



How Not to Hex a Gentleman (Witches of Edinburgh)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Kennedy Hellebore knows how to keep a secret. She's been a witch-in-hiding her whole life. But when she moves to Edinburgh for a study-abroad program, the enchanting city seems to have plans of its own. Including magically bonding her to three unexpected new friends.

Bennett MacKay never meant to run (literally) into his beautiful neighbor and would do anything to make it up to her. Lucky for him, she needs help with Edinburgh lore, and that's his specialty.

Kennedy's soon had enough of her gorgeous—and frustrating—Scottish neighbor, because Bennett can't seem to help making a fool of himself as he tries to win over the grumpy beauty. She's got enough to do without him making her already messy life messier.

Romance isn't the only magic brewing in the Edinburgh air and Kennedy needs to focus, but as they spend time researching the city's history, she can't help but be charmed as Bennett's sunny personality slowly cracks through her walls.

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Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:42 am

Chapter One

KENNEDY

O f all the ways to die, I never thought it would be "death by a suitcase," but at this rate, this might be a very real possibility. I didn't even pack that much. Just two, thirty-inch suitcases for my year stay in Edinburgh, Scotland. I'm proud of that accomplishment, not going to lie. The efficient way I packed my life into two medium-sized pieces of luggage brings me joy.

Now though, these two manageable bags seem like monstrosities as I try—and fail—to get them up the narrow staircase of a tenement built in the late 1800s. The stairs are tall, steep, and narrow, with walls on both sides and nothing to hold onto. My history-loving heart is already in heaven, just waiting to dig into the records of when exactly this building was built and how. Sadly for me, tenements don't come with elevators—or lifts —and so here I am, trying to get these two banes of my existence up to my apartment—or flat as they say around here. That's going to take some getting used to, but I'm ready for it. Ready and able and so incredibly excited. My body has been buzzing for days.

When a spot opened up for the exchange student position I jumped on it with everything I had. Edinburgh, Scotland is a dream for anyone, but especially for someone who lives and breathes history. Unsurprising to anyone I know, my goal is to become a researcher. This means I will get my history degree, apply for internships, and then hopefully end up in a gloriously stocked library somewhere with thousands of years of information to go through.

Maybe write my own book about it one day.

As my aunt is always saying, I'm not exactly equipped for people. I like lists and books and being left on my own. The fact that I get to come to a country, all by myself, with my own living space—it's a complete and total dream.

At the back of my mind, there's another dream, the one that has been fully discouraged by my aunt, but it doesn't matter. Being a researcher is the next best thing and I will be good at it.

Regardless of the doubts, the moment I stepped out of that airport and smelled the Scottish air, I knew I was exactly where I needed to be.

The taxi driver was incredibly friendly and talked the whole way to the apartment, but I don't think any of it registered the moment I caught a glimpse of Old Town out the window. I just stared, with my mouth slightly open, the whole way.

It's January, so the streets are a bit emptier of tourists and the air is crisp and cold. Even so, now that I'm struggling up these hundred million stairs—at least—I'm sweating buckets. Good thing my apartment is my own and I can hide away and catch my bearings. Glorious, glorious alone time after all the traveling.

Then I will wander.

I can't wait. How many times can I freak out about this per day? I should really set myself a limit.

I opted to arrive on a Saturday, so I have a day and a half to settle before I have to head to the school. There is also no time for jetlag, so my body better be ready to not sleep until tonight.

Yes, body, I'm talking to you. Don't be getting winded. And brain? Don't you be imagining a bed in your future.

At twenty, maybe I have thought I'd outgrown this weird need to talk to myself, but I've spent the majority of my life with only myself for company so, nope. That's not going anywhere.

And neither is this suitcase, which is now balancing precariously on a not-wide-enough step.

What would be incredibly useful is if I could zippity-zap it up to my flat with a wave of my hand, but my magic is basically dormant—besides making a few plants sprout flowers in the off-season every now and then.

Being a witch is not all it's cracked up to be by the media. Mostly, it's having absolutely no idea where the magic came from or from whom and then only having bursts of random sparks at the most inconvenient of times. I don't have a wand and I don't have any spells in me to get this piece of my personal torment up the stairs.

My aunt—who is also a witch but refuses to practice her magic—spent her whole life telling me that magic is dangerous and I am not allowed to use it in any way whatsoever. It's why I've hidden away for most of my life and have chosen a career that lets me be away from people. I fear magic more than most people fear spiders or snakes. I can still hear my aunt's voice in my head—her threat—promising that if I were to go to Edinburgh, I was not to return.

But I couldn't stay. I couldn't keep myself locked away any longer. When the acceptance letter came, it was the open door I'd been longing for. So here I am, starting a new life and hoping it doesn't end with my suitcases taking me out and ending it prematurely.

My goodness, how many stairs can there be? I feel like I've been on these for an hour.

Taking a few deep breaths, I pull one suitcase up and lean my body against it to keep it in check before I pull the second one after me. There's barely enough space for another person next to me, and for once, I do wish I had some help because I'm going to be fighting with this for a while.

"You really hate me, don't you?" I ask the suitcase, glaring down at the little progress I've made. I'm not even ten steps up. My apartment is on the third floor. It's going to take forever. At least there's a small landing a few steps above me before the staircase turns and continues up. Maybe if I can just make it there, I can leave one suitcase and struggle with the other.

My mind is working on a strategy when I hear a door shut above me. The sound of footsteps reaches me first before a deep, slightly accented voice speaks up. I focus on pulling and lifting the suitcases, determined to make it to the first landing, when the voice gets louder, a bit of worry in it. "No, I'm coming. Don't move. I'll be right there. I don't?—"

Before I can figure out how to move out of the way, a guy rounds the corner. There isn't anywhere to go, so I flatten myself to one side with a quick gasp, but before I can get my suitcases out of the way, he's already slamming into one, making it tumble all the way down to the ground floor.

"Seriously?" I sigh, frustration making my back taut. I turn to offer an apology, expecting one as well, but the guy is already almost down the stairs.

"You good?" he calls up and I glimpse a strong jaw, tousled brown hair, and light eyes before I realize he's moving away, his ear no longer pressed to his phone.

"No?" I snap, my voice loud enough so he can hear me. He stops then at the bottom

of the stairs, his attention on his phone as he proceeds to type quickly.

"It's not polite to take up the whole staircase," he says, not even bothering to look up at me. He's got a very nice voice with a slight Scottish accent, and I tell my insides to get a hold of themselves because he is not attractive.

Rude—he's rude!

Before I can formulate a response, my suitcase decides to burst open, like the traitor that it is.

"You've got to be kidding me!" I glare at the mess as if it has personally offended me. Clearly, all my research into this luggage only paid off for airplane travel. The moment someone knocks it down the stairs, it decides to not be toss-resistant.

The mess on the floor must finally pull the guy's attention and I see the moment his eyes zero in on a specific item. I shove the suitcase I managed to hold onto against the wall on the landing and nearly trip down the stairs in my haste. I don't miss the way he chuckles as I drop myself on top of my clothes.

"You're a walking hazard, you know that right?"

"If you weren't racing down the stairs, this wouldn't be a problem," I reply, trying to push all my clothes back into the suitcase.

"If you weren't taking up the whole staircase, I would've had no problem getting around you." He sounds completely unbothered by my situation, but also distracted at the same time. I find it annoying.

"Well, if you managed to glance up from your phone for more than a second, you'd realize you're not the only person on this planet!" I snap, my voice rising—and so is

my magic. I drop my head, taking a few calming breaths because I am not the kind of a person to lose it in front of a complete stranger. I thrive on control.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see him reach down, yanking the t-shirt from where I was trying to hide it.

"I glanced up long enough to see this atrocity," he says, opening it up to take a good look. "I mean, I like Ninja Turtles as well, but this shirt has more holes than the sewer topper?—"

"It is none of your business how many holes this shirt has." I reach up, yanking the t-shirt out of his hands and balling it up to hold it against me.

"What a zinger of a comeback. Raphael would be so proud."

I look up at him, my rage rising, but before I can say anything, his phone rings and his whole body snaps to attention. "It's okay, I'm coming! Don't do anything—please just—okay, stay right there!" His voice is full of worry and he turns away immediately, heading for the door.

"Thanks for the help!" I call out, sarcastically.

"Don't mention it!" he yells back as the door shuts behind him.

I sit there for a moment, surrounded by my clothes, completely bamboozled, before shaking myself into action.

I throw another annoyed look at the entrance door, but the cute—no, incredibly rude—guy has disappeared. I'm not blind. Obviously, I noticed what he looked like, but I still hope he was just a visitor and I won't be running into him again. If I do, I'll have a few very stern words to offer him. Once my brain restarts, I'm sure I can come

up with some. Ugh, that guy was unbelievable!

"So much for Scottish hospitality," I mumble, as I toss the clothes back into my suitcase and manage to zip it back up. It seems to stay shut and I can only hope that it does all the way to the third floor.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:42 am

Chapter Two

KENNEDY

When I said Edinburgh is a dream come true, I meant it. These kinds of things just don't happen to people like me. I'm a planner. I like my facts and I like them laid out in pretty lists, with post-it notes for color. It's the only way I can keep the worry and the fear away when I have an aunt constantly reminding me that there is something very wrong with me.

My aunt was enraged when I told her about Edinburgh. She couldn't imagine what I would do on the other side of the world when I had one of "my magic flare-ups" as she likes to call them. But what am I supposed to do? Never leave my house in fear that I might shock someone with a little party trick. If she had her way, that would be exactly what she'd have me do.

A party trick is all my magic has ever been to me, but that's not the way my aunt has seen it. She always expected the end of the world if anyone ever found out the magic exists. She had her own problems when she was younger—betrayal she has never fully recovered from—and those experiences led her to pretend she has no magic, which means I've spent my whole life putting up walls between me and all things magical.

Then the letter came. Followed by the apartment offer. For exchange students like myself, there are usually apartments available to rent for the duration of their stay. However, I was one of the later accepted individuals and all the places were taken. After some research though, this little beauty popped up. I can't believe I get to live

by myself. I never have before and it feels like an extra cherry on top of this very sweet Scottish dream.

The tenement building, with its signature high ceilings and bay windows, is absolutely perfect. I expected to be stuck in some one-bed, one-desk shared space, but when I saw the pictures for this listing I fell in love. However, right now, I'm not enjoying the dark cement stairs or the awkward narrow pathways leading up to this gorgeous haven of an apartment.

When I finally make it up the stairs, I feel like cheering. There are only two doors on this landing. Hopefully, my neighbors are nice. There was a lock box downstairs, and after I entered the provided numbers, it popped open to produce a key. I reach for it now, inserting it into the door on the right. One turn, and I'm in.

The door opens soundlessly into a small foyer. I tug my suitcases inside and shut the door before taking a breather. At least all these stairs are going to be great for my cardio. I pull at the scarf around my neck, a bit of sweat rolling down the back of my neck and into the collar of my shirt. Leaving the scarf on top of my luggage, I push past the suitcases and step around the corner.

Only to be greeted with a knife.

I scream, jumping back, my hand coming up—but thankfully with no sparks—just as the girl wielding the knife screams as well. My mind shuffles through self-defense tactics and I'm ready to fight if need be when the girl's words register.

"What are you doing in my apartment?" she shouts and I drop my hands, fear merging into confusion.

"Your apartment? This is my apartment." Whatever moment of panic I had at the knife-wielding stranger is gone. I am ready to fight for my apartment.

"No, you crazy. Get out!"

The girl waves in the direction of the door with her knife. She looks like she means business. I narrow my eyes, processing this information. Her hair is curly and a mix of brown and black as if she couldn't decide on just one color. She's wearing a tight black long-sleeve shirt and dark jeans, but her wrists are adorned in numerous colorful bracelets. A large ring with a red stone blinks at me, the color matching her lipstick. She seems to be my age and sounds American, although probably from the west coast. I take a deep breath and try a rational approach. After the day I've had, I really don't need this.

"This apartment is part of the university housing and I booked it for my exchange program," I say, my voice soothing but firm.

The girl narrows her eyes dropping her knife-wielding hand to her side. "Well, so did I," she sighs. Her words bring another bout of annoyance to an already annoying day. I really just want to take a shower and head out into the city to keep my jetlag in check, but I guess I'll be dealing with this situation instead.

"I'm Parker, by the way," the girl says, raising an eyebrow. She's giving me one of those thorough studies, where she assesses everything from my hair to my clothes. Much like I've done with her.

"Kennedy," I reply, somewhat reluctantly. If she's a student, then someone messed up.

"Well, Kennedy, did you book a three-bedroom apartment or a single residence?"

"What?" I'm confused again and the girl motions for me to follow her.

"See for yourself."

We leave the tiny corridor and step into the room behind her which opens up into a circular sitting area with a bay window. There are two doors on one side and one door on the other, and an opening leading to the kitchen, almost like this is the center of the flower and those are the petals. It's adorable, no doubt about it. It's just much larger—and shared—which is not something I expected.

"I don't understand. It's supposed to be a one-bedroom apartment," I comment, peaking into the first open door and seeing a barely furnished bedroom. Just a bed and a dresser.

"That's what I thought I was getting as well. I suppose they forgot to mention this communal space."

"That makes no sense."

I saw the pictures; I knew what I was getting into, and this is definitely not it. I was looking forward to living by myself. I had a plan and everything.

"This is stupid. There has to be some mistake. We'll need to figure this out." I pull out my phone, scrolling through the contacts until I reach the realtor's office—or I guess they're called letting agents here.

"I've tried that," Parker comments, now studying the kitchen knife like one would look at their nails.

"Why do you even have that?" I ask and she raises her eyebrow at me.

"Because every woman should own a weapon," she says with a silent duh at the end. I roll my eyes but don't comment, pushing dial on the phone. It rings a few times before going to voicemail, but as I open my mouth to leave one, the phone shuts off.

"Yep, it's been doing that to me too. Maybe it's because it's Saturday."

"That doesn't make sense," I say, still looking at my phone and pulling up the notes app to check the information I typed out for them. "The website said they're open all day Saturday. At least until six."

"Wow, you are organized."

I didn't realize Parker moved until she's reading over my shoulders. I dim the phone and turn to her. "Every woman should have her bases covered."

Parker smirks and I do another perusal of the space. "Well, we can't just let it be. We need to get to the bottom of this. I suggest a trip to the office."

Parker nods and turns for the door.

"Might want to leave that here," I call out and she glances at the kitchen knife.

"Oh yeah, wouldn't want to scare the locals." She grins and I shake my head, frustration adding pressure to my temples. Parker grabs her coat and we reach the door just as it swings open without a sound.

A girl our age with long blonde hair jumps back, a hand on her heart. She stares at us and we stare at her, and I sigh.

"Let me guess, you booked a single-bedroom apartment too?" Parker asks.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:42 am

Chapter Three

BENNETT

When I race into the nearly empty waiting room, my heart is in my throat. If something happened to?—

"Bennett!" Lana exclaims, launching herself into my arms. I catch the petite fifteen-year-old by the shoulders, giving her a once-over.

"Are you okay? Were you in an accident? What happened?"

Lana is my best friend's little sister and a walking hazard to herself—and everyone around her most of the time. When Nicholas is out of town, which he currently is, I'm the speed dial on Lana's phone for all of her after-school mishaps.

"I did have an accident!" Lana exclaims dramatically, raising her hand in front of her and moving some of the gauze away so I can see. "This is what I get for trying to cook at home. Never again!"

My eyes focus on the small cut below her pinky running down to her wrist. It can't be more than an inch and a half, but it's been bleeding. I exhale deeply, running a hand over my face. From the way she sounded on the phone and the abrupt disconnect I thought she lost a finger.

"Lana—"

"I know, how horrible! The nurse said I need stitches, so she's getting it all prepped. It might even leave a scar! Or worse! What if it got infected? I could've died."

"We don't live in the 1800s."

"So?"

I take another deep breath, trying to keep the smile off my face. This girl is such a handful, but she's lucky I adore her because if I didn't, this would be a huge problem.

"Lana, you need to work on your delivery. I was very worried."

"As you should be!" She nearly stomps her foot with outrage. "I could've bled out."

"No, you couldn't have." The nurse reappears, a patient look on her face, "As I explained to you already."

"But—"

"No buts." The nurse gives me a kind smile before motioning for Lana. "Let's get you stitched up."

"I'll be right here," I say, pulling out my phone as Lana is led away. This girl is a full-time responsibility. I dial her brother and he picks up on the second ring.

"What's the update on the disaster?" Nicholas asks by way of a greeting, and I chuckle.

"According to Lana she almost died from a cut on her hand. The nurse is patching her up now."

Nicholas exhales loudly, much like I did, and I can almost see him shaking his head. We met when I was first studying at the university and hit it off immediately. Originally from the states, he'd been in the UK for the majority of his life by the time I met him. When I moved up from the Borders for university, I didn't know anyone in town. Now, five years later, he's my best friend and the family I've been searching for most of my life. Lana was only nine when Nicholas brought me home with him for the Christmas holiday, back when he still tried to have some kind of relationship with his uncaring parents, and Lana took an instant liking to me. She dubbed me her "better" brother, since according to her, I was the fun one who actually played hide and seek with her when she wanted.

Truthfully, both Nicholas and Lana have helped with my ever-present longing for family and I'm willing to do my part as their honorary family member.

"Thanks, mate. You think she'll grow out of it?" Nicholas asks.

"I don't know," I reply honestly.

Most of Lana's hyper anxiety when it comes to these things came from her mother who is a hypochondriac and raised Lana to be the same. Every little thing sets them off and I know Lana is working through it, but it's a long process. The moment Nicholas could, he stepped in and became Lana's guardian. Not that their parents fought him on it; I think they were sort of glad to be rid of their kids. Nicholas and I bonded over our lack of parents.

"Thanks for being there," Nicholas says. "I should be back in two days at the most, but hopefully tomorrow. This professor is consistently too busy to see me."

"You think he's hiding?"

"Oh, I'm sure he is. If I didn't need his interview for the article I would've bailed

already."

Nicholas is in the midst of his latest academic study. After graduation, he had no plans to leave Scotland or Edinburgh, because he fell in love with the city much like I have. So he stuck around to work for the university in various capacities. Lately, he's been teaching, and since he's between lectures at the moment, he's doing a study-article on Scottish lore—which is my expertise as well, with a bit of a different approach. Nicholas has a bad history when it comes to the "magical" aspect of Scottish lore—his mum really ruined that for him. So his articles are always simply the facts, while I kind of like the whimsy.

His current research is on the Stone of Destiny, a literal sandstone block used by Scotland for the inauguration of our kings until it was stolen by the English and used for their coronations. There was a full-on heist by some students in the fifties who stole the stone back from England and returned it to Scotland. Nicholas is trying to talk to someone who was around at that time and witnessed all the madness firsthand. Clearly, he's not having any luck.

