfaction as he puttered around the kitchen below.

The Mist & Mirth Inn had been fully booked for the past three weeks.

What had started as curiosity about the reopened founder inn had evolved into genuine enthusiasm for what Lyra and Cade had created together.

The inn felt alive again—not just magically, but with the kind of warmth that came from being a place where people genuinely wanted to spend time.

Every room had been lovingly restored, the common areas buzzed with conversation and laughter, and the garden had been transformed from overgrown wilderness into something that belonged in a fairy tale.

Lyra had found her place in Mistwhisper Falls' supernatural community, no longer

the uncertain outsider but a respected member who contributed as much as she received.

She'd started teaching basic magical control to younger witches, her hard-won understanding of chaos magic proving invaluable for others struggling with unstable power.

The town council meetings were still bureaucratic nightmares, but now she was consulted rather than lectured, her opinions sought rather than dismissed.

And Cade... Lyra smiled as she felt him through their bond, his wolf content in ways that suggested he'd finally found the balance between duty and happiness that had eluded him for years.

He'd moved into the inn two weeks ago, officially claiming the residential wing as their shared space.

His pack had adapted to the change with surprising ease, many of them seeming relieved that their alpha had finally found someone to share the burden of constant vigilance.

"Morning, Sunshine," Cade called from downstairs, his voice carrying the warm affection that never failed to make her heart skip. "Breakfast is ready when you are."

"Give me five minutes," Lyra called back, already reaching for the clothes she'd laid out the night before. The inn had guests checking out this morning, and new arrivals expected by afternoon. The rhythm of hospitality had become as natural to her as breathing.

She was brushing her teeth when the first sign of trouble appeared.

Through the bathroom window, she could see Hush Falls in the distance, visible

through the gap in the trees that Cade had carefully maintained for exactly this purpose.

During the day, the waterfall looked perfectly normal—crystal-clear water tumbling over ancient stone into the natural pool below.

But Lyra had learned to check it every morning, just to be sure.

The water wasn't glowing blue anymore. It was glowing red.

"Cade," she called, her voice sharp enough to carry the urgency. "We have a problem."

She heard his footsteps on the stairs before she'd finished pulling on her sweater, and when he appeared in the doorway, his expression was already shifting into the focused alertness that meant alpha business.

"The falls?" he asked.

"Red instead of blue. When did that start?"

"Three days ago," Cade said grimly. "I was hoping it was temporary, but it's been getting brighter each night."

"Three days? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I was hoping it would resolve itself, and because you've been so happy here. I didn't want to worry you unless I had to."

Lyra stared at him, feeling a spike of frustration through their bond. "Cade, we're partners. That means you don't get to protect me from information I need to make decisions."

"You're right," he said immediately, and she could feel his wolf's chagrin at the mild rebuke. "I'm still learning how to balance keeping you safe with treating you like an equal partner."

"Well, learn faster," Lyra said, though her tone had softened. "Because if the seal is changing, I need to know about it immediately."

They made their way downstairs together, where Junie was indeed in the kitchen, along with what appeared to be half the inn's current guests.

The communal breakfast had been Lyra's idea—a way to build community among the supernatural travelers who stayed at the inn—but this morning's gathering felt different.

There was an undercurrent of tension that suggested news was spreading through the supernatural grapevine.

"Morning, you two," Junie said, though her usual cheerful demeanor seemed strained. "I hope you're hungry, because we've got plenty to go around."

"What's the occasion?" Lyra asked, accepting a cup of coffee that tasted like comfort and subtle warnings.

"Nico called a meeting," said Marcus Blackwood, the vampire from Asheville who'd become a regular guest. "Said he had information the community needed to hear."

"What kind of information?"

"The kind that requires coffee and carbohydrates to process properly," Nico said, appearing in the kitchen doorway with his usual dramatic timing. But his pale eyes were serious, and Lyra could see the tension in his shoulders that suggested whatever news he carried wasn't good.

"How bad?" Cade asked bluntly.

"Bad enough that I've spent the last week confirming it through multiple sources before bringing it to you," Nico said, settling at the kitchen table with the fluid grace that marked him as definitively not human. "The seal beneath the falls isn't the only one showing signs of stress."

Lyra felt her stomach drop. "There are others?"

"Three more, scattered across the continent.

Each one built by different founder lines, each one designed to contain.

.. entities... that were too dangerous to destroy outright.

" Nico pulled out a folder thick with documents and photographs.

"Seattle has a binding beneath Pioneer Square that's been showing fluctuations for months.

There's something under the French Quarter in New Orleans that's been making the local supernatural community nervous.

And the founders' seal in Salem has been completely compromised. "

"Compromised how?" Sheriff Torres asked. Lyra hadn't noticed her arrive, but the law enforcement officer was leaning against the kitchen doorframe with the alert posture that meant she was already thinking about crisis management.