"I'm not sure why he's being so tight-lipped about it. It's not like he's the one who stole the stone or was even old enough to do it. He was in high school! Barely."

"Are you angrily chugging glasses of water?" I ask when there's a pause in the rant and then Nicholas chuckles.

"You know me too well, mate." I can hear him put something—the glass, I assume—down and sigh again. "Seriously, I'm sorry you have to come running when Lana calls."

"I'm not," I reply honestly, even though I was in the middle of things when she did. I was also pretty rude not helping the girl with the suitcases, now that I think about it. The way Lana had panicked on the phone, though, I truly thought something was

horribly wrong. "She's the little sister I never had."

"Or wanted. It's okay, you can be honest with me."

I chuckle, but I would never admit that because I've been alone for a lot of my life and I wouldn't trade Nicholas and Lana for anything. They saved me even before I knew I needed to be saved.

"I need you to do me a favor," Nicholas says out of nowhere and I focus immediately.

"Of course. What is it?"

"I need you—to have a little fun." I roll my eyes even though he can't see me. He's been harping on this for a while now. "Don't roll your eyes at me, man. You've become boring. You need to shake things up."

"What I need is for you to come back so we can celebrate your birthday proper, for once."

In the five years we've been friends we've yet to celebrate a birthday within the birthday month. It was his New Year's resolution this year, and we're still off to a rocky start.

"Perfect, then we can get you to loosen up a bit," Nicholas says as I shake my head. He thinks I'm too studious, and this is coming from someone who's fully into his articles and lectures day and night. I have been spending most of my time in books lately, so engrossed I've missed out on friends, but that's how it needs to be right now. If I'm to become an academic one day, I need all the knowledge I can gleam.

Granted, an academic wasn't my first choice. For the longest time, I wanted to be a museum curator. It would be quite glorious to research collections and design

exhibits. It's the attention to detail and administrative tasks that give me a case of the hives. While I can meet deadlines, I definitely don't do it in an organized sort of way. Either way, a history degree gives me a step inside, but it doesn't leave me much room for extracurricular activities.

"I'm hanging up now," I say as Nicholas laughs.

We say our goodbyes and I turn to face the door Lana disappeared through.

Maybe there is something to Nicholas's assessment of my life, considering before Lana called I was pages deep in the latest volume of Highlands versus Lowlands. A wild Saturday night, as usual. I won't be admitting any of this out loud. Coming to study in Edinburgh and meeting Nicholas and Lana was a near miracle. My grandma raised me after my father checked out and my mother abandoned me before him, back when I was still in need of motherly love. She did the best she could, but I was mostly left to my own devices, as she was already sick by the time I was left on her doorstep and we just ended up stuck with each other. Then, my first year at the university, my grandma passed away.

Until I met Nicholas, I never thought family would be for me. I expected everyone to simply be going through the motions of life alone. I think a part of me is still that little boy who doesn't believe he deserves love and it's simply easier to be happy-go-lucky, but nothing deeper when it comes to relationships.

Clearly, Nicholas and Lana see past that and I'm grateful.

"All ready!" Lana announces, breaking through my thoughts as she steps out from the backroom, waving her bandaged hand at me.

"Come on, troublemaker. Let's get you home in one piece."

"And stop for ice cream?"

I chuckle. This girl is spoiled and I'm definitely an enabler.

"And stop for ice cream."

KENNEDY

"This is ridiculous," Parker mumbles from my right as Lily, the golden-haired third member of our little group, sighs to my left.

We were right, Lily also booked a one-bedroom apartment, and she's also an exchange student from America. Apparently, we're all here for a year to finish our studies before we decide on our next step. This apartment was sent to all of us as an option after we searched for university housing. According to the website, there are a lot of students who use short-term rentals while here for a year of study and we all had the same listing for a "single occupancy flat".

"How are they closed? I guess maybe letting agents just don't work on Saturdays here." Lily cups her hands over her face and tries to see into the office through the glass door, but it's just dark in there.

"Maybe they messed up and ran for the hills," Parker comments, leaning against the wall beside the glass, arms crossed over her puffy jacket. I pull my black long-line winter coat a little tighter across my body, as I stare out into the street. I should've grabbed my scarf.

"I doubt that's the case," I say, my attention on people passing by. It's barely four in the afternoon, but the sky is darkening already. Night comes early during this time of the year and I didn't even get to explore any of the city like I planned. My body and my mind are tired, and I'm resigned to not checking things off my list like I wanted to

today. Except for the shower. I really want one of those.

"Okay," I turn to the girls, my mind spinning, "we have no options here but to see this through. The apartment has three separate bedrooms."

I checked before we left.

"So that means we can all lock ourselves in for the night, put a chair under the doorknob or something," I direct that at Parker, "and figure it out in the morning. It would be irrational to do anything else."

The girls look at me a bit strangely and then Parker cocks her head to the side.

"She looks so lifelike, don't you think?" she asks Lily, making the other girl chuckle.

"They don't make them like they used to," Lily replies and now Parker is cracking up.

"It must be the newest model," Parker says between laughs.

I roll my eyes, stuffing my hands in my pockets. "You're hilarious," I say, zero humor in my voice, "but someone needs to have a plan around here."

"I have a plan." Parker stands up straight, shooting me a grin. "Right now it involves some food because I've had nothing but airplane food in the last twenty hours and I must be fed."

"Before you turn into a monster?"

It's my turn to raise an eyebrow at her, but she's not offended, giving me one of her grins.

"So she does have a sense of humor. Good to know."

Ignoring the dig, I pull out my phone. "There are a few restaurants nearby...well, more than a few."

"What's that?" Lily asks over my shoulder, pointing to a little icon of a croissant nearby. The girls crowd around me, studying the map I pulled up on the app.

"A bakery," I reply, before clicking on it. There are several options that include savory as well as sweet.

"If we're voting," Lily says, looking over the menu, "I say we grab something and head to the apartment."

"That's my vote too," Parker says over my other shoulder before they both step back and look at me. I guess we're making decisions by votes then. I happen to agree; I too would like to be back at the apartment and hopefully taking that shower I've been dreaming about.

"Let's head to the bakery then."

It takes us no time at all to walk over to Princes Street. My eye is immediately drawn to the castle and I say a little "hi" in my head as if I'm greeting an old friend. There are even more people here, considering the number of stores and transportation options available—the Waverley Train Station is just on the other side of the street—and we weave in and out as we follow the map's instructions.

One word that comes to mind when I look out at the city is regal . It's brimming with history and pride. The buildings, all different heights, all stand closely together as if they're one big family. The weathered stone architecture, preserved over the centuries, is situated in the medieval street plan, making up the oldest part of

Edinburgh. The city slopes and rises, with the castle perched on top of a rocky crag, where it is built on the remains of a volcano. These bits of information file in as we pass some of the world's first high-rises. Like a typical tourist, I gawk at it. It feels right somehow, to feel the cobblestones beneath my feet while being enveloped in the hustle and bustle of the narrow streets.

I glance up to stare at the castle once again, my heart happy at the sight. It looms over us, cast in the shadows of the setting sun. There's something incredibly charming about an old castle on a dormant volcano, overlooking her city. It's as if she's a proud parent, making sure her child is flourishing. There's a moment where I'm almost positive I see a few sparkles flitter in the space around the castle, but when I blink they're gone.

"You've been staring at that castle nonstop," Lily comments as we walk.

"Old things in general are kind of my thing." I shrug.

"Oh, I'm not judging," Lily says with a little wave of her hand. "I'm pretty obsessed with it too; there's just a look about you."

"A look?"

"Yes, it's kind of like you're in love," Parker comments.

I've never been in love before, but as I stare up at the castle I think that might be a fair assessment. So much of my life, and my academia, has been me figuring out how to be just a regular human and going going going nonstop. The constant fear instilled in me by my aunt regarding my magic hasn't left much room for anything but hard work and keeping to myself. Even after a few hours on the streets of Edinburgh there's a sense of home here I haven't felt before. Almost like maybe...just maybe, I can be myself here.

"Come on, dorks. Let's get some food and then we can stare up at the castle some more." Parker hooks her arms through the crook of my elbow, pulling me in the direction of the bakery. Surprised by her easy manner, I let her tug me along.

"You're taking this all so well," I comment, as I try to extract myself from her grip after a few steps. She grins but lets me go.

"I figure we're three women in a new city in a new country so it is our responsibility to the sisterhood of women to watch out for each other, which means the best we can do is go with the flow."

"Is that why you greeted me with a knife?" I ask, just as we step into the tiny bakery. Two pairs of eyes swivel in our direction and I give them what I hope is an innocent shrug. Parker isn't fazed.

"Hey, I thought you were breaking in and I have every right to defend myself. Hi there," she turns to the worker, not breaking her stride, her eyes scanning over the available options. "I will take a bacon and chicken Cornish pasty, please."

Lily chuckles, before ordering a traditional steak Cornish pasty and then looks at me expectantly. I guess Parker is right, this could be worse. I could've been stuck in an apartment with some shady characters. Although the jury is still out on these two. So far, all I know is that Parker is the pushy one and Lily is the quieter one, but I like them both. The weird part is that they don't quite seem like strangers, but that might just be my tired brain latching onto things.

My stomach grumbles and I glance over at the options in front of me. "I'll take the peppered Cornish pasty, please."

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:42 am

Chapter Four

KENNEDY

"Come on, we should walk in the garden on the way back." Parker beelines for the crosswalk before Lily and I can say a word.

"She's a doer," Lily comments, and I chuckle.

"That's one word for her."

We follow because we're not about to leave her alone. What she said about us looking out for each other, I stand by that. We cross the street and take the stairs down to Princes Street Gardens. Since we're entering the west end of the garden, we have the perfect view of the castle looming over the fountain.

"Oh my goodness," Lily exclaims, heading straight for it. "I've seen pictures, but it's just so beautiful in person."

"Ross Fountain," I supply, my own heart filling with wonder the closer we get. That sense of rightness comes again, and this time I'm sure I'm seeing the fountain sparkle—but not in a normal way. Maybe it's my tired brain playing tricks on me, but I do an internal check—like my aunt taught me—to make sure I'm not sending off any magical sparks. I clear my throat, focusing on the girls. "It was cast in France, a cast-iron piece of art, a really good example of 19th century sculpture. It was shipped here in 122 pieces and then assembled in 1872."

"How do you know so much about it?" Parker asks and I beam at her.

"That's my thing. History, specifically European history."

"Goodness, this is the perfect place for you then." Lily grins at me, her eyes shining. It seems like everything about her shines. While Parker seems to prefer darker colors, Lily is all sunshine. From her blonde cascading hair to the light green dress that goes right past her knees and peaks out below her tan coat to her light brown eyes full of laughter. I think the only lines on her face are laugh lines, while mine have got quite a few frown ones at this point.

"I think so too," I reply honestly, returning the smile. I give myself a moment to study the park around the fountain and notice a magpie sitting on one of the branches, staring at us. I turn back to the girls. "Everything about this exchange program felt right. What about you? What's your area of study?"

"Oh, I'm an English major," Lily replies. "Edinburgh is also a place of books, so it was right, ya know?" She's still staring at the fountain and her fascination with it feels me with warmth. If I look like that staring at the castle, then I can tell why the girls would think I'm in love.

"What about you?" We look over at Parker who stopped in front of the fountain and is now facing us.

"Art," she supplies with a grin. "Specifically relating to the Wicca aspects of history. And I think," she continues, looking back up at the fountain, "I'll have to come back in the daytime and sketch this monstrosity, because look at it."

Parker is now grinning up at it, but my mind is on the casual way she used the word Wicca . It's not a word I hear often, but just like with everything else surrounding magic, I am sensitive to it.

I try not to show it and focus on the fountain instead. It hits me square in the chest. The beauty, the history, it's all there, intricately woven together by a skilled artist who took the time to put all the pieces together. At the very top of the fountain resides a woman, overlooking the gardens. Below her are four nymphets, said to represent arts, science, poetry, and industry. Under the first tier is a collection of mermaids, cherubs, and walrus and lion heads. It's unique and strange in all the right ways.

"Did you know it used to be all gold?" I glance at the girls and they shake their heads. Instantly, I want to tell these strangers everything. This is a subject I'm comfortable with, a safe place for me when the anxiety of magical things starts to creep in. "They restored it a few years back and painted it this turquoise, brown, and gold to pay homage to the French style of that time."

"How did it get here?"

"A gunsmith, Daniel Ross, saw it at an exhibit in France and bought it before gifting it to Edinburgh. Not that they appreciated it; not with all the naked ladies. Victorian society was very scandalized to have so much unreal skin on display."

The three of us chuckle, looking back up at the structure. I think I could stay here forever. There's a sense of peace, simply enjoying the monument, with the gentle fall of water and the sound of the city around us. The park is nearly empty at this hour, and it's still early enough in the year that the streets aren't full of tourists.

Lily motions to one of the benches near the fountain and we take a seat as we eat our Cornish pasties.

I'm halfway through mine before I speak up again. "I never thought I'd be able to come here," I say, and I'm not exactly sure what possessed me to share, but it feels like I can speak my mind with these strangers. Maybe because they are strangers. "I applied every semester and always got rejected. It seemed like an unreachable

dream."

I want to say more about how alone I felt in those dreams when I'd applied secretly and how much my aunt discouraged me and made me fearful of myself, but I take a bite of my pasty instead, finishing it off. Standing, I discard my trash and walk back to the fountain, unsure where this emotional part of me is coming from. I don't talk about feelings with anyone, but suddenly I want to and I have no idea why.

I hear them come up on either side of me and it's Lily who speaks first. "It was a miracle for me too, but I think—I think we're meant to be here. Don't you think?"

That last part is aimed at Parker and we both glance to the left, to see her staring at the fountain. There's something in her eyes that makes me pause and I wonder just how much history she carries behind that carefree spirit of hers. That's true for anyone, I suppose. We all carry a load of baggage.

Parker turns, looking at Lily and me with a little twinkle in her eye. "I think we're going to be the best of friends."

"Hey there."

The voice comes from behind us and we turn as one to see two guys approaching. They look to be in their twenties with broad grins on both of their faces. In the minutes we've been here, the park has seemed to clear out even more, save for these two—and the magpie still eyeing us from the branches.

"We were wondering, could you take a picture of us?" the slightly taller one of the two asks and I narrow my eyes a little. He's looking at us in that sort of a way that immediately makes me uncomfortable—as if he sees his favorite dessert and is about to take a bite out of it. I can't tell if my brain is being overly cautious or if I'm picking up some vibes, but either way, I would like them to leave.

"Sure," Lily replies beating my automatic no.

She steps forward to take the offered phone as Parker and I move to the side. The guys pose themselves in front of the fountain, their hands in their pockets and those smiles in place. We're close enough to the fountain that it won't be fully in the picture, but I assume it's because it's dark out, the sun has set, and there aren't lights in this area of the park except at the fountain.

"Here you go."

Lily hands the phone back, but instead of accepting it, they move to either side of her, looking over her shoulders.

"Oh that's nice, could we try another?"

They're standing way too close, in her personal space, and when Lily goes to move back, they follow. And that just won't do.

"I think that's enough," I say, moving up to stand by Lily, my hand plunging into my pocket. I wedge my body right next to her, making the guys move.

"What? We just want another picture," the shorter of the two whines, and I can tell they're not from around here, but I can't place the accent either. It doesn't matter, we're done helping. The uncomfortable feeling that came when they arrived is intensifying by the second.

"Well, we're not your personal paparazzi, so how about you take your phone and move on?" I ask, raising an eyebrow.

"American, yes?" The taller one eyes me up and down. "I heard you tend to be feisty ."

"And I heard European men are good-looking, but I guess only one of us has the right information," Parker comments, flanking Lily's other side.

Lily grins at the guys before tossing the phone at them. The shorter one barely catches it, a harsh look coming over his features.

"Now, you little—" He steps forward, but I grab Lily's hand, pulling her slightly behind me, as I level the guy with a look.

"I suggest you move alone, before I shower you with a particularly feisty type of blessing," I say, raising a tiny cylinder can.

Parker barks out a laugh, as the guys take a surprised step back.

"Really, run along. She's pretty unhinged these days, especially after the day she's had. You don't want her—Oh look at that, they're gone."

We exchange a look before the three of us burst out laughing.

"When you pulled out the can I thought they were going to pee their pants. I thought pepper spray was illegal here. They didn't take it away in customs?" Lily giggles and I give the can a proud look, raising it higher and spraying a few pumps.

"It's perfume," I say as the girls quickly step back. "But looks legit, doesn't it? Never travel without one, even if it's a fake one."

"And you were shocked at me and my knife, Miss Self-Defense Goddess."

"Oooh, goddess. I like that." I do a little bow, and then the girls stumble into me, pulling us into an impulsive group hug. My instinctual response is to pull away, but for some reason, I don't. It's almost like this is what I was missing in my day—a hug

between friends. We're laughing like we've known each other for years, and that sense of rightness washes over me once more. Nothing like an uncomfortable situation to bond girls together. I glance at the fountain as something catches my eye, and before I can look away, it begins to glow.

"Oh, hey, girls," I say, since I'm the only one facing it.

They turn as one and we watch the glow start at the top of the fountain, right over the statue's head, and slowly travel down the length of it. I blink a few times, making sure I'm actually seeing it. Maybe I'm more tired after my flight than I thought, but Parker shatters that notion with her next words.

"Is there a spotlight?"

I glance around but I don't see any lights pointing in this direction. I turn my attention back to the glow, watching it make its way over the intricate design and into the water. Before we know it, we find ourselves at the edge of the fountain, as the glowing orb moves all the way down and stops in the water, right in front of us.

"We all see that, right?" Parker asks.

"Yes," Lily and I answer at the same time, unable to look away.

Then, before we realize we're moving, we step forward and reach for it, as one. The moment our fingers touch the water, something happens. A tingly sensation rushes through my body, almost like I touched a live wire. My confusion turns to panic as the fear that's been instilled in me from a young age rushes in.

Control yourself, Kennedy. Breathe through it. But...I'm not doing this...this isn't my magic. No way. I—suddenly, my wrist is on fire and I jerk away as if there's a way to shake it off. The girls gasp and then we're stumbling back, each holding our right

wrist in our left hand.

"What's happening?" Lily asks as we pant like we've run a mile.

I grip my hand over my skin, trying to keep the pain at bay. There had to have been something in the water, maybe something I'm allergic to. That is the only rational explanation because I definitely did not perform any magic.

"No idea," Parker manages, and then, just as suddenly as the burning sensation appeared, it's gone. Blinking a few times I stare at the fountain, but it's normal again. I look around the park, but we're alone.

"Umm, guys?" Parker's voice carries a note of concern in it and I spin around to find her staring at her wrist. I glance down at my own, shock holding me completely immobile.

Because where there was only skin before, in a spot on my wrist below the thumb, there are now black lines, about two inches long and one inch across.

A flower.

My mind tries to wrap itself around what I'm seeing when Lily speaks up. "Is that a thistle?"

Chapter Five

KENNEDY

We speed walk back to the apartment without a word, my mind coming up with a hundred explanations, but none of them seem rational enough. I pride myself on being pretty calm in most situations. I come into scenarios with a plan and options on how to execute it, but I'll be honest here, I'm freaking out. Fully and completely.

Because that was magic. There's no other explanation. Except I didn't do it, so that means someone else did it. But why? And how? And for what reason? Wait, my brain is repeating itself now. I think I might be heading into a full-blown hysteria. Which is absolutely not allowed.

Hundreds of warnings flash in front of me—all spoken by my aunt since the moment we knew I had magic in me.

You must never let anyone see it.

They will hunt you if you show any magic.

Magic will destroy you if you let it in.

That last one was repeated over and over in every possible way until my dreams became nightmares of me being chased and captured—tortured for simply being who I am. I couldn't even tell a counselor about it because that would be telling someone about magic.

Once we're inside the apartment, we head straight for the communal living room. I take the plush chair as Parker and Lily sit on the couch. The convenience of this apartment being furnished does not escape me, but if I focus on any of this for more than a second, I will lose my mind entirely.

I stare at the girls and they stare back. The one thing I do refuse to look at is my wrist, because what is there can't be real. Not while Parker and Lily are in the room. They don't know about magic, so I have to make sure they don't find out about it. The last time I was around a person with no powers, my aunt locked me in the basement for over a day, punishing me for not being able to control a magical response I had when I touched a crystal she left out. I have to keep things rational.

"Maybe there was something in those pasties," I say, breaking the silence. Common sense for common people. I have it. I can come up with options that are not magical. "It could be a collective hallucination."

"We've been drugged?" Lily gasps, and Parker levels me with a look.

"Can you not with the conspiracy theories? You're scaring Lily."

I glare right back at Parker before turning to look at Lily.

"I'm fine," Lily says, her voice quiet but strong. "I've never taken drugs, so I have no idea what to expect, but should I feel this kind of...electricity in my veins?"

I open my mouth to reply, but I have no idea what to say because it's happening to me too. However, unlike Lily, I'm familiar with this feeling. It's the type of awareness that travels over my skin, before it plunges straight into my bloodstream, making my whole body tingle. It's magic, waking up and stretching after a long rest. I've only felt it a few times in my life and each time I was severely punished. My mind is rebelling against the very possibility, but I can't ignore the way my body is feeling.

I have to pretend.

I have to stay in control.

I'm trying to come up with another explanation, but Parker speaks again. "No, this is not how it feels."

I focus on her, latching onto anything at this point other than the magic. "And how would you know? Have you been dosed with hallucinogens before?"

"No, but I'm pretty sure they don't come with a pretty thistle tattoo on my wrist," Parker snaps, raising her arm in the air, like she's trying to prove a point.

"Maybe we got food poisoning." I ignore the tattoo. "We could be delirious."

"The only delirious one here is you, Kennedy." Parker stands up from the couch and walks into her room.

"I'm trying to provide options," I call after her.

"Your options suck!" she yells from inside her room.

Exasperated, I run a hand over my hair and glance at Lily. She's staring at me with a concerned look—and something else. I can't quite place it, but I settle for staying logical.

"I'm sure it's nothing serious," I try to reassure her, even as my dread continues to rise. If there is a chance Parker—a non-magical person—finds out about my magic—I will be in danger. Those in power, who are always searching for more power, will come for me and they will punish me, more severely than my aunt ever has, breaking me down so that I become useful to them. This is the truth I've lived

with my whole life. I can't let that happen.

Lily gives me a tense smile before glancing down at her wrist. "It feels serious," she says and now I'm even more concerned. "It feels like it means something big."

Before I can comment on that, Parker is back with a book in her hands. She plops herself down on the couch and gives me a smug smirk, which sets more of my internal alarms off.

"What?"

She raises her eyebrows at me before she looks down at the open book on her lap. "A sign of power can take shape in various ways," she begins to read. "There are documented instances where a lock of hair has turned a different color overnight. Other instances speak about variations in eye color or even marks on the skin."

"What is that?" Lily asks, but Parker isn't done.

"The most powerful signs are often intricate designs, often in the form of a symbol that best represents the power. It has been said, that the purest form of power shows itself in markings on the skin, like a tattoo."

"Parker—" My voice is low, my heart beating fast as I stare at her reading from the book. She can't be doing this. She can't be talking about magic like it's the most normal thing in the world. I glance around as if the walls have ears before I zero in on her once more.

The constant fear I've always lived with rises closer to the surface, making my head spin. I focus on pulling air into my lungs, my eyes not leaving Parker.

"Powers? What kind of powers?" Lily asks.

Parker looks up at her, giving her a brilliant smile before turning to me. "Magical powers, of course."

At first, I don't think I hear her correctly. There's a buzzing sound in my head, pushing all the noise out. Parker continues to watch me as I make myself as still as possible, afraid that one move will send me hurling off the edge completely. The magic under my skin is moving more freely now, as if the mention of it has freed it from its locked room.

"Umm, Parker, I think Kennedy's collective hallucination is maybe more plausible," Lily says, but there's something in her voice that tells me she doesn't believe it. Nothing is making sense.

"How is that more plausible?"

"Because magic isn't real." I finally find my voice, but that only makes Parker laugh. This girl is getting on my nerves.

"Look," I snap, "we're trying to come up with an answer to what in the world has happened to us. I would appreciate it if you took this seriously."

"I am taking it seriously."

"By suggesting magic?" I sigh, exhaustion weighing heavily on my shoulders. It's taking everything in me not to show Parker just how correct she is in her assessment, but if there is one rule I live by, it's that keeping my magic a secret is a must. A rule that's been so instilled in me, it's controlling my every response. I don't think I've ever been so afraid in my life, and logical thinking is escaping me by the second. I have to talk Parker out of this before it escalates any further.

Lily is staring at her wrist again before glancing up at Parker. I'm still refusing to

acknowledge there's anything on my wrist, even though I can feel it there.

"Just because you don't believe in it, doesn't mean it's not real."

"I think that's exactly what it means." I sigh again, standing up just to give me something to do. I'm feeling antsy now, but I can't tell if pacing will help or make it worse.

"Think about it, Kennedy," Parker says, her eyes lighting up with excitement. "We touched some water that a glowing orb led us to and three identical tattoos appeared on our wrists as a result. That's not a hallucination. That's a magical event."

"Magic isn't possible," I say.

"Neither was air travel until someone decided to try it."

I level Parker with a look, but she's undeterred.

"You can't use science to justify magic."

"Why not? Isn't it the same thing? Just because it hasn't been discovered yet, doesn't mean it's not there. Although, there are centuries of recorded facts when it comes to magic, so I can't even make that argument."

"You can't make an argument at all, because magic is...well, magic," Lily speaks up, looking between the two of us.

"Oh, come on, Lily. I'd think you, out of all of us would be inclined to believe in magic. You already look magical." Parker waves her hand in Lily's direction, and Lily chuckles as she blushes. For once, Parker isn't wrong. Lily does look like a fairy princess and I would agree if I wasn't having an absolute meltdown.

"Look, magical studies is the whole concentration of my final project. It's why I wanted to come to Edinburgh in the first place."

"You said you were studying art," I say.

"Relating to witches," Parker supplies, and I remember her saying that, but I was working on blocking it out of my mind. The magic within me is flowing happily around, just waiting for me to give it permission to come out to play. But I can't do that. I can't let myself?—

"Tell me you don't feel it." Parker catches me right before I make another circle around the room, stopping right in front of me. She's a little taller than me, which I find particularly annoying right now.

"I don't feel it," I say, but the words are so hard to get out, Parker grins.

"You're a liar and I know why."

Parker glances back at Lily, her eyes growing bigger. When she looks back at me, I'm almost terrified of what she'll say next. Lily stands as well, coming up beside me.

"Parker, what is it?" Lily asks, because I'm having a difficult time breathing. Parker is grinning like she won the lottery and then she says something that changes everything.

"You're a liar because you're a witch. Just like Lily and I are."

I might be having an aneurysm or a stroke. It must be serious. Either that or I've fallen into an alternate reality. Lily and I stare at Parker as if she's lost her mind, while she continues to grin at us like she's won first place in the Olympics.

"Parker—"

"How did you know?" Lily interrupts me, shocking me into silence all over again. Parker squeals, grabbing Lily's hands and doing a little shimmy.

"I knew it, I knew it, I knew it." Parker tugs Lily along with her dance and the other girl giggles. They turn to me as one, but I can't make myself move. Is this how the world ends? Is this—no, I am not my aunt. The reason I basically ran away from home was to discover who I am without her overbearing and manipulating ways, but I never in a million years expected it to lead me to find more people with magic.

While my body continues to figure out if it's going with fight or flight, I take a deep breath. I can do this. I can work through this problem one step at a time.

"How did you know?" I ask, finally finding my voice.

Parker studies me for a moment as if gauging her response. I probably look like a deer in the headlights right now, but I can't control the fear that's washing over me.

"I didn't at first, but now, it's almost like I can feel it on you." She speaks the words slowly, as if afraid she'll spook me, and I wonder if she has empathy powers. I don't know very much about the different types of magic, and most of what I do know I learned by myself in secret, but my aunt has repeatedly cautioned me against empaths. They're dangerous because they can pick up on emotions even if you're closed up.

"Kennedy—"

"No!" I raise my hands in front of me, keeping Parker from moving closer. I tried being calm, but that has disappeared already. My emotions are all over the place and I'm afraid if this continues, my magic will manifest. I can't let that happen.

"We shouldn't be talking about this," I say, keeping my voice as firm as I can manage. "If you are what you say you are then you know it's not something that should be discussed. I—I need to go to bed or something."

I don't wait for a response before I rush to the room on my left, shutting the door firmly behind me. The room has a bed, a nightstand, a desk, and a chair. For the first time, I notice the bed is made and filled with pillows, and even though my suitcase is still out in the hall, I can't make myself go out there.

Instead, I fall onto the bed head first, making a grunting noise right into the comforter. That's when I realize that the bed has a comforter and pillows that I would've picked. Simple, white, and incredibly fluffy. Scurrying off the bed, I pull the door open, and the girls are each by their door and turn to face me.

"Did you make my bed?" I ask and they both shake their heads no.

"I think it's this place. It's our gift," Parker says, keeping her voice softer than I've heard it before.

Maybe I look as unhinged as I feel.

"Please, not right now. I can't," I say, stepping out into the hallway, grabbing my suitcases, and wheeling them into my room. The girls are still by their doors and I stop for a moment, looking over my shoulder. "We'll talk tomorrow."

It's the best I can do. Closing the door behind me, I lean against it and take a deep breath.

Everything is okay. Nothing bad is going to happen because Parker said magic and witches out loud—even though I've been taught to think that my whole life—as long as I keep my magic in check, I will be just fine. The others are not my concern. I can

look after myself.

You have never lost control, Kennedy, and you're not about to now.

Repeating the words in my head, I take a few calming breaths as I get ready for bed. Making sure I focus on the tasks in front of me, I keep my thoughts firmly away from any memories that are threatening to rise to the surface. Yet, I can't turn off my aunt's voice. My whole childhood is shrouded in her fear of magic, pushing me to be a small version of myself. I place a hand against my chest as my heartbeat races again, my body remembering the pain I felt for three days locked in my room with no food. I was seven, fascinated by the way I could make sparkles appear above my hand. I only did it once, in our backyard, but she saw me.

I can still remember her shouting as she dragged me into the house, that I would bring ruin to our whole family if anyone ever saw me do that. That I would be taken from her, used and abused for someone else's gain, and I had to learn my lesson. She said she was being a good caretaker, that she was doing this for my own good. And I believed her. She was my family, after all. Ever since that day, I tried to follow her rules the best I could, but now all of that is blowing up in my face in the most spectacular fashion.

Taking out my hairbrush, I untangle my locks the best I can, trying to let the familiar task calm me. I wanted a shower, but I can't bring myself to go back out there again. I use travel napkins to clean up as best as I can before I collapse on the bed. I think I'll toss and turn, but instead, I simply pass out.

Page 6

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Chapter Six

KENNEDY

Surprisingly, I sleep. I'm not exactly sure how I managed that, but somehow the comfortable bed and the hundred pillows on it lulled me into a false sense of safety. I honestly can't believe that actually happened. Maybe I made it up? Maybe it was simply a bad dream?

But when I lift my hand, the thistle tattoo is there, and so is the insistent buzz of magic right under my skin. I stare at the incriminating thistle tattoo like it can provide me with all the answers I need before I sigh, resigned, and get out of bed. I can't hide out here forever.

My phone is on my small nightstand—whoever furnished this room thought of everything. Now that I'm a little calmer, I study the room a little more carefully. The furniture is white and modern. The bedding is also white, coupled with four large pillows and three decorative ones. The pattern on the decorative pillows is geometrical, in shades of gray, green, and gold. Across from the bed are two windows, with a small pothos plant hanging on the right near the edge of the window frame and another plant on the desk between the windows. The lamp on the nightstand is gold, matching the lines on the pillows. Right above the nightstand is a small vertical decoration: a collection of metal moon phases, connected by a delicate chain. It's beautiful and there's a prickle of tears in my eyes as I think about the one time I dared to ask my aunt for one just like it.

As I glance around trying to control my rising emotions, I realize all I need are a few

throw blankets and more plants and this will be the perfect room. The strangeness of it all does not escape me, even though I'm actively working on ignoring everything that could be magical.

I stare at my phone for a full minute before I reach for it. I need answers, but I can't call my aunt. One, she might not even answer after exiling me, but two, if she does, she will spiral into terror and that will send me into worse levels of fear and then I will definitely do something with my magic that I'm not supposed to do.

Getting dressed quickly in my trusty blue jeans and oversized black sweater, I keep my hair down. I had a proper outfit picked out for today—a dark red mid-thigh skirt and black sweater, with black tights, but for some reason, I feel like I need the extra protection and comfort. So, oversized clothes it is. Last night, I put a chair under the doorknob, just in case. I would laugh at the absurdity of it all if I could, but none of this is funny. I pull the chair from under the doorknob and open the door.

At the same time, the other two doors open, and we all stare at each other as if we're seeing each other for the first time.

"Weird, right?" Lily asks, stepping out of her room first. She's dressed in another dress, this one a shade of burnt orange, with long sleeves and a thin belt around her waist. Her long hair is braided to the side and she looks adorably put together.

Parker is dressed much like she was last night, except she's wearing baggier black jeans and a different crop top, this one with long sleeves. Her necklaces and bracelets clink together as she nearly bounces in her step.

"I learned so much," she says, as I raise my hand and step out of my room.

"Please, coffee first," I say, heading for the kitchen. Lily shrugs as she follows. Parker rolls her eyes but she follows as well.

Thankfully the kitchen seems to come stocked with a coffee pod coffee brewer because I don't think I have the patience for a French press right now. I make myself a cup before adding a splash of oat milk and caramel syrup to taste. I'm stirring it all together before it dawns on me.

"Is this kitchen stocked with all of our favorite foods?" I ask, turning to face the girls.

Parker is eating out of a bowl, sitting at the table, while Lily sips orange juice out of a cup and stares at the shelf of cereal.

"Of course it is. It's our home base! It makes sense why we all ended up here together. We were meant to be here, and this is our safe haven. Oh! I bet that the realtor's office isn't even real, but this place, it's welcoming us with open arms. We'll have to restock manually, of course, but this is a gift."

"Please tell me you understand her," I say and watch Lily shake her head.

Parker puts her bowl down and stands. The small table near the window is perfectly positioned with three chairs for the three of us, and I tuck that piece of information away for later. I'm feeling slightly overwhelmed.

"I'm telling you, this is how it is. When a witch discovers her greater powers the universe itself gives her a gift. Granted, we already had our powers, but my grandma told me they weren't fully awakened. So I'm assuming they're finally awaked in me. In us! Grandma always talked about "the main event" and this must be ours! Oh! It's usually always women, by the way. Male witches are super rare." Parker barely even pauses for a breath. "Although I would think a lot of that is written by humans so it can be wrong considering they're not typically privy to the magical information, so who knows how reliable that is."

"We're humans!" I snap, even as my eyes are drawn to my wrist.

"No, we're witches," Parker replies. I think I might actually be losing my mind...in real-time. "Kennedy," Parker takes a step forward, her voice taking on a calming tone, "witches are led to places all the time to discover their magic, and if they're lucky enough to follow the signs, they are blessed on the other side of it. Some witches are destined for great things, and by the looks of it, we might be too. Just look at us! We're in Scotland and the fountain of all fountains opened up the magic in us. How wild is that?"

"Did you do this to us?" I ask, narrowing my eyes.

"What?" Lily and Parker exclaim together.

"You have all this knowledge and apparently your grandmother taught you a bunch. And you said you're studying it. Did you do something? Was it a setup? A joke? Did you dust us with some odorless powder?"

I know I sound completely crazy, but at this point, crazy is all I've got. My body is starting that shaking thing it does when I'm trying hard to stay in control. Parker just expects me to swallow this huge truth, but I was taught not to trust anyone, and all of this sounds more like a trap than anything else.

"Kennedy, I'm going to say this now and as kindly as possible but you are paranoid, my friend."

"I am not paranoid, I'm practical," I say, squaring off against Parker. Almost automatically my hands are on my hips and I stand a little taller. "Isn't it way more plausible to believe that we were drugged than that...magic...is real?" I'm terrified even saying the term out loud.

"Actually—" Lily begins, but Parker cuts her off.

"Don't encourage her."

I throw my hands up in the air. "Why? Because it doesn't fit with your agenda? What is the plan here exactly? To manipulate us for some ill intent? Are you writing a paper on this? Trying to get published? Is this an experiment?"

"Okay, you're officially giving me a headache." Parker waves a hand in my direction before turning on her heels and heading back to the common room.

"What, you can't just magic it away?" I say as I stalk after her.

"That's not how this works!"

"And how would you know?"

Lily has followed us as well. I can feel her behind me as Parker rounds on me. "It is not my fault, Miss Uptight, that you lack the imagination that there might be something incredible out there and we are part of it. You know the truth, it's staring you right in the face—I know you can feel it—and you're denying it anyway."

"Well, excuse me if I'm being a normal person here and freaking out about the possibility that something is wrong with me!" I didn't mean to say it out loud, but I couldn't help it. It's the fear I've been carrying inside of me my whole life.

What is inside of you is dangerous; it will destroy you. If you ever want to become part of normal society, you must fix yourself.

Fix myself. The one thing I could never accomplish in my aunt's eyes. Now I'm around people who are accepting this thing as normal? I can't...I can't deal with that. If I admit that Parker is right, if I actually accept the fact that I'm not the only "freak" out there, then everything I've been taught by my aunt is wrong. Everything about my

childhood becomes shrouded in wrongness and I can't deal with that.