"As in no longer functional," Nico said grimly. "As in the entity it was designed to contain broke free two weeks ago and disappeared into the general population."

The kitchen fell silent except for the sound of coffee percolating and someone's sharp intake of breath.

"What kind of entity?" Lyra asked, though she wasn't sure she wanted to know the answer.

"A Siren," Nico said. "One of the old ones, from before the supernatural communities learned to coexist peacefully. It feeds on emotional chaos—broken hearts, shattered families, the kind of despair that makes people do desperate things."

"And it's loose?"

"It's loose, it's hunting, and it's getting stronger." Nico's expression was grim. "Which brings me to the really troubling part of this report."

"There's a worse part?" Marcus asked.

"There's a connected part," Nico corrected. "The timing isn't coincidental. All four seals began showing signs of degradation within weeks of each other, despite being separated by thousands of miles and maintained by completely different founder lines."

"Meaning?" Cade asked, though Lyra could feel through their bond that he already suspected the answer.

"Meaning something is actively working to weaken the bindings.

Something with enough power and knowledge to target multiple seals simultaneously.

" Nico paused, letting the implications sink in.

"The founders didn't just bind individual entities.

They bound parts of something larger, something that's been trying to reunite its scattered pieces for over two centuries. "

Lyra set down her coffee cup with hands that weren't quite steady. "You're saying there's a master entity? Something that's been orchestrating the breakdown of all the seals?"

"I'm saying the Mistbound beneath our falls might not be the primary threat," Nico said quietly. "It might just be one piece of something much more dangerous."

The weight of that revelation settled over the kitchen like a blanket of dread. Lyra felt Cade's protective instincts surge through their bond, along with the kind of strategic thinking that came from years of pack leadership.

"What do we do?" she asked.

"We strengthen our seal as much as possible and prepare for the probability that we're going to have company," Nico said.

"The other founder bloodlines are awakening, Lyra.

I've had reports of supernatural surges in at least six different cities, all associated with families that carry genetic markers consistent with founder heritage. "

"They're being called," Lyra realized. "The same way I was called here."

"Exactly. Which means we're about to become the center of a convergence that could either save the supernatural world or destroy it entirely."

Before anyone could respond to that cheerful assessment, there was a knock at the



inn's front door. Lyra moved to answer it, grateful for any interruption to the increasingly dire conversation, but when she opened the door, no one was there.

Just a letter on the doormat, addressed in elegant script to "The First Founder's Heir."

"That's new," she muttered, picking up the envelope. The paper felt expensive, and there was something about the handwriting that seemed familiar, though she couldn't place where she might have seen it before.

She was about to open it when movement at the edge of the forest caught her attention.

A woman stood at the treeline, watching the inn with the kind of focused attention that suggested more than casual interest. She was tall and elegant, with dark hair and features that seemed to shift whenever Lyra tried to focus on them directly.

"Cade," Lyra called, not taking her eyes off the mysterious figure. "You might want to see this."

But by the time he reached the door, the woman was gone, leaving only the faint scent of ozone and something that might have been magic hanging in the morning air.

"What did you see?" Cade asked, his enhanced senses no doubt picking up traces of whatever had been there.

"Someone watching the inn. Someone who didn't want to be seen." Lyra held up the letter. "And someone who apparently knows more about my heritage than I do."

"Don't open it here," Nico said, appearing behind them with the kind of urgency that suggested his fae instincts were screaming warnings. "Whatever that is, it's been magically prepared. We should examine it in a controlled environment before you make contact with whatever enchantments it carries."

Lyra nodded, though every instinct she possessed was screaming at her to tear open the envelope immediately. The letter felt warm in her hands, and she could swear she felt it pulse with each beat of her heart.

"The seal isn't the only thing changing," she said quietly, looking back toward the falls where red light was still visible even in daylight. "Everything's changing. The whole supernatural world is shifting, and we're right in the center of it."

"Then we'd better be ready," Cade said, his arm sliding around her waist in a gesture that was both protective and supportive. "Because ready or not, it looks like the next phase of this crisis is about to begin."

As they stood in the doorway of the inn that had become their home, watching the forest for signs of their mysterious observer, Lyra felt the weight of destiny settling over her shoulders.

The thread that linked her to Cade pulsed with strength, their place in the community was secure, and the immediate crisis had been resolved.

But the letter in her hands felt like the opening line of a much larger story, one that would test everything they'd built together and everything they thought they knew about the supernatural world.

The first book of their journey was ending, but Lyra had the distinct feeling that the sequel was going to be much more complicated.

And possibly much more dangerous.

But whatever came next, they would face it together. Bonded, committed, and ready to protect the home they'd fought so hard to build.

The Mist & Mirth Inn stood ready to welcome whatever the future might bring, and

its founders' heirs were finally prepared to claim their full inheritance.

Even if that inheritance came with more questions than answers, and more danger than either of them had ever imagined possible.