Parker is not backing down though. "Nothing is wrong with you!" she nearly shouts, "and you're not a normal person! You're a witch! I'm a witch!"

"And I can think of another itch word that would fit here as well," I snap.

"Oh really? I see we've taken the mature route of calling each other names. In that case, I have one for you. You are a?—"

"Girls!" Lily steps between us, "I don't think this is helping anyone."

"She's not trying to help anyone!" I snap, staring daggers at Parker. "What if I don't want this? What if I just want to be normal?"

It's the only thing I've ever wanted, the reason I escaped from my aunt, but Parker is shattering all of those notions with every word she says. "Tough luck, sister. Normal was never in your destiny and you know it."

"You know this after spending one day with me?"

"I knew that the moment I nearly stabbed you with that knife. There was something about you. And now? Now I can feel it, and if you would stop being so stubborn you'd feel it too."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, don't you? You can lie all you want to us but you can't lie to yourself."

"Just stop," I say, something uncomfortable settling in my chest. The magic is there, right under the surface, brewing as hard as my emotions.

"You don't want to hear it but you know it's true. Maybe your magic has been more dormant than mine, but you feel it, I know you do. You've always known you've been looking for something and you came to Scotland thinking the answers were here."

"Stop."

"And now that you have them and you don't like them, all of a sudden boohoo you want to be normal. You want?—"

"I said stop!"

I throw my hands in a downward motion in frustration, my voice echoing around me. In the same breath, all of the furniture is lifted and slammed against the wall around us. The three of us are left standing in the middle of the room, with a clear circle of space around us where the couch, chairs, and table once were, as I try to calm my racing heart.

"Kennedy—" Lily says, staring up at me in shock as Parker smirks.

I don't pause to think. I turn and run for the door, only stopping long enough to grab my coat and keys before I'm down the stairs and racing into the morning Edinburgh light.

I have no idea where I'm going, only that I need to be away from that place and whatever it was that I did there. I've never showcased so much active magic before. Even now, I can feel it hovering right under my skin, as if it's just waiting for me to have another outburst. The confusion comes in where I also feel a sense of—happiness, as if it finally has a chance to come out and play.

There's definitely something very wrong with me. My aunt was right, wasn't she?

The Edinburgh trip of my dreams is off to a rocky start. It's not at all what I've envisioned and I'm not sure how I'm supposed to reconcile with any of it. It's doubly frustrating because I didn't even get to drink my coffee. My body is craving caffeine, and no, I don't think I have a problem. I reach for my phone and realize I left it in my room. Great, I can't even look up the list of cafés I wanted to check out while I'm here. Not that I need much help finding one; they are everywhere.

However, I don't stop at the first one I come across, considering it's a main chain and doesn't seem very authentic. This honestly just proves to me that I definitely don't have a problem or I would be stepping into that coffee shop immediately.

Okay, Kennedy, if you can talk to yourself about coffee, not all is lost.

Somehow, I wind up on the Royal Mile, and being surrounded by all the strangers isn't exactly what my head needs right now. While I desperately want to explore, I also desperately need to clear my mind. So I turn off the main street, walking into the nearby close, my feet moving automatically. The narrow alleyway takes me down and away from the Royal Mile, but I've barely walked at all when a sign catches my attention.

The Black Cat is written in gold on a black plaque hanging over a door. A magpie is sitting on the little overhang above it, watching me. I hold the bird's gaze and then it takes off. There really are a lot of magpies in the city. It's curious...but not right now.

I concentrate on the coffee shop instead. There's a large window to the left and a small one right near the door where I can see plants hanging near the light. My feet move in the coffee shop's direction before I can think too much about it, and I am less than graceful when I push the door open and stumble in. The coffee shop is completely empty, save for a black cat residing on a perch near the bar. There's a counter in the shape of an L and a table against the wall between it and the door. To the left, is the window with a table in front of it directly across from the bar, and

another two tables placed strategically around the room.

The decorations make me feel welcomed immediately. There are plants and dried herbs hanging all over the place and candles are lit on every surface. It smells like coffee and flowers in here. The bell overhead dings as I step fully in and the cat offers me a bored glance in greeting.

"Be right there!" a pleasant voice with a subtle Scottish accent calls out.

I step up to the counter, still eyed by the cat, and raise an eyebrow in reply. I swear the cat holds my gaze for a moment before smirking. Clearly, this losing my mind thing is extending to other areas of my life if I think a cat can smirk.

"Well, hello there."

I turn my attention to the woman who appears behind the counter. Wild blonde curls frame her face. Bangles and necklaces adorn her neck and wrists, much like Parker's, but unlike Parker's edgy style, the woman is wearing a light green layered dress with a brown belt. She must be in her mid-forties, my aunt's age, but such a contrast. The woman looks approachable and kind with a smile that's so inviting I suddenly want to cry.

"Umm," I clear my throat, scanning the chalk board behind her. "Hi. Could I please get a caramel latte?"

"Sit in or takeaway?"

"Sit in, please," I reply immediately because this feels exactly like the kind of place I can hide in. For some reason, I feel like myself here and that brings me a sense of comfort.

"Pick any seat." She gives me another gentle smile, and I return it. Hopefully, it looks much more relaxed than I feel. I take a seat opposite the counter, near the bigger of the two windows. The coffee shop is a bit tucked away, but there are still people passing by in the close, even this early in the morning.

My chest feels heavy as I try to take some calming breaths. I'm staring at my hands as if they're going to offer some kind of answer to what happened in the apartment. My aunt would be livid if she knew, which means she can never find out. The moment I think of her, the force of the dread returns, and I place my hand over my heart, hoping to calm it.

Magic can only bring your downfall, Kennedy. Never let anyone know you possess it or your destiny is to be alone.

Even as my aunt spoke those words to me over and over again, she never stopped to think I was already alone. I've never met anyone with powers besides her, but now there are two girls who—no. I can't even let myself go down that train of thought.

When a cup of coffee is slid in front of me I glance up to watch the woman take a seat across from me.

"I'm Olivia Bates," she says.

"Kennedy Hellebore," I supply automatically. My fingers wrap around the mug and I take a sip, sighing in contentment. The coffee is delicious.

"This is so good," I say, as the woman—Olivia—looks pleased at the compliment.

"I'm happy you think so, Kennedy Hellebore. Now, tell me, what brings you to The Black Cat today?"

My eyebrows scrunch down at the question, taken back a bit. I'm not exactly used to such direct inquiries from café owners.

"I was looking for coffee," I say.

"You passed plenty of coffee shops coming here, did you not?"

"Yes." I have no idea where this is going. I glance at my wrists, tugging on my jacket to make sure the sleeves cover any incriminating evidence—that's how I've decided to think of the tattoo.

"Yet, you came into this one." She's looking at me as if she knows something. I have no idea how to respond to this, so I take another sip instead. When I glance up, there's a soft look in her eyes as she studies me. "I'm sorry. I see that I made you uncomfortable. Sometimes I speak before I am meant to." Before I can comment on that cryptic comment, she carries on. "Now tell me, what has you so troubled?"

"I look troubled?"

"You do, and I say that with a kindness."

I chuckle at that, taking another sip before setting the mug down. There's no rhyme or reason as to why I'm about to say what I'm going to say, but it feels like I need to get things off my chest. Even if I can't be completely forthcoming.

"I'm new to Edinburgh—to Scotland really. I'm here for a year abroad and yesterday when I arrived, well, nothing went the way I planned."

"And you're a planner."

It's not a question but I nod anyway. "Yes, it's very important to me that I know

where I'm going and how to get there in every aspect of life." I stop again, not sure how to articulate exactly what's happening, considering I don't even know yet.

"But something happened that pushed you off that path."

"Rather aggressively, if I do say so myself." I take another sip of coffee, thankful for the large size of this mug. Just then, the black cat that was residing on the counter jumps to the windowsill beside us, watching me with those unblinking eyes.

Olivia strokes a hand down the cat's back, but the cat won't take its eyes off me.

"Petunia seems to have taken a liking to you. She doesn't usually come over to strangers."

"Petunia?"

"Yes. She's named after the black petunia variety, one of my favorite flowers. It, just like black cats, used to have a bad connotation attached to it, but now petunias are a symbol of comfort. Just like this little furball is."

I swear the cat, Petunia, is soaking up every bit of Olivia's words, raising her chin a little as she continues to stare at me.

"You have that in common, you know?"

"What?"

"You are both named after flowers."

That pleases me and for some reason it also brings me comfort. I turn my attention back to the mug in front of me. Even though everything still seems out of control, I

feel much calmer now that I've had my coffee and met Olivia and Petunia. I'm not exactly sure why that is.

"Kennedy." Olivia's voice breaks through my thoughts and I glance up to meet her kind gaze. "Life tends to throw curveballs at us regardless of our plans. It is the only thing you can truly count on to happen. You seem like a capable young lady. What do you usually do when things don't go your way?"

That's a good question. It has happened before, of course. I can't control every aspect of my life, no matter how much I want to. No matter how much my aunt wishes she could too, life always finds a way to be unpredictable.

"Usually, I would sit down and make a list of ideas on how to fix the trajectory, do research if need be, maybe look into—" I trail off as I glance up at Olivia's kind face. "Research. In this case, I need to do research."

The fact that my mind didn't automatically go to research just proves how off-kilter this whole experience is making me.

"Well, my door is always open and I will supply you with plenty of coffee and biscuits if you need a quiet place to think."

"Thank you so much." I stand then, excitement coursing through my veins. This is something I'm really good at, something I can manage. There is the internet, of course, but also there are libraries galore here. "I will definitely be back."

Olivia stands as well, taking the now empty mug from my hands.

"Anytime, Kennedy. Anytime."

I grin and then I'm out the door with a wave. Edinburgh is the perfect place to

research magic. Or at least the lore behind it. Now I just need to find myself a library.

Page 7

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Chapter Seven

KENNEDY

"Where have you been?" Parker asks the moment I step back into the apartment. The girls are in the common room, sitting opposite each other with a deck of cards between them. They put all the furniture back and are looking as if nothing happened. Yet, I can still feel that strange buzz of awareness just under my skin, and it's so much more evident being near the girls. I try hard to ignore it.

"Clearing my head," I reply before taking a closer look at the table. "Are you doing a tarot reading?"

"Oracle actually."

I glance at Parker, still so off-center about the casual way she mentions anything magical.

"Tarot has more rules," Lily takes my silence as confusion. "And oracle is more free-flowing."

"Did Parker teach you or did you already know that?" I ask, because while Parker says Lily is a witch, I have no idea how much information the other girl actually has regarding this.

"I knew about it. I have done both before."

"So, did the clearing of the head help you come to terms with your awesome power?" Parker asks, and I collapse next to Lily on the couch, all dramatic-like.

"You really won't let this go, will you?" I sigh and Lily chuckles.

I catch Parker rolling her eyes. "Please keep up with the dramatics even when you do come to terms with it. I think it'll add to the aesthetic."

I laugh. And then Lily joins in and then Parker. Soon the three of us are laughing, nearly hysterical. The feeling that washes over me is unusual—because I've spent the majority of my life afraid of being myself around people, but here there are three of us sharing this discovery. For the first time in my life, I don't feel so alone.

"We need a plan," I say, once the giggling has settled.

"And there she is," Parker smirks, picking up the cards and beginning to shuffle. I raise an eyebrow at her, but she's grinning. "I've known you for a day and a half and I can already tell you can't survive without a plan. I dig it," she hurries on to add before I can defend myself. "Please continue."

I hold her stare for a moment, trying to decide how truthful she is, but then move on because it doesn't actually matter right now. "We need to research more about this sudden tattoo." I raise my wrist and show off the thistle that now resides there.

Even though Parker mentioned the whole symbol of power thing from her books, I'm going to need much more. And why a thistle? There has to be meaning behind it. I have so many questions.

"I've always wanted a tattoo," Lily says and Parker and I glance at her in surprise. She glances up and shrugs, "What? Tattoos are cool."

"Okay, we need house rules," I say, "And rule number one, don't assume anything." Lily grins at that, looking kind of pleased with herself.

"Shouldn't rule number one be don't steal each other's boyfriends ?"

Lily and I twist to stare at Parker as she lays out the cards she's picked. Neither of us needs to be a mind reader to know that there's more to it than just a simple statement.

"Usually, that's a given," Lily says slowly, "but if it makes you feel better, we can absolutely write it down."

Parker meets our eyes for a moment, but there's definitely a sense of gratitude there and I file that away for later, because first things first.

"As you pointed out, Parker, Scotland is a land filled with lore on magic. There might be something here that could help us understand what's happening. I'll go to the library and see what I can dig up."

"Can't you just use the internet like a normal person?" Parker asks.

"I could, but where's the fun in that?" I stand, straightening my clothes. "Also, I did. And let me tell you, there are things I've seen that I now want to unsee, but since you seem much more...comfortable with all this, I think you should surf the internet while I check the library. As you might have noticed, I'm not very open about anything relating to magic?"

"It might've come up."

I glare at Parker as she grins and continues, "But we're in this together now so I need to do my part, and research is what I'm good at."

"So you're admitting you're a witch?" Parker asks.

I take a deep breath, open my mouth, and nothing comes out. Maybe I'm not so ready to say the forbidden words out loud. "I'm admitting I have some research to do," I say. The girls chuckle, but it's not unpleasant, more like friends would.

"If this is what helps you deal with all of this, then do what you need to," Lily says, her voice soft. "It seems—I don't mean to be rude about it—but you carry some fear when it comes to magic."

I swallow the immediate worry, feeling incredibly exposed, but there's only kindness in Lily's face.

"We're here for you. Do what you need to do," Lily says and Parker nods.

I glance between the two of them and grin. It's almost like they already understand me; as if we've known each other for years. Maybe it's the shared trauma of the magical tattoo situation or maybe it's something else, but it feels right. To be doing this and to be doing this together.

I grab my bag from my room, along with a notebook and my phone, before I step back out.

"I actually might know someone who can help. Kind of," Parker says.

I stop in my tracks. "You know someone in Edinburgh?"

"Well, we've talked over video calls. He was assigned as my advisor for my last project when the other dude bailed." Parker rolls her eyes. "But anyway, he's kind of a magic lore guru since it's his area of study. He might know some things."

"Okay, no offense, but we're not telling some stranger about this. Do they still witch hunt around here?"

"Kennedy, all that planning is going to your head. We're not in the 1700s?—"

"1500s," I interrupt. I at least know that much about Wiccan history.

"Whatever!" Parker throws her hands in the air. "We're living in the twenty-first century. People are much more accepting."

"They're hardly that accepting and we all know that," Lily says, a bit of sadness in her voice.

It hits me right then and there that these girls have their own ghosts to vanquish. My overcautious aunt and her paranoia may have made me into who I am, but Lily and Parker also have stories. It would probably help if I wasn't constantly so difficult, but my stance on telling strangers stands.

"I think we should divide and conquer," I say, taking a deep breath. "Lily, how do you feel about handling the magical tattoo situation by looking things up online? There has to be something about it, right? We can't be the first people alive to have experienced it, and there has to be a way to find out..."

Even though I'm not sure about this as I say it, it seems like a plausible option considering we live in the era of information. Lily doesn't even blink, already reaching for her laptop. "I'll check the regular forums first before doing a deep dive behind the curtain," she says, her voice all business.

Parker and I stare at her in surprise, unsure where this is coming from. Lily isn't even fazed, grinning down at the computer. "I may be shy, but I've got skills," she says and then she does look at us, throwing a wink our way, before she gets back to typing.

"Okay then." I turn to Parker next. "How about you?—"

"Go talk to my friend? Great idea!" She's turning away before I can argue.

"Parker!"

"Kennedy!" she mimics over her shoulder as she walks to her room.

"Come on, shouldn't we at least vote on this?" I ask from the doorway.

Even though she's only been here for a day, the room already feels like her. I can't tell how much of it came from her and how much of it came from the place itself, but it fits. There is a stack of art prints against one wall waiting to be hung and a tapestry of the moon phases above the bed. Her bedding is light pink, taking me by surprise. There's also a bunch of pillows, stacks of books, and a tan knitted blanket at the foot of the bed.

"Did you pack any clothes?" I ask, studying all the books and art pieces.

Parker looks up at me with a grin. "Just the essentials. I can buy more clothes, but these"—she points to the books and the art—"are one-of-a-kind essentials that can't be replaced."

Okay, fine, Parker is growing on me, because I understand this on a personal level. Books are essentials. Maybe we do have some things in common after all.

"Kennedy, don't worry, okay?" Parker comes toward me, placing a hand on my shoulder. "I'm not spilling our secrets. Just asking some general questions for research purposes."

"Okay, I guess if you put it like that."

It's a good idea. If she has an in with all the magical stuff, we can use the help. My aunt would be a resource if I was allowed to talk to her about these things. I nod and Parker pats my shoulder before pushing past me.

"Is there anyone back home you can ask?" I address both Parker and Lily and both of them look at me in surprise, like they haven't thought of it.

"My grandma was the one with all the info, but she's been gone a few years now," Parker says with a shrug. I have the urge to hug her, but I squish it. While I've come to accept their hugs, reaching out first still feels foreign.

"My mom never had any active magic," Lily says, "And I—I don't really feel comfortable asking her coven."

"It's okay." I give her an encouraging nod because I don't want to pry, but I understand that family is difficult. "We'll figure it out."

"How about we meet at The Black Cat in a few hours?" I ask, checking through my bag quickly. Not that I don't already love this apartment, as weird as it is, but a part of me needs to be away from it if only to feel a little less like I'm surrounded by the magical. Also, it just feels right somehow to meet at the coffee shop.

"What's that?" Lily asks.

"Oh, right." I chuckle. "It's an adorable coffee shop off the Royal Mile. It's very cozy and cute and you'll love it." I have no idea why I feel so strongly about this, but the girls don't even question it.

"The Black Cat, three hours," Parker says before she inputs something into her phone and then she's out the front door with a wave.

I pull out my own phone and do a quick search for the library. There are two opposite each other; The National Library of Scotland and The Central Library on George IV Street. I think I'll start at the latter, but when I look at the opening hours I realize it's Sunday and the libraries are closed.

Think, Kennedy. What are your other options?

The next best bet is bookstores and I know there are plenty in Edinburgh. Do I try a more modern place like Toppings and Company or a used bookstore like Armchair Books? I suppose I can always go to Blackwells. I have three hours to come up with something.

"I'm off," I say, and Lily doesn't even look up, simply waving in my direction.

I have to admit that even though these girls are strangers, I'm beginning to like them.

I pull on my coat and step out of the apartment, turning so I can lock it behind me. With my phone in my hand, I turn back around only to slam into a hard body. My phone goes flying as air whooshes out of my lungs. I react automatically, stepping past whoever ran into me and trying to grab the phone out of thin air. When I do, a hand wraps around my waist, yanking me back and spinning me around at the same time. My back lands against the wall, as my front is pressed into the body in front of me.

I glance up to meet the greenest eyes I have ever seen. The guy is that sort of handsome that leaves you a bit breathless. Strong jaw, long eyelashes, and a mop of brown hair that's just long enough to fall into his eyes. It looks like he ran a hand through it a time or two.

And the lips. Full and much too close. And that's when it hits me.

"You!"

BENNETT

I overslept. Granted, nine in the morning is early for some, but since I dedicated the rest of my Saturday to Lana, I had some catching up to do today. Typically Sundays are the days I give myself to wander around Edinburgh with no rhyme or reason, but the book is due back to my supervisor tomorrow, and I'm not finished. There are a few notes I still have to write up and copy some of the information down for my paper.

Forgoing breakfast, I down a glass of water and make a mental note to order something to eat when I meet Nicholas before I finally leave my flat behind. I'm racing down the stairs, which is becoming a pattern I need to break, when someone steps out of the abandoned flat. Well, I thought it was abandoned since I feel like no one has lived there the whole time I've been in the building. I'm so baffled by this that I step right into her when she turns, sending her phone flying. When she reaches for it, the stairs are right there, and I react automatically, pulling her into me.

The moment she's in my arms, my body is aflame. I glance down at her, pressed against the wall, and when she meets my eye, whatever air I had left in my lungs has disappeared.

She's beautiful.

Hazel eyes, wild long brown hair falling against her oversized black coat, and a glow to her skin that seems almost otherworldly.

"You!"

I snap out of my wonder at her sharp tone and focus on the fire blazing in her eyes.

She pushes against my embrace and I step back immediately.

"My phone is probably ruined," she mutters and I try not to react to her voice. It's a little deeper, a little raspy, and it sends goosebumps up my arms, straight to my heart. I like it. Her accent is American, so is she a tourist? Or, hopefully, a student.

"I'm sorry, I didn't think the phone was worth your life," I comment.

She turns to glare at me again. "If you learn to watch where you're going we wouldn't have this problem," she snaps, completely throwing me for the loop. I'm missing something, but she's already ignoring me, reaching for the phone balancing precariously on the first step. She snatches it up, and I can tell the moment she notices how close she'd come to danger, but she looks too stubborn to admit it. Which makes me more curious.

"I'm sorry for not paying attention," I try again because now I'm determined to get this girl to look at me again.

"Okay, you apologized. Now be on your way."

She's not looking up from her phone, studying it as if it might yield some answers to the questions of the universe. From what I can see of it, it's not cracked by some wild luck. She exhales and then turns to go, and I have no idea what possesses me to do what I do next, but I reach over and pluck the phone from her grasp.

She gasps, reaching for it, and I put it behind my back, bringing her closer to me as she lunges forward. She pushes at the hair that's fallen into her face, leaving it unobscured for me to study, and I grin.

"Maybe you should say thank you for the rescue?" I ask, possessed by some imp of unknown origin. She's shooting daggers at me with her eyes, which makes me feel

like I won something precious because she's looking at me again. She's also not backing down.

"I wouldn't need rescuing if you would walk down the stairs like a normal person. This is on you."

"I think it's perfectly acceptable to be surprised by someone coming out of a flat that I thought no one lived in and be distracted by that?"

"Oh yeah? Is it also acceptable to bulldoze over people hauling suitcases up the stairs and then not even stop to help when those said suitcases tumble to the bottom?"

I open my mouth but then close it, my brain trying to catch up with the information. She takes that moment to lunge for the phone again, but I recover just in time to keep it out of her reach. Maybe this is unbecoming of me, but she can't leave yet.

"I think we started on the wrong foot. I'm Bennett. Bennett MacKay. I live in the upstairs flat."

She stares at me for a moment before raising her eyebrow. "Good for you."

"And you are?" I ask.

She doesn't reply immediately, but takes a tiny step back, giving me a once-over. Her eyes start at the bottom and slowly make their way up and when her gaze meets mine, it holds. I feel her quiet perusal like a physical touch and I'm going to be the first to hand over my man-card because it makes me feel all kinds of giddy. Like a school kid figuring out girls for the first time. Not that it's possible to ever figure them out.

I want to though. This girl, specifically. I have never wanted something so badly in my life and she's standing in front of me with an air of cool indifference that strikes

me right to the heart.

"Late," her voice breaks through my stare, and then she snags the phone out of my grasp and is down the stairs before I recover enough to speak.

I hear the door downstairs open and shut before I get the use of my limbs back. I have no idea what just happened. I'm pretty sure I'll be walking around with those eyes and that face in my mind for the rest of the day. Just then my own phone buzzes and I glance down at the event reminder.

Late. I'm also late.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:42 am

Chapter Eight

KENNEDY

I spend hours at the bookstore and hours stewing over the audacity of Bennett. What kind of a name is that anyway? Who names their kid Bennett? It's so annoyingly posh.

Okay, I'm really not concentrating on the right thing here. I need to focus on the actual problem at hand. That maybe...possibly...magic isn't some horrible thing that will make me burst into flames if I use it and I'm part of a magically tattooed trio who was anointed by a fountain. Not how completely disorienting it was to be pressed tightly against his broad chest.

I didn't even know they made them like that anymore. He looks like he stepped right off a magazine cover in his dark blazer and pressed slacks. He looked put together, except for that messy mop of brown hair that I really wanted to run my hands?—

No, focus, Kennedy . You are much too disciplined to be mooning over an annoying guy who apparently can't look where he's going . Yes, that's much better. Focus on his lack of manners.

But his accent? It's gloriously Scottish and?—

Ugh! Focus!

When I step into The Black Cat hours later I'm no closer to figuring anything out—or

getting Bennett out of my mind—which is quite frustrating.

"Kennedy!" Olivia greets me from behind the counter where Lily is leaning against it.

"You weren't kidding! This place is incredible," Lily says, beaming at me.

"Did you know that Olivia is into the mystical?" Parker comes out from the back, carrying a cup of coffee. My heart immediately starts beating fast with anxiety at Parker's talk of magic, but I breathe through it. One thing I did decide while I was leafing through the book on the history of witches is that I need to be better at controlling my learned responses. I thrive on control, so I can do my part in controlling my automatic reactions. Taking a deep breath, I raise my eyebrow at her blatant bombardment of Olivia's place.

"I sincerely apologize for her rudeness," I say, turning to Olivia. "This girl was clearly raised in a barn."

"And it was a glorious barn at that." Parker winks at me and I almost don't feel like rolling my eyes at her.

I don't want to admit it, but she's getting to me.

"You've come at a perfect time," Olivia says, just as Petunia jumps on the counter, staring at me. "And clearly Pet thinks so as well."

"You named your pet...Pet?" Lily asks and Olivia chuckles.

"No, her name is Petunia."

"Incredible," Parker says, coming over to stare at Petunia, whose eyes don't leave mine. "She really seems to like you, Kennedy."

"She does," Olivia agrees, and I glance up to find the cat studying me. I reach over to Petunia, letting her sniff my fingers before she butts her head against my hand for pets, to which I oblige immediately. "She's not typically big on letting anyone pet her."

"Maybe she can sense I need it," I say before I can think too much of it.

"Is everything okay?" Olivia asks immediately, and I realize my mistake. I told the girls I didn't want strangers in our business so I can't exactly be spilling my guts now.

"Yes, but it's been a long day since I saw you last. Could I please get a caramel latte?"

Olivia doesn't question the change in subject and turns to make me my coffee. The girls and I converge on the same table I sat at this morning.

"This place is incredible. It's witchy, don't you think?" Parker says, not bothering to keep her voice down.

"Parker," I hiss, leaning over the table. "Can we not?"

"Sorry, I just think Olivia would be open to the discussion. She has the coolest and most diverse collection of oracle and tarot cards I've ever seen. And she's been around here for a while; she might know things."

"Please tell me you didn't just go snooping?"

"Hey, I asked. She saw my bracelets." Parker holds up her hand and her collection of bracelets, pointing to the three light green ones. "She was curious about these ones and why I have so many shades. This is green aventurine and I wear a lot of it."

"It provides strength and confidence, right?" I ask, the seemingly random knowledge I learned years ago springing to mind. At least that's something I can be grateful for. Just because I've never been allowed to use my magic, doesn't mean I didn't do my due diligence and learned the basics. The few lessons my aunt actually taught me were more about how not to do magic, but the basic information is the same.

"The girl knows her crystals." Parker grins, looking quite proud of the fact.

I grin, very pleased with myself. "I'm a scholar of many subjects."

Lily and Parker laugh at that, just as Olivia comes over with my coffee.

"You girls are more than welcome to stay as long as you like," she says. "I have some things to take care of in the back, but I'll be out if a customer comes in."

"Thank you so much," I say.

The way she's looking at us, I have a feeling she's doing this to give us some privacy, and I'm grateful. Once she disappears to the back, I turn back to the girls. Before I can say a word, Petunia jumps into my lap, curling up on it immediately.

"Wow, this cat really likes you," Lily comments.

I scratch behind Petunia's ear and am rewarded by a little purr. The tension in my shoulders dissipates immediately.

"So what did you find?" Parker asks.

I sigh deeply before I reply. "Nothing, everything. I have no idea. I completely forgot the libraries are closed today, so I opted for a bookstore, but that just yielded more questions. There is so much lore surrounding the magic in Scotland. I could sit there

for days and not even make a dent. Which is quite frustrating. I actually love research, and it's partially why I'm here in the first place, but it's like the more I tried to figure out what this thistle tattoo means or what I did in the apartment, the farther away from the truth I was actually getting. I've never been allowed to access so much of the...power, and it's making my head spin. The fact that I'm not alone in this and there are others like me who aren't terrified of it...and it's not like this is something that goes away with a few antibiotics. This is in us for life. And it's quite the conundrum, and I am completely helpless to come up with any kind of a solution. Or even the beginning of one. Which is very disorienting for me and I don't like it."

The words leave me in a rush before I even realized what I was going to say. Once I'm done, I take another deep breath as the girls stare at me from across the table.

"Feel better?" Lilly asks.

"Yes, actually," I reply. It does feel like I'm bottling things up, but it's hard not to when I'm surrounded by strangers and trying to come to terms with the fact that not everyone thinks magic is terrible or that we will be burned at the stake for using it. Even though my aunt has been my only living relative since I was five years old, I'm used to taking care of life on my own. She's too scared of it and I try very hard not to imitate that response as well.

"Here." Parker reaches over and tugs a necklace over her head, presenting it to me. It's a simple silver chain with an inverted pyramid pendant. "This is amethyst. It will help."

I don't even question it when she reaches to place it over my head. Once it drops to my chest, Petunia raises her head and butts at it, giving me another purr before settling back down on my lap.

"Thank you," I say, oddly touched.

Lily reaches out a hand, taking one of mine, and without hesitation, I reach for Parker. The moment we lock hands a sense of peace washes over me. At the same time, my wrist tingles, and I glance over at the thistle tattoo residing there.

"You feel it too right?" Parker whispers and all I can do is nod.

"Why does it feel so...right?" Lily asks.

"Because, my dearest darlings," —we twist around to see Olivia is back in the room with us— "you are magic and you have finally found each other."

BENNETT

"Are you ill, mate? You look a mess," Nicholas says as I drop down in the seat across from him at one of our favorite coffee shops in town. My friend looks like he's stepped out of a meeting with the king, while I look like a haggard mess. The weather decided to be typical unpredictable Scottish and warmed up too many degrees on the rush over here. And I might've speed-walked...up a hill.

Or maybe I'm just running hotter since the run-in on the staircase. I can't get that interaction with the beautiful stranger out of my mind. I shrug out of my jacket, running a hand over my face.

"Maybe? I've met the most beautiful girl I have ever seen in my life and she hates me."

"Well, I suppose that makes her the smartest as well."

"Shut up." I drop my head into my hands, trying to figure out what I could've done to offend the beautiful creature. I mean, I am not as smooth as Nicholas is, but I'm not terrible either. Not usually. Running into her and almost ruining her phone wasn't my

finest moment, but she seemed to dislike me already.

"Okay, lad. Tell me what's troubling your weary soul."

"Bugger off." I sit up straight as he chuckles. My stomach rumbles, adding another layer of discomfort and I need to get food in me fast before I become as whiny as a puppy.

"I return early from my trip just for you and this is the welcome I get?"

"What do you mean?" I look at him appalled. "We're downright cuddling at this point."

I shake my head as he belly laughs and a few people glance over. Nicholas has always been the kind of guy who commands attention and it's so much worse when he's laughing. Girls swarm him any time we go out, nearly swooning at his feet. It doesn't help that the guy is built like a model—one of those rugged-looking ones who know how to use their hands for something other than moisturizing. His hair is much darker than mine, nearly black, and his eyes are that amber color that looks like honey. I've heard a woman describe him as a forbidden sweet dessert once and he hasn't let me forget it once.

"Come on, mate. What happened? Your text sounded like the end of the world and now this?"

I forgot I even texted him about my paper, but even so, I don't start there. I start with the girl. "You know that flat below me?"

"The abandoned one?"

"Apparently not abandoned. A girl walked out of it this morning, and I was so

distracted I ran right into her, sending her phone flying. When she lunged for it, I saved her from plummeting down the stairs, but apparently she hates me for it? Or maybe for something else I did because the moment she saw who I was she got on the defensive."

"Oh, I like her already."

"Come on, man." I send him a glare.

"What? Your pretty boy puppy persona can be taken down a peg or two. Not everyone loves you the moment they meet you."

"That's not what your ex-girlfriend said."

"Yeah, she had terrible taste, didn't she?"

"She did date you, so can't argue with that."

Nicholas chuckles because his last girlfriend was kind of nuts with her stalker tendencies and all that. After I met her, she thought she could have both of us. The moment she made her move, I told Nicholas and he broke up with her immediately. She didn't take it well, but we do give each other a hard time about it now and then anyway.

"Laugh all you want, but this girl sounds like she's a good one if she didn't automatically fall for your charms."

I ignore the comment and glance over at the chalkboard of options near the counter.

"I'm getting a coffee," I announce, getting up.

Nicholas isn't even fazed, and I bypass a server bringing him his coffee. He clearly ordered before I got here. I order mine and grab a cinnamon bun before I head back to the table to find him grinning at me.

"What?"

"Lana texted me and told me just how amazing you are," Nicholas says, turning his phone around so I can see the message. She makes sure to make Nicholas feel bad for not being there, but then sings my praises for being her knight in shining armor.

"Wait!" I grab Nicholas' phone and scroll up a bit to Lana's earlier message. "The suitcase. That's why. Ugh. Of course."

"Full sentences, mate."

I sit down just as my coffee is brought over and I thank the server before I meet Nicholas' inquiring gaze. "When I raced to meet Lana, I bumped into someone coming up the stairs. Their suitcase slid back down but I was so distracted, I didn't even stop to help. You know how crazy with worry Lana makes me; I can't believe I completely blocked that moment from my mind."

"That's true. You forgot to put on trousers that one time Lana called from school after the easel incident. You should really work on that."

I huff at him but don't comment. I can't believe I forgot about that until now, but Lana was hysterical on the phone and my mind was on a worst-case scenario when it came to her. We really never know when it's her hyper-anxiousness acting up and when something truly horrible has happened. It's not only that her mother made her this way—we've been through an actually terrible experience—so I think both Nicholas and I are more sensitive to her now.

"But, yeah, mate, that girl is going to hate you forever. Those stairs are difficult to navigate without the suitcases." Nicholas takes a sip of his coffee, nodding a little.

"Not helping, Wellington."

"Not trying to, MacKay."

There has to be a way that I can make it up to her. In any other situation I would've stopped and helped, but Lana's message sent me into a worst-case-scenario mindset, and since I was going on two hours of sleep, I was already on edge. None of these are excuses, but it is something that could've happened to anyone. She can't hate me forever, not if I find the right way to make it up to her.

"Are you listening to me?"

"No," I reply before I grin up at my friend.

"Just apologize and then be extra aware of your surroundings. She'll appreciate that." Nicholas raises his coffee cup to salute me with it.

"I did apologize. Well, I didn't know what I was apologizing for, so I will do it again, but I need to do something else too."

"Scrub her windows?"

I glare at him. He thinks he's hilarious. I'm about to make another quip, but this does actually give me an idea, which I'm not going to share with him. He's going to think I'm crazy, but I think I might need to be to earn my favor with her.

Then maybe she'll tell me her name.

"Anyway, can we talk about my project now?" I ask before I take a bite of my cinnamon bun.

Nicholas chuckles, "Yes, we can."

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:42 am

Chapter Nine

KENNEDY

The three of us sit in shock as Olivia calmly walks over to the door, flipping the sign to 'closed' and locking it. Every terrible scenario my aunt has ever painted for me when it comes to magic runs through my mind and I try to keep my breathing even. Lily grips my hand tighter as if she can feel the fear coursing through me, and I nod a little. I won't say that I'm scared for our lives or anything, I think the three of us could take her if it came to that, but I do sit up a little straighter.

"What do you mean?" I ask, deciding on the direct approach.

Olivia doesn't comment but takes a chair and pulls it up at the head of the table. "May I see?" she asks, placing her hand palm up on the table.

I have no idea what she's asking for, but Lily doesn't hesitate. She places her wrist in the palm of Olivia's hand, the thistle tattoo fully on display.

"Oh, it's beautiful. It has been generations since magic manifested in such a visible way."

"You know about magic?" Parker asks. Out of all of us, I would assume she would be the most likely to assume that, but for some reason, she looks almost nervous.

"I know all about magic, Parker, and when I met Kennedy here, I could feel it on her. Just like I can feel it on the two of you."

"I don't understand," I say, and have no idea how to continue where I'm going with this because just like what happened in the apartment, I don't have any idea what's going on. The usual parameters don't exist here.

"Let me start at the beginning then, my darlings. I assume you've known about magic, but this is—the three of you, your own coven—is all new to you."

"I've heard stories of covens, but I've never been part of one," Parker says and Olivia nods.

"I could tell by your immediate questions regarding my card collection that you love magic." Olivia reaches over and takes Parker's hand. "You have a lot of intuition in you already. You'll develop those gifts as time goes on. But back to the beginning." Olivia winks at me. "This land is rich in stories of witches who walked amongst us, of wonder and fear of faeries, and relics that were wielded by kings and peasants alike who hold special affinities.

"Edinburgh specifically is a well of power, built on ancient leylines, running throughout the city. Many come here searching for something of which they are not sure of and end up finding more than they bargained for."

"We weren't searching," Lily says.

"Weren't you? Can you honestly tell me that Scotland didn't call to you?" None of us answer and Olivia nods. "That's what I thought. There is powerful magic in your blood and it seems that it's been awakened, not only by the magic of the land, but by the bond you are creating."

"A bond?"

"Magic is more powerful when it is nurtured in love. This is why in the ancient days,

sisters were often found to be the most powerful of witches. Covens were created to nurture that sense of family when there were no sisters to share the magic with. This right here," Olivia traces Lily's thistle tattoo, "is a visual manifestation of the magical connection you share."

"Are we like...the chosen ones?" Lily asks.

"In a way, yes, but then we are all chosen for greatness in our own lives. Just like in every aspect of life, there will be ups and downs, battles and victories. Now, you have this incredible magical sisterhood to help you through it all."

"But why us?" I ask the one question that's been bugging me the most since the beginning. "We're nothing special."

"Oh, my darling. You don't need to have magic to be special and you don't need to be extraordinary to be special. You are, already, just as you are, as special as they come. You are an individual, a beautiful soul, and that in itself qualifies you."

My eyes sting at her words and I blink a few times to clear them. I don't think I've ever truly been told I'm special. I don't remember my parents so I can't say for sure, but my aunt has made it her life's work to make sure I never felt special. That I minimized everything about myself—my magic especially—to never stand out and never make noise.

So I worked at being special in my own way, staying on top of my studies and working hard. To be the best at something meant you could earn the title of being special. It's why doing well in school has always been so important to me, why planning every day made me seem like I'm a step ahead of everyone else. Even back when I thought my aunt loved me, she would never encourage me in this way. The older I got, the more I realized she feared me more than she loved me so I stopped trying to earn her favor and shut down. Now, I'm learning a whole new way of

thinking and it's hard to accept.

"I see that there are some truths you will have to come to terms with on your own." Olivia's voice breaks through my thoughts and I glance up to find her eyes on me. "But know that this is the beginning of a wonderful journey. And I will help you the best way I know how."

"No offense, but how are you qualified to help us?" I'm glad to see Parker is getting some of her spunk back. She's been quiet longer than I anticipated.

"Because I am just like you. Olivia Bates—of the magical variety."

"You are?"

Instead of answering, Olivia grins, and then she waves her hand. In the next moment, the plant hanging near the window grows three sizes, blossoming in a second. I jerk back, waking Petunia up, but she barely reacts to the vines that are now spread out across the table.

"Plants are my specialty, my affinity," Olivia says, "but I can do much of the standard elemental magic. You will too as you discover what this bond means for each of you."

"An affinity?" Lily asks, her eyes glued to the vines.

"You will discover that in time as well. Each witch usually carries at least one."

"Where are your sisters? Or a coven?" Parker asks and I turn to her sharply.

"Parker, what if it's a sensitive subject?" I whisper and Olivia chuckles.

"It's okay, Kennedy. It's a valid question. I am part of a coven; there are quite a few across Scotland, and my coven has been awaiting your arrival."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that one of my sister witches foresaw a great power coming to Edinburgh, one that needed to be nurtured. We've been preparing, without knowing which one of us will have the privilege of meeting you. And I suppose that's where I come in. I am here to provide you with a safe place, whenever you need it."

"But how do we know we can trust you?" I ask before I can stop myself.

Olivia doesn't seem to be offended. She meets my gaze head-on before replying. "I don't expect you to trust me nor do I expect you to accept everything I say at face value. You will have your own journey, but I wanted to offer you a safe haven within these walls, a place that you can come to if needed. This café is warded against negative forces and will always have a warm cuppa ready for you. And hopefully, with time, I will earn your trust."

She seems completely genuine in everything she says and I can't find fault in any of it, but it still feels incredibly overwhelming.

Moving to a different country, even if only for a year, was a huge step for me. My aunt hated the idea, but I'm old enough to make these decisions myself now, so she couldn't stop me. Everything about that decision was overwhelming.

Now I find out that my magic, which has been suppressed for as long as I remember, is something that's looked upon as a gift and not a curse. Nothing about the world makes sense anymore and I don't know how to find my footing in any of it.

Suddenly, Parker surprises me by reaching across the table and taking Olivia's hand.

She stares at her deeply and no one says a word for a good minute as I glance between the two of them.

"Okay," Parker says, leaning back.

"Okay?" Lily and I ask.

"Yes, she's legit."

"What?" I stare at Parker completely baffled all over again.

"I don't know how I can tell, but I can tell. She's not like an evil witch or anything."

"Parker, and I say again, what?"

"Intuition," Olivia supplies. "Yours the power of the mind. Could you read mine?"

"No, but I could feel it? Wait, I can read minds? Seriously? I've always been sensitive, but since the tattoo appeared I feel like I'm more so than ever before."

"You might be able to one day. Only the strongest of witches carry that gift."

"But what about evil witches?" I ask, filing the reading of minds things for later. My aunt has always believed any power that controlled the mind was evil and to be feared even more than others. Olivia seems to understand my question, even the parts I don't ask.

"Of course, just like there are regular people who use their power for evil, there are witches who do so as well. We're not all that different. Magic itself isn't evil, Kennedy. It's something I think you will come to learn over time."

I freeze at her words because she saw right down to the core of the problem. Suddenly, Olivia stands.

"I see that I have overwhelmed you. This is normal, but I will tell you this; I have been a witch my whole life and I will always do my best to be a help to you in any way I can. Your powers are tied to your emotions and it will take time to master them. I am here any time, day or night, so please, don't hesitate to come to me."

She walks back over to the door then, unlocks it, and turns the sign to open before she gives us a kind smile and a customer comes in. She walks back around the counter as if she didn't just shake us to our core, and all I can do is sit here stunned.

"What just happened?" Parker whispers.

That's what I'd like to know.

By the time we get back to the apartment, we're exhausted. We stopped long enough to grab takeaway and now we've all changed into our comfortable clothes and are sitting on the sofa and chairs in the common room, eating.

Even if everything feels overwhelming, our living accommodations are nice. Honestly, the apartment is gorgeous. This particular room has three tall bay windows, with an area for sitting right under the middle one. There is a bigger sofa in the middle of the room across from the windows, a table right in front of it, and two plush chairs across the table from each other. There is plenty of light from the windows and the overhead fixtures, but there are also lamps all over the place, which I find quite cozy. My room is directly behind the chair on the left, with Lily's room to the left of it, and Parker's room behind the other chair, with the kitchen opening to the right of it. We're in the middle of a flower, with the other rooms spreading out like petals. Directly across from the bay windows, behind the couch is the little hallway that leads to the bathroom and then to the front door.

If I were to choose an apartment for myself, this would be it. Although, I wouldn't originally have chosen to live with anyone else. Now, as I look at the girls around me, I don't think I would change this for anything, which is incredibly strange all in itself. Maybe even more strange than the whole magic thing, and that's saying something.

"Do you think we may have collectively lost our minds?" Lily asks, breaking the silence and jerking my attention away from my food. It's such a me question, that it takes me a moment to realize I wasn't the one who asked it.

"Or you know, got into some kind of an airplane accident where we've entered an alternate universe?"

"Lily, I think that might be even less believable than magic." Parker's voice is soft and I glance at her just in time for her to round her eyes a little bigger in my direction before looking back to Lily. I get it. Lily has been the most chill about the whole situation, but maybe it's finally hitting her in the way it hit me immediately.

"Does it scare you?" I ask gently, and Lily's attention turns to me.

At first, I don't think she's going to reply, but then she nods. "It does. My magic—" she takes a deep breath, "it has always been very minor. I've never been accepted by the coven back home because I just didn't bring enough to the table. I always wanted it to be more, and now my magic has the space to be more. It scares me how much I'm afraid I'll mess things up or worse, lose it."

The last part is added almost reluctantly, and there's definitely more below the surface there, but I don't want to push. Instead, Parker and I wait her out. My heart squeezes at the sadness in her eyes, and I realize that maybe she's been just as alone in all of this as I have.

Lily takes a deep breath as if steadying herself before she speaks again. "My

family—they never really understood my interests or goals. I thought that coming to Scotland was a way for me to not only further my studies, but to find my own people. My own family—people who would understand. Only after a few days of knowing you, it feels like maybe that's what we're becoming, and I'm scared it's all in my head and that it's not real because it seems too fast, and also cloaked in this magic, and I don't understand—how can I trust it? Everything seems out of control and confusing, but also exhilarating and I'm not sure how to feel about any of it."

All of this is said in nearly one breath and when Lily is finished, Parker and I stand immediately, moving to her. We plop down on either side of her before we wrap our arms around her. She squeals at our tight embrace, but neither Parker nor I let go. The three of us hold onto each other as if we've always done so and no matter how logical or trained to hate magic I have been, I can't protest at how much everything Lily has said resonates with my own feelings on the matter.

"It's okay to be scared. We're all scared," Parker says, and Lily and I glance at her immediately. "What? Don't give me that look."

"I thought Parker wasn't scared of anything," Lily mock whispers, still staring at her.

"I know, right? Our world has tilted once again," I reply and Parker rolls her eyes.

"I'm trying to have a moment here and you're being idiots." She goes to pull back, to perch on the arm of the chair, but Lily and I hold tight.

"Do you really think we can trust Olivia?" I ask, because no matter how much I'd like to trust my judgment on this, there are three of us in it together. It can't just be a me decision. Maybe for the first time in my life, it doesn't have to be an only me decision.

"I think so," Lily is the one to reply first.

"I do too. I can't explain it, guys," Parker says, "but I could feel it."

"What do you feel about us?" I ask.

Parker takes a long moment to reply and Lily and I watch as she mulls it over. It's funny to see just how much we're picking up about each other. Our friendship—the beginning of one—feels like it would feel to put on a favorite cozy sweater; everything seems to fit just right.

"I feel—" Parker begins, "that we'll be having a lot of these moments together and that we'll figure it all out, the way we're meant to."

For some reason, that's the most perfect thing Parker could say and when I go to bed that night, I'm actually able to sleep again.

Chapter Ten

KENNEDY

The next morning, checking in for school goes without a hitch and at least that's settled. Most of my classes are independent study, which gives me the freedom to do more research on this whole magic thing. Olivia gave us a starting point, mentioning the way the magic bonds us together, but I need more.

We wouldn't be given this mark and given this power if it didn't mean something. It's not enough that I know it bonds us. I need to know for what reason and what it means for us, but today, after leafing through half a dozen books, I don't feel any better. The number of warnings I've read between the lines are staggering. While many of these books talk about witches as women who were misunderstood, it doesn't take away the fact that someone was always on the opposing side of magic. Maybe I shouldn't have pulled out that last fairytale book for information, but I had to look somewhere, and according to the story, every good magical being ever always has an evil one trying to steal its powers. How's that for something to worry about?

My aunt's warnings got so much louder after reading that book that I slammed it shut and left it behind, hoping a walk would help me clear my head.

By the time I make it back to the apartment, I'm exhausted. Mostly mentally, but also physically because Edinburgh is hilly. I don't think I was prepared for just how much. The city seems to be built on top of itself, and every street from the Old Town either runs down or up from the center of it. Even when the incline or decline isn't major, my body can tell. As hard as walking is, I'm still quite enjoying its glorious charm.

The part where I definitely need to up my cardio workouts just adds to it.

My phone buzzes just as I reach the door to our apartment, and I pull it out to see a new group chat has been created, expertly named by Parker as "Witch Please!" with a few witchy emojis added in. I give myself a moment to grin at it, when no one is watching, and shut the door behind me, leaning against it as I read the messages. Both girls texted to say they'll be home within the hour, so I have the apartment to myself for the first time.

My mind is already coming up with lists of things that need to be done. I haven't really unpacked yet and I need to make a list of groceries we'll need to eventually get. I don't think the fridge is going to magically restock itself, although, wouldn't that be helpful? Also, I will need to clean up?—

The knock on the door makes me freeze, a dozen bad scenarios immediately coming to mind. I don't know anyone who would be casually dropping by. After reading about evil witches sucking the magic and souls of good witches, I am definitely not in a good place to be opening that door—but no, I refuse to live in the same mindset as my aunt, so I need to be better than this fear.

Get a grip, Kennedy, and handle it like a woman.

I rip the door open with a lot more force than I intend, and it nearly takes me with it. When I lift my eyes, a range of emotions rush through me, settling on annoyance. "You!" I glare at the same guy who'd run me over twice already. "Come to finish the job?"

He stares at me for a few seconds, as if unsure of how to take my words before he chuckles. "Hello to you too, neighbor. Do you greet everyone in such a hostile manner?" His voice sends an array of goosebumps over my skin, so I turn up the offensive immediately.

"Just you." I don't hesitate and his grin grows wider. "What do you want?" I ask, placing my hand on my hip, the other gripping the doorknob. It's annoying how good he looks, standing on the dimly lit landing. His hair is tousled by the Edinburgh wind and I guess it started raining after I came inside because a few drops are still clinging to the end of the strands. His brown coat looks tailored to him and fits way too nicely over his tall frame. Before I allow my eyes to wander any farther, I stop myself.

Why am I noticing his body?

I meet his eyes and see that he did not miss me blatantly checking him out.

"You're dripping in my doorway. Say what you need to say and leave." I'm so flustered I stay on the offensive and he makes a noise that sounds suspiciously like a laugh, which actually makes me feel hotter than before and I hope my face isn't betraying me too much.

"I came to apologize for earlier. Is your phone okay?"

"It's fine. Thanks," I mumble, surprised he's apologizing again. "If you'll excuse me—" I start to shut the door, but he stops me with a hand.

"Here." His other hand is holding a piece of paper and I stare at it as if it might bite me.

"What is it?" My eyes narrow with suspicion, as if the paper is going to attack me.

"Why don't you take it and check?" He waves it at me a little, raising an eyebrow.

"Because I don't want to get a paper cut or contract contact poisoning?" I reply and he blinks at me, as I'm speaking a different language.

"What does that even mean?"

"That you are a hazard to my health, so who knows what's on that paper." I fold my arms over my chest and this time he does chuckle. Albeit a bit frustrated, like he's not quite sure what to make of me.

"You're ridiculous." He sighs.

"Sure, you bulldoze over me twice and I'm the ridiculous one."

"Just take the paper already."

For some reason, I do. It's folded once and when I unfold it, it looks like one of those old carnival tickets, with the big block letters on top, and a twisty frame around the edges, but it's hand drawn and it says, "Bennett's IOU" on top.

"What is this?" I ask, scanning it quickly before my eyes meet his again. I swear he looks a little sheepish as he tucks his hands in the pockets of his slacks.

"It's a coupon, for you. I owe you a favor. Or anything you want."

I glance down at it again and read the fine print below the large letters.

Admit One. This ticket entitles the bearer to one favor, free of charge. Presented by Bennett MacKay. No expiration date.

"Why?"

"Because I was rude in not helping you with the suitcases and I think it requires more than an apology to pay for my crimes." He's looking a little sheepish and a whole lot of adorable. My cold exterior begins to melt, but I freeze it back up before I do

something crazy like return his smile.

"You're trying to buy my forgiveness?"

"No, I'm working for it."

Well, I can't argue with that. I won't admit this, but this is actually quite adorable. The way he's fidgeting in place and pushing at the hair falling into his eyes every now and then—it's a whole package. It would be very easy to forgive him right here and right now, but I'm stubborn. And still too annoyed.

Which is what causes me to say what I do next. "Do I make you wash the baseboards or do my laundry for a month?" My lips curl up in a tiny smile as his eyes round in response. He looks quite concerned at what he might've gotten himself into.

I surprise both of us when I laugh. His whole body jerks at the sound, his eyes flying up to meet mine, as he stares at me with what I can only describe as awe. Then, after a moment, something changes in his gaze and I forget what we were talking about because he's looking at my mouth and I suddenly can't think straight. I automatically lick my lips and his gaze jerks to mine, his eyes unguarded for just a moment. It's enough to raise my temperature by twenty degrees and I think I need to see a doctor immediately because that is not a typical response. Something must be wrong with me.

Bennett clears his throat and I shake myself mentally. "Anything you want," he says, his voice much quieter now and I can't seem to look away from his darkening gaze.

It hits me all over again just how attractive he is and how his voice is sending pleasant tingles down my back. I'm sweating in my sweater and I need to put a stop to this now before I'm the one making a fool out of myself.

"I'll think on it," I say, waving the ticket at him. I take a tiny step back and he takes that as his cue to move toward the stairs that lead up to his apartment.

"You do that," he says before giving me a quick once over and swallowing hard. When his eyes meet mine again he adds, "Would it be too much to ask—could I—" He runs a hand over his hair, sending it into more disarray before he rubs his palm over the back of his neck. "What's your name?"

The question is barely a whisper and I realize I never told him. He'd introduced himself and I—I was too annoyed to be polite.

For a moment, I want to hold onto it for a bit longer, but there's something in his eyes that pulls at me, and I get the urge to simply reply. "Kennedy."

The grin he sends my way is blinding. I think he'll say something else, but then he turns and rushes up the stairs. I close the door slowly and then turn and lean against it, like I need it to prop me up. What the heck was that?

BENNETT

Kennedy.

Her name is a sweet melody on repeat and I'm grinning like a fool any time I think of it. It feels like I've won something precious and it makes me feel lightheaded. Then that's overshadowed by what I did. Maybe the whole ticket thing was a bad idea. I've been tossing this around my head since yesterday. Maybe I overdid it. My brain is thinking...she must find me nuts. Who does something so random? I drew her a ticket. What was I thinking? I probably scared her into never talking to me again.

Which would be a serious problem considering I want her to talk to me again.

There's something incredibly fascinating about Kennedy. Yes, she's beautiful. Anyone can see that. With her wavy brown hair that is a little wild due to the humidity to her hazel eyes that seem to be glaring at me perpetually. The slightly flushed cheeks as if she's been walking just a tad too fast. And that mouth. I think I'm going to have dreams about that mouth for the rest of my life. When she smiled at me, I thought I was having an out-of-body experience.

Yet, it's not just the physical aspects of her. There's something in her eyes, the kind of intelligence that I find very attractive. She seems like the kind of a person who would meet you on your level and then push you beyond your comfort zone, which is intimidating in the best kind of way.

I want to know more about her, I want to know everything about her.

My phone buzzes with an incoming text, and typically I don't touch it when I'm in the middle of research, but I'm not doing anything. It's been three hours and I think I'm still reading the same page.

Did you scare her away?

Nicholas texts and I roll my eyes.

The number you have reached is no longer in service.

I text back.

Resubscribe.

Nicholas replies immediately.

Stop being a numpty and come over for dinner.

Is that so you and Lana can make fun of me some more? Also, stop picking up weird Scottish slang.

Absolutely not. And you Scotts don't hold monopoly on numpty. It's perfect for you. Dumb but in a cute way.

I roll my eyes. One, he absolutely is. And two, sometimes his vocabulary makes me question our friendship—but not really.

It's been nearly two weeks since we've had dinner together, the three of us, and I would really enjoy it, but I'm not sure I will enjoy putting myself in the position of being made fun of.

Lana has never seen you like a girl. She's fascinated.

Nicholas has no problem double-texting. I groan. Why did he have to tell Lana? She'll be all over this now, meddling in that annoying way teenagers do.

While I would typically endure the torture for the sake of being the better brother, I actually have plans.

I text back, glancing at the time. I did promise a student to help them with a project and we're meeting in less than an hour.

Is it with your building mate? Lana wants to know.

It is not. Now leave me alone.

If only I could.

I chuckle and drop the phone next to me on the sofa before I lean back and stare at

the white ceiling and the embedded crown molding lining the top. My flat has always been a place of refuge for me. I found it by sheer luck three years ago and haven't wanted to move since. The building is old and carries much history within its walls. The two-bedroom setup is perfect since it means I can have an office. The living room is small with the bay windows taking up much of the wall space, but it brings in the most beautiful sunrise over the tops of some of the buildings. Oftentimes, I sit on the sofa, gazing out the window, my mind lost in scenarios of a time before my own.

Right now, it doesn't feel like a refuge though. Mostly because I keep thinking about the girl downstairs, with her glaring eyes and wild hair that seems like a contrast to her perfectly put-together persona.

Nicholas is right; I haven't liked anyone in a long time. It takes me a while to let my walls down to give anyone a chance on a romantic scale, and girls usually move on before I do. I may have been told I suck at dating a time or ten. It's not like I don't want to show affection. I actually want to show it pretty badly. There is also that fear of people leaving me when they get to know me that I can't quite turn off. I've been told more than once that I'm "too much" for some. So I tone it down, to the point of a near shutdown and then I'm "uninterested" or "unfeeling," which puts me firmly in the "I don't date" category.

With Kennedy, it just feels different. I barely know anything about her, but I actually have the urge to bring some of my walls down and try . Not that she wants anything to do with me. I don't know what I expected. Her being so amused by the ticket that she uses it immediately? I really need to learn how to curb my expectations, but it's really hard when I can't even understand this pull I feel toward her, which is why I'm being a sadsack of emotions, moping the day away instead of working on my project.

My phone buzzes on the sofa and I grab it to turn off the reminder. Standing, I run a hand over my stomach, tugging at my green jumper before I head for the door. If I'm useful to someone else maybe this meeting will help me take my mind off things.

Chapter Eleven

KENNEDY

I spent all day prepping lists for school and going over what's needed for my studies, ignoring everything about magic—and the annoying neighbor upstairs who invaded my dreams repeatedly last night. The girls have been out all day at school as well, but Parker texted the group to meet.

When I step inside The Black Cat it's the busiest I've seen it. After a quick scan of the room, I don't see the girls, so I make my way to the counter.

"Hello, Pet," I greet the cat who opens one eye to look at me and I think give me a knowing smirk? Olivia comes out from the back, placing two plates on the bar, distracting me.

"Hello, Kennedy." She gives me a quick wave before turning toward the couple in front of her. They order two coffees just as the door dings behind me and two more guests come in. This room is quickly filling to capacity and Olivia seems to be alone. I hang my coat near Pet's bed and give the customers another quick scan.

"Can I help?" I ask, leaning over the counter and she glances at me with a grateful nod.

"Could you grab the sandwiches from the oven?"

I nod, walking around the waiting customers and stepping behind the bar. Olivia

points in the direction of the kitchen, and I step through the macramé curtains to find two small ovens, both with sandwiches heating up. They ding together, and I grab two plates from the shelf nearby, using the spatula to take them out. I walk back into the main room, handing the plates over, which Olivia accepts with a grateful smile.

"Could you also pour some tea, please?" She points to a dark green teapot on the counter, next to a display stand with teacups hanging off it. "Two cups, fill it to the golden line from the pot, and the rest with the hot water in the dispenser beside it."

She's not even looking at me as she gives me directions while she prepares a cup of coffee, and I do as I'm told before I place the cups on their respective saucers.

"A dash of milk in one." Olivia keeps giving out instructions, as she moves around, taking the next order.

"Where to?" I ask.

"The table by the door," she replies.

I step around the counter, heading for the table, and place the two cups in front of the customers sitting there. As I turn to walk back over to Olivia, something stops me. I do a quick scan of the room, trying to pinpoint what it is. I feel eyes on me and I look over at Petunia, who's watching me steadily with a sort of a knowing look on her face. I take a step toward the counter and I realize what's off. Somehow, the small café is bigger than it was when I first came in here—or it seems bigger somehow, considering it's fitting more people than it should. There are at least twenty people in here now, when it usually only seats seven comfortably. No one else seems to notice anything off, but I swear when I glance at Petunia, she's grinning at me.

I walk back over at Olivia, a question on my lips, but she's already pointing to the kitchen. "Can you please heat two cheese toasties? They're labeled."

I nod without hesitation and walk to the kitchen, glancing over at the array of prepared sandwiches and instructions right next to them. I shake my head a little at the randomness of it all, but I don't hesitate to follow the instructions and prepare the toasties. The smell of cheese and bread fills the space, making my stomach rumble, and I realize that in my haste to get here, I didn't eat.

When I step out with the orders, I hand them over to the customers just as Lily and Parker come in. The table where we sat last time opens up and they beeline for it without a word.

"Did you register for classes and get a job in the span of the last twenty-four hours?" Lily asks when I step up to the table.

"Olivia seemed swamped so I'm helping out."

"Is it me or does the room seem bigger?" Parker whispers and I immediately feel better because I thought I was losing it there for a moment.

The three of us turn to look at Olivia, who catches our eye and winks.

"She's awesome," Parker breathes out, and I have to agree.

"Did you want anything?" I ask.

"A latte."

"Earl grey."

I wink at the girls and head back to the counter with a nod. I relay the orders and Olivia shows me where the Earl Grey is, so I prepare that while she works on the coffee. The bell over the door sounds again and I vaguely wonder if we'll even get a

chance to talk with how busy it is as I take the coffee and the tea and walk back around the counter.

A couple moves to the side and I dodge them, managing not to spill the drinks, just as another customer steps around them at the same time. With a whoosh of movement, the guy barely has time to stop. I halt and before I can help it, the tea tumbles over spilling over my hand. I hiss at the pain of hot liquid on my skin but thankfully don't drop the cups. At the same moment, the cups are taken out of my hands, as someone catches my burnt hand and gently wipes it. I glance up to find Bennett's concerned gaze on my hand as he uses the sleeve of his sweater to wipe at the liquid.

"Are you trying to kill or just maim me?" I whisper because suddenly I can't breathe with him standing so close to me, his hand holding mine gently. Not that it's actually his fault this time—mostly just being at the wrong place at the wrong time—but it definitely seems like this is my automatic response to him. Aside from the other automatic response I refuse to acknowledge.

"My goal is for neither," Bennett replies, and when I glance up his eyes are on mine.

"Fine. Are you stalking me?" My question is missing some of its typical bite and I can't make my chest expand enough to take in a full breath—which is quite annoying.

"So it would seem," he replies but doesn't drop my hand and doesn't move away. Actually, I think we both move a little closer, almost like we sway toward each other.

"Kennedy! Are you okay?"

The spell is broken as Lily and Parker descend on me. I jerk my hand back, taking a step away, turning to face the girls.

"I'm fine. It wasn't that hot."

Olivia comes over next with a little ice pack and hands it over. "Just to be safe."

I take it gratefully and realize that the café is much quieter than it was only moments ago. Looking around I find that the majority of patrons have cleared out. I glance at Olivia and she raises her eyebrows at me, looking rather mischievous.

"Well, I'm glad you're okay because now that Bennett is here, we can get started. Bennett, this is my friend, Kennedy Hellebore. The student I mentioned who needed some help."

I blink as Parker motions for us to sit down. "What?"

"Bennett. This is my sort of friend from the university. He's here to talk to us about Scottish witches lore."

I stare at Parker like she's speaking another language. My eyes turn to Bennett and I find he looks just as confused as I feel. "No," I say, turning to Parker. "Absolutely not."

"What, why?" She's looking at me like I'm crazy, and I might be feeling as such—but how do I explain to her the strange array of emotions I feel when Bennett is around?

Not only that, the warning about bad witches flashes in my mind from years of hearing my aunt rage about them, and suddenly I can't turn off the way my brain is coming up with every terrible scenario. He's been around since the beginning and now he's the magic expert? It can't be a coincidence, can it? Is this why I'm feeling so unsettled around him? Can I read emotions or is this my intuition?

My mind flashes to the last book I was reading for research and the information about evil witches sucking the good magic out of other magical beings. What if Bennett is that person? The one who gets close to a witch and then sucks all of her energy out.

My emotions rise until I can't seem to catch a breath.

Am I just paranoid? No, I'm not. I'm careful and this is sending all of my alarms off in the worst way possible. My chest hurts and I try to keep myself calm but I'm failing.

Suddenly, the room seems to shrink in size around me, warnings flashing before my eyes as neon signs and I can't breathe. "I have to go," I say, stepping past the girls and toward the door. "I forgot—I have to—" I can't even come up with an excuse as I push past everyone, dropping the ice back on the counter and grabbing my coat from the rack before rushing out the door. I need air, I need to be out of here, I need?—

Lily calls after me, but I don't slow down. I'm feeling one hundred percent unbalanced. The cool early evening breeze hits me in the face, filling my lungs with much-needed air. My feet move automatically, out of the close and into the center of Old Town. I hear movement behind me and then Parker and Lily catch up to me.

"How do you know Bennett?"

"Why are you running away like you've seen a ghost?"

"What's wrong?"

"Are you okay?"

All the questions tumble out of the girls as they link their arms through mine on each side. I stop my escape immediately, calm washing over me at their presence. They step in front of me so they can look me in the eye and I force myself to take a few calming breaths. I really hope it's my overactive imagination, but I can't take that risk. So I tell them what I'm thinking because we're in this together.

"I think Bennett might be evil."

BENNETT

Nicholas has been laughing for a good three minutes. People are starting to stare.

"I should've never told you," I grumble as I take a sip of my coffee. We met up on campus this morning because we both have meetings with the faculty. He's having his monthly check in and I'm having a sit down with my supervisor. I need to figure out which direction to take this paper and Professor Stewart is a good person to bounce ideas off of. Having regular meetings has been helpful, even though I'm still struggling to get a grasp on what exactly I want my thesis to be about.

What was not a good idea was telling Nicholas that Kennedy ran from me like her hair was on fire.

"You really know how to make an impression, don't you?" Nicholas asks, between gasps of laughter.

"Get a hold of yourself, pal." I roll my eyes, giving the two men beside us an apologetic shrug.

"I can't help it. Mr. Sunshine has finally met his match, and this is the best news I've heard all month.

"This is not funny."

"Actually, it's downright hilarious, mate. You have finally met someone who sets your world off kilter."

"How is that hilarious?" I take another sip of my coffee trying not to think about the

anxiety in her eyes last night. There has to be more to it than just me, but I don't know her well enough to ask those questions—even though I really want to be someone she would confide in.

"Well, not for you, but for me. I need to meet her."

"No, absolutely not."

"Why? Are you afraid she'll take one look at me and fall madly in love?"

I wasn't up until this moment, but now maybe I should be. Nicholas does have a way with the ladies and a much more successful rate of conversion.

What am I even thinking? I need to chill. This is fine. Everything is fine.

"I can barely get her to look at me right now. I don't need you to add fuel to that fire by telling embarrassing stories."

"I would only tell her mildly embarrassing ones. She needs to know what she's getting into."

"Nicholas, she doesn't even like me."

And that's the problem right there. It was a battle just to get her to tell me her name. I've only been in her presence three times and I keep thinking of her. I would like nothing more than to take her to dinner and ask her every possible question about her life, her dreams, and her goals. When was the last time I wanted to get to know anyone like that? Of course with my luck, she'll be the one girl who wants nothing to do with me.

"Come on, mate, don't do that sad puppy face. She's probably just overwhelmed you

keep popping up where she is and causing trouble. I mean, I'd be concerned too."

"But she ran from me like I'm a serial killer. How do I come back from that?"

"I have no idea. Maybe talk to your friend. Who is that girl anyway?"

That's right. I keep forgetting that I do actually have a connection to Kennedy through Parker. "Remember how last year I was assigned a student mentee? She's one of the ones I had. She's studying magic and occults, and asked if she could pick my brain on some Scotland-specific history."

"You would be the man to ask," Nicholas agrees before taking a sip of his coffee.

"Are they working on a project together?"

"I have no idea. Parker threw a hasty sorry over her shoulder before she and the other girl ran out after Kennedy."

"And what did you do?"

"I didn't run after her, if that's what you're asking. The café owner brought me a coffee and I sat there and drank it before coming back to the flat."

"Just like that."

"Just like that. What was I supposed to do?"

"Good point. Maybe talk to the friend. See where you stand."

Or maybe I should just give up.

The moment I think that, I get an uncomfortable feeling in the pit of my stomach. I feel like I don't have a right answer here. If Kennedy truly wants nothing to do with me, I'll respect her decision, but there has to be a way to know for sure. I can't stop picturing the way she studied me when I brought her the ticket or the way her pulse sped up when I held her hand at the café. The look in her eyes told me she felt it too, that spark of electricity. I can't be making that up, can I? I suppose I could. She does make me feel a bit...unhinged.

I'm still thinking about her when I step inside Professor Stewart's office an hour later.

"Bennett, you're here. Brilliant. Take a seat," Professor Stewart greets me.

I walk over to the chairs in front of the desk. His office always brings me a sense of satisfaction, like he's arrived at a place I'm trying to reach and it's clearly possible. Dark wooden tones and rich leather fill the space. The books on the shelves are old and well taken care of. The stacks of papers on the desk are evidence of his philosophy of doing research by hand. He always says there is something traditional and rewarding in taking notes by writing them out instead of typing them on a computer. I've been following that pattern lately, and I do enjoy how my brain retains information after it's been written out. I hand over one of the books I brought with me, placing it on the desk.

"Thank you for lending me this. There are some fascinating accounts of travel in the Highlands."

Professor Stewart nods, picking up the book and standing from his chair to walk over to put it back on the shelf. "Did you decide which area you're going to focus on?" he asks over his shoulder.

"Yes and no." I've been trying to find a topic for this specific paper for a while. Nothing truly feels right, and if I'm writing a paper on it, I need to be confident I can

spend the time I need to on it and stay enthusiastic through the process—a difficult balance in academics, at least for me. My mind tends to wander, but there is a topic that has stuck out a little more this last week and I grab onto that for the idea. "I think I want to do a study of the witches residing in Scotland over the years. There are so many different monuments and memorials that hold history of those times. I think it would be a fascinating study, especially if I can visit some of these places and see if I can hear the accounts as the locals tell them."

Professor Stewart turns toward me from his place near the shelves, pondering the suggestion. It's important for him to approve of the direction I'm going before I get too far into it. The university covers many different topics when it comes to Scottish history, but I haven't seen anyone focus on this particular one in recent years. Professor Stewart takes a moment before nodding thoughtfully.

"Are you sure about this? I'm not too sold on the idea." He pauses for a moment. "Is there anything specific that inspired it?"

Honestly, it was Parker's question about visual representations of magic in Scotland. She asked if there was any history of witches carrying marks, and that sent me down a whole path of research I was going to share with her.

Thoughts of Parker bring to mind another particularly prickly brown-haired beauty, but I push those thoughts aside and focus on the professor. I can't exactly use Parker as an excuse for my paper, but maybe I don't actually need to. Now that I think about it, I've done papers on the royal family and the architecture of Edinburgh already. I need something different.

"Just a few of the things that came up in the books I've been researching," I finally reply.

He nods again and I can't tell if he thinks it's a good idea or a bad one. He stays quiet

for a few minutes, mulling it over, before coming back over to the desk and sitting down. "I would encourage you to move away from this subject and see if there is a better concentration for you."

I'm surprised, but I try not to show it. I thought he would be more open to it since he himself has done studies on the lore.

"Do you think the witches concept has become too mainstream?"

He glances at me then, studying me carefully, before he replies. "It might be, but I think the best step for you to take would be to do some preliminary writing. See what you can find and if this is truly the direction you want to take. Do you have a starting point?"

I really thought I'd have to fight him on it, and I feel a little better that he didn't shut me down completely. "I was thinking of starting with the most obvious magical artifact known around these parts," I say. "The Stone of Destiny. It seems like there's enough lore surrounding it that it might give me a good starting point?" Plus, Nicholas just wrote an article about it and he would be an excellent source of information.

There's that nod again and I'm just going to accept it for what it is. He's not enthusiastic about it, but then again, when does Professor Stewart ever show any ounce of emotion? I'll have to impress him with my actual writing, and maybe, if I find something interesting I can pass it on to Parker. Or Kennedy. If she ever talks to me again. Either way, I feel much better having this conversation with Professor Stewart. Now, I need to get going on this research and just the prospect of it excites me.

Chapter Twelve

KENNEDY

"I don't want to do this," I call out from my room, studying myself in the mirror. I can hear Parker's snort even from in here and I roll my eyes. "Shouldn't we be spending our free time trying to figure out this magical tattoo situation? Or whether or not we have an evil witch stalking us?" I continue.

"Kennedy, your paranoia is showing again," Parker calls out and it's my turn to huff.

The girls are convinced that Bennett isn't some evil witch trying to steal our powers, but I'm not. When I initially brought up the idea, they paused, thought it over and then unanimously disagreed. Parker specifically said that she would've picked up something from him if that was the case. But I just can't let it go. There has to be a reason I have such a strong response to him. What could it be if it's not that he is evil?

We've been talking about this for most of the week while trying to figure out a time to research the tattoo. With our independent studies starting, it's been harder to find the time. We haven't even seen each other for longer than a few minutes during the week.

Now it's the weekend, which is why we're going to a cèilidh. Of course, it's Parker's idea. She said it'll be a good bonding activity for us. I have never done any kind of traditional dancing and I will only be honest with myself for this one second where I admit I'm fascinated—and also very apprehensive because I have no idea what to expect. Lily is incredibly excited. She's been twirling in her long dark yellow dress for about half an hour now as we finish up getting ready.

I was told that a twirly skirt is required and that's a great thing because I do love a twirly skirt. I brought my best ones with me, considering I love a good skirt to pull together an outfit in general. I've been wearing out my two pairs of jeans since I've been here, but I think I'm finally comfortable enough to bring out the big guns. Namely this dark red beauty, which is made up of various lengths of layers, tumbling all the way down to my ankles. The layers at the front are shorter, leaving one of my legs almost entirely exposed, while the other side only teases a peak at the leg. Paired with a dark grey chunky sweater tied at my waist, the amethyst necklace Parker gave me the only jewelry and my black boots, I look like I'm ready to take on anything and feel like I'm actually capable of doing so.

When I step out of the room, I get an appreciative whistle and a whoop from the girls.

"Kennedy, you look like a proper witch, and I mean that in the most flattering way possible."

I laugh at Parker's compliment because we all know that a witch is the coolest thing you can be to Parker, so this is the best praise I could receive.

"Seriously awesome skirt," Lily says, coming over to take a look. "The layers make it look so magical."

Lily's dress is flowy and magical in its own way that makes it look like it's been made for her. Full sleeves and a square neckline, with a faux corset over the ribcage, and an A-line skirt that fans out completely when she spins. Parker is sporting a crisscross-backed black overall dress over a white turtleneck. The corduroy is accented by various flowers stitched into the material, and the straight skirt barely grazes her thighs. To finish off her look, she's wearing her combat boots. She looks like a proper witch as well and it makes me grin. Suddenly, the cèilidh idea seems brilliant.

"What?" Parker asks, probably because I look like a crazy person grinning from ear to

ear.

"Nothing. We just look very us somehow."

Lily giggles at that before launching herself at me and Parker for a group hug. For someone who's never been hugged this much before, I'm finding it comforting instead of strange. I think the girls feel the same way, and the feeling of rightness grows as we laugh, the glow spreading from my chest to the rest of my body like sunshine on skin. This will be good for us; we need this time together. I feel it in my bones.

"Come on, weirdos," I say, tugging the girls in the direction of the door. "It's time to learn this Scottish dancing thing."

When we arrive at the building, we walk past it. There are no indicators outside that we've come to the right place, just a door. Doubling back according to our trusty map service, we push inside, and find a small entryway, with two small sets of stairs at the back that lead to another door and people. An elderly man greets us at the table.

"Hiya. You here for the cèilidh?" His voice is low, his accent very Scottish and it makes me smile.

"Yes, sir," I reply and he grins, picking up a clipboard.

"Names?" We give our names and he checks us off on the list. "Have you been to one before?"

"No," Lily says a little unsure and the man grins again.

"Don't ya worry, hen. There will be a wee bit of instruction, just follow along."

Somehow that bit of information calms my nerves. We thank him and follow the

steps up to the next room. There are already people sitting in chairs around the open space. The ballroom is big enough to fit at least a hundred people. The chairs line the walls and we find three together, shedding our coats and taking our seats.

There's a live band at one end of the room with a man standing near it holding a microphone. The buzz in the room is full of excitement and somehow my attitude of not wanting to go out has merged into feeling like I belong here. Edinburgh seems to do that to me.

"Are we ready to get started?" The man with the microphone steps forward and immediately a few people reply with a yes.

"Ah, around here, we say aye. So, are we ready to get started?"

"Aye!" The girls and I join in on the much louder response.

"That's better. Now, this is going to be the hardest dance of the night because it is the first one. Join in two groups of three. We're starting it off with the Dashing White Sergeant."

Lily grabs both of our hands, pulling us to stand before I can voice the fact that we should sit this one out.

"You're not even going to give us a chance to observe?" Parker asks, clearly on the same page as me, which is hilarious to me since this was her idea.

"Absolutely not. We learn by doing," Lily announces, walking over to three people standing together. I expected Parker to be this bold, but I guess Lily keeps surprising us. The people in front of us say hello as the man continues his instructions.

"Join hands, the six of you. We will do eight counts circle to the left and back to the

right. And go."

The man counts the steps and we walk to the left, then to the right.

"Now, the middle dancer in each group of three, face your right partner, join arms and swing. And then repeat on the left. And go!"

Lily turns to me first and we loop our elbows together, spinning once, so we end up in the original position, before she turns and does the same with Parker.

"Once back in original position, join hands in lines of three and dance forward, raising hands and retire, one two." We follow the instructions, giggling as we stumble along.

"Then dance forward, one line raising hands in an arch and the other ducks underneath—"We do as we're told and come face to face with another group of three. "And there ya go. Now with music."

He doesn't even give us a moment to reorient ourselves as the live band begins to play. The space fills with sounds of guitar, violin, and electric keyboard, and the three of us grin at each other. We stumble through the steps, as the instructor continues to count, but the more we move, the more natural it becomes and eventually, it's just the music and our laughter that fills the air.

Lily is a pro at this. She's never been to a cèilidh either, but she's picking up the steps as if they were made for her. We make our way around the room, meeting new groups of three each time we duck under the arm arches. Parker is never going to let me live this down but this was the best idea. I glance over at the girls, to find them laughing just as much as I am, sweat dripping off our temples, and I think this is what it might feel like to have sisters. The feeling of rightness once again fills me from the inside out and I give myself to the moment. The music gets louder and faster, the

encouragement for the man with the microphone louder as we continue to spin.

We come under another arch when suddenly I'm face to face with Bennett, just as the music stops.

BENNETT

Kennedy looks magnificent. I didn't know what to expect from Parker's sudden invitation to a cèilidh. I haven't been to one in ages, considering they drilled these dance steps into us at school, but I couldn't pass it up, and I'm very pleased I didn't because Kennedy is here. The moment I saw her step inside the ballroom with her wild hair and her jumper and skirt combo, her eyes shining as she looked around, I realized I'm much more gone than I thought I was. The desire to go to her was nearly immediate.

My phone buzzed with a text and I pulled it out to read Nicholas's apology.

Sorry, mate. Dance a Canadian barn dance for me.

He's been in meetings all day again, and I guess this one went just as late. I almost brought Lana, but she's out with friends and I didn't want to bother her. I had thought of keeping to the shadows, but then the couple next to me asked if I wanted to join and I couldn't help myself.

Now I'm standing in front of Kennedy, staring at her flushed cheeks and her hair messy and slightly sticky from perspiration and I grin.

"Fancy meeting you here," I say.

"Does Edinburgh deal in restraining orders?" she asks, raising an eyebrow. Her face is stern, but there's a gleam of something in her eye and I feel myself responding to it.

"I'm fine, thank you, Kennedy. How are you?" I ask.

Kennedy rolls her eyes, clearly annoyed, and places one hand on her hip as she stares at me. "Why must you be everywhere I am?"

"Just lucky, I guess."

She huffs at that, and I'm trying hard not to keep grinning like an idiot. She's flustered in that adorable way where I can tell she wants to be mad at me, but she also doesn't have a reason.

"I invited him," Parker speaks up with a little smirk.

I look over at Kennedy's companions for the first time with a greeting. "Good evening, ladies," I say, nodding at the two girls. Kennedy twists around to glare at Parker and apparently, I'm not the only recipient of that stern look. "I don't think we've had the pleasure to be properly introduced?" I smile at the blonde girl and she returns it.

"I'm Lily."

"Don't be nice to him," Kennedy says and I turn my attention back to her.

"Now, didn't anyone ever teach you good manners?" I ask and she huffs a little.

"Didn't anyone ever teach you it's not nice to stalk people?"

"You're really stuck on this stalking thing," I say, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Is that an American thing?"

Maybe I should be nicer, but I don't resist the impulse to rile her up just a little.

"Edinburgh is not that small," she says, "It's a single-woman kind of a thing."

The urge to say you don't have to be single is so strong I have to bite the inside of my lip, but I really don't think she'll be receptive to that right now. I go for the argument that she can't really argue with instead.

"Parker invited me."

"I—" Parker starts to say something, but Kennedy is already grabbing her and Lily's hands and hauling them away. I want to follow, but I don't. Lily throws a little wave over her shoulder and I grin. I think the smart thing to do here would be to let Parker handle this.

Those three have gotten close in the short time they've been together and as someone who also came to a city where he knew no one, I'm happy for them. It's a rare find when you meet your people, and it seems like that's what has happened with these three.

I watch Kennedy's back as she says something to the girls, and I walk over to where I left my water bottle to take a swig. The instructor is already talking about the next dance and I watch as Lily shakes her head and then pulls the girls back onto the dance floor. Which means, of course, I follow.

Chapter Thirteen

KENNEDY

"Everyone get into a circle. Aye, let's go!" The man waves his arms around and we scramble to follow instructions, while I try desperately not to make eye contact with the thorn in my side.

"Kennedy, honey, your face is going to get stuck like that," Parker whispers, taking her place beside me.

I roll my eyes, not missing Lily's soft chuckle on my other side. "I can't believe you invited him," I hiss. "Did I not specifically say I think he's...not good?" I'm so frazzled I can't even come up with a proper synonym for evil.

The girls shake their heads in unison as Parker levels me with a look. "Kennedy, I have no idea what you've been through in your life to hold on so tightly to this idea, but my...power," she lowers her voice even more at that word, "is telling me that he's good. Can you give yourself a chance to see that for yourself instead of making an assumption?"

She's making a logical argument, something she knows I can't argue against, but because I'm stubborn, I want to anyway. I can't just turn off my pre-programmed notions about people because I want to. It's a process.

I'm reaching for Parker's hand when a man steps between us. I look at him in confusion and he motions toward the instructor.

"He said it's man every other one." The guy shrugs and I move to the side to let him take the spot between Parker and me while another steps on the other side of me. There are definitely more women here than men, but our side of the room is pretty evened out.

"I invited him because he can help and you need to get over your hiccup when it comes to him." Parker is relentless. She leans over the guys beside her and raises her eyebrow at me.

"We're in the middle of a cèilidh, Parker," I huff. "What is he going to do? Pull out an encyclopedia from his back pocket and shout Scottish lore at us from across the room?"

"If you talked to him initially, we wouldn't be having this conversation right now," Parker replies.

"No, we'd be having it at a jail," I mumble, but clearly not quietly enough because the guy on my right gives me a sharp look.

"Don't worry, she's more bark than bite," Lily says to the man and he relaxes at her soft words. The girl can truly work magic all on her own without any mystical powers. "You should really be listening to instructions," she says to Parker and me.

"Listening isn't Parker's strong suit," I say and I don't miss the grunt from the other side.

"Should we talk about this later?" Parker asks, giving the man between us a once-over, and I realize we do sound a little bit like lunatics.

"Talk about it now; she can't assault you in public," Lily chimes in. The two men listening to our convo both chuckle and I shake my head, focusing my attention on

the instructor. He's gone through most of the dance already, but luckily someone across the way asks a question and he shouts a quick set of rules.

"Forward, back, then the women are passed on. Every four, you pair up and dance, before moving on. No more questions!" He hurries on when someone else asks a follow-up. "We dance, you figure it out."

The music starts up immediately and we link hands, walking to the center of the room as one big group before we walk backward to our spots. Next, the women come out first and I scramble to keep up, then the men do the same before we join hands again. Clearly the guys were paying attention because I'm then twirled to the right, stopping between the next two. The Scottish folk sounds fill the hall and just like before, I'm lost to it instantly.

Lily, of course, is a natural. I'm pretty sure she could make a career out of it if she really wanted to. I watch her as I'm twirled to the next set, grinning at the pure joy on her face. When I glance to my left, I see Parker is enjoying herself just as much, but then my eyes look over her shoulder and there he is.

The smug annoying one.

I tear my gaze away immediately, as I'm twirled again, and then again. The next man catches me easily and he looks like he knows what he's doing as I move away and he pulls me back. "Now we dance together." We step forward, then turn and step backward, before he twirls me, catching me again. In a proper hold, we waltz for four beats, before he says, "Now you keep going."

And suddenly I'm back in the queue, being passed down the line after we do the forward and back to the center of the room. I throw him a grateful smile as I move on. Never in a million years would I have tried a cèilidh, but here I am, and loving every second of it.

Even as I focus on the music and the steps though, it's almost like my attention is pulled in his direction and I have to look for him . The next time I'm spun around, my eyes clash with Bennett's once more and hold. The music swells and I keep moving, closer and closer to him with each twirl and pass around the room.

When we finally stop, we're face to face, just as the music ends once more.

Our noses are barely inches apart and my breath is caught somewhere between here and three steps behind me. He's too close, my body fully aware of him in that annoying way that I wish it wasn't. This is the part where I move away; I know this, but I simply can't. I'm held immobile by the intensity in his eyes. It has to be because he's doing something to me, trying to entice me into a false sense of security before he takes my power, right?

Don't trust anyone, specifically men. They will only want to use you for their own advancement. My aunt's voice is so loud in my head I almost turn around to see if she's suddenly here.

"Brilliant! We have our next couple of victims."

The voice booms over me, snapping me out of whatever trance I was in and I turn to find the man in charge of the dancing instructions right beside us. I don't understand what he means, but then he reaches over, taking me and Bennett by the elbows, and drawing us to the center of the room.

"What we have here is Strip the Willow and in this one, you cannot be shy." He turns to us. "Come then, step forward."

I glance at Bennett in confusion—the least hostile expression he's seen from me lately—and find that he's just as frozen.

"Well, go on then. We don't have all day." The man nudges me forward until I'm once again just mere inches from Bennett.

"Here we go," the man says. "Cross arms, cupping the other's elbow."

When neither of us moves, he huffs a frustrated breath. "Before I'm gray and old." He doesn't wait for us to move as he grabs Bennett's arm and then mine, twining us together, our chests touching with only our arms a barrier between us. Bennett's hand cups the back of my elbow, as I do the same to him. We're so close we're breathing each other's air.

"You're just letting this happen," I hiss.

"So are you," he replies, completely unbothered. He seems to have recovered from his momentary immobility. There's a spark in his eyes, almost as if he's enjoying it, and I'm not surprised considering he seems to enjoy everything. Especially when it comes to me.

"I don't feel like causing a scene," I reply.

"Then I guess you better listen closely because we're about to demonstrate."

I turn just in time to see the instructor come back to us after he oriented the other couples into the same hold and placed five other couples facing each other like a tunnel near us.

"You spin," he says, pointing at us. "Spin, spin!"

Bennett pulls me into a twirl as the man shouts, but apparently, we're not going fast enough for the instructor as he motions with his hands. I want to lead but Bennett is stronger than me, so his movement is the one that's carrying me and I'm not sure how

to feel about that.

"Faster, faster!"

Bennett doesn't hesitate to spin me faster and I'm gripping his elbow like I'm about to fly off into the sky. The instructor stops us and then guides me to the men lined up on my right. I link arms with the first one, spin, and am led back to Bennett. We link arms, spin, and then it's the next man's turn. I link arms with each of the men in the row, each time coming back to Bennett, each time with him ready to catch me as I turn. We do another spin and then come back down the small tunnel of people, this time with him linking arms with the women and me being there to catch him. By the time we come back to the front of the line, we're to link elbows again, and Bennett pulls me into a dizzying spin.

"Now again, but both sides!"

There's no hesitation in Bennett's movements as he leads me to the men and back to him, each time pulling me closer and closer as we spin. I want to keep the distance between us because it's safer somehow, but his arms catch me each time.

"You're fighting me," Bennett calls as we spin.

I manage to throw a glare his way. "Get used to it."

He chuckles, completely unfazed, yet he pulls me a little closer as if to keep me from losing my footing.

I'm out of breath before we're done, my head spinning. I honestly can't tell if it's the dance or Bennett's proximity, but I am nearly drunk on it all. We freeze as we finish the last spin, both of us breathing heavily. My body is almost completely against him, with our arms directly across my stomach as the only obstacle. The dance is wild,

much like my experience in Edinburgh has been, but with Bennett acting as an anchor, I don't seem to spin completely out of control.

"Again, with the music. And much faster!" the instructor shouts and the music starts up immediately along with the cheers from the crowd. I glance over at the girls only long enough to see broad grins on their faces as they are pulled into the dance.

"Ready?" Bennett's voice is low, but I hear it over the introductory chords of the song. He seems a little unsure, as if I'm going to bolt out of here, and maybe that's my fault since it's been my standard response when it comes to him. But suddenly, I don't want to run. Running will imply that I'm giving in to my aunt's ideas about the world, instead of creating my own. Much like Parker encouraged me, I suddenly want to give Bennett the benefit of the doubt and make my opinions based on facts, not the prejudice of a scared woman. That realization surprises me, but it also immediately settles in my heart like the truth and I give myself the permission to smile.

The grin Bennett gives me in return could probably chase away the Edinburgh clouds, nearly blinding me into a stupor, but then he's gripping my arm again as the music swells and we're spinning.

Chapter Fourteen

BENNETT

I can tell the moment she surrenders to my leading and the dance. I was prepared to fight her on this—Parker mentioned that pushing Kennedy's buttons might be the best way to get through to her, but I was still hoping my personality would win her over instead. My head swims at the display of trust she shows me as I spin her around. I feel like since the moment we met, I've been trying to break some of her walls down, and here we are, finally making progress. All it took was a cèilidh dance.

Kennedy is fire through and through. So much like her surname suggests, a poisonous flower, if you get too close. However, just like with almost every poisonous plant, more research has yielded medicinal uses. The fascination I have with this woman is new to me, but maybe it's not at all surprising. She has this tough exterior, but one look at the way she is with her friends and I can see there's a softer side beneath the surface. I want to be the recipient of that softer side too.

Almost as if she can read my mind, her chin comes up, eyes shining as we separate and then come back together in the dance. We're moving through the rest of the steps with her back straight, but she can't fool me. I know for a fact she was enjoying herself there for a moment.

We separate at the end of the row, standing across from each other, and I watch as she claps along to the music, waiting for the next couple to make their rounds. At this point, I don't know if anything can make me take my eyes off her. She seems to be glowing. Her eyes find mine and there's a moment where I think she feels it too

before she narrows her gaze. I'm going through the motions of the dance, but I keep coming back to her. When it's our turn to join at the arms again, my whole body is alight in anticipation.

"It's not polite to stare," Kennedy says as she hooks her palm at the back of my elbow, and I pull her close. Her voice is slightly breathless and I can't tell if it's from the dance or the proximity.

"I can't help myself," I reply, deciding to be honest, and her eyes fly up to mine just as I start to spin us. She moves with me, now more easily than before, as if we've been doing this all our lives. Her hair flies out behind her, her eyes gleaming, but her gaze doesn't leave mine.

It's obvious I surprised her with my honesty, and maybe I'm doing that thing again where I come off too strong—too much. I'm nervous I'll scare her off, but I can't seem to keep my thoughts to myself. She has spun my world completely off its axis and I'm not sure anything will ever set it right again.

I'm not sure I want it to.

KENNEDY

I am intoxicated by the feel of him and I can't stop my head from spinning. The dance ends abruptly and we're left standing, hands locked, our breaths in sync. I can't stop staring at him. Those eyes that I've been thinking about a lot more than I'd like to admit, hold me captive. There's something about Bennett, the kind of pull I've never felt for another person, and it makes me feel unsteady in a way that can't be helped. Or fixed.

The instructor's voice booms over the microphone and I pull my hand free, taking a step back.

"I need fresh air," I mumble before spinning on my heels and heading for the door that leads outside. I hear my name called, but I don't stop. Not even long enough to grab my jacket.

The cool air hits me in the face as I stumble out of the building. It's dark out, nearly ten in the evening, and the streets are mostly empty in this neighborhood. I pivot to the right, heading to the small courtyard with a few trees we passed earlier at the side of the building. A magpie jumps down from the tree, gives me a look, and takes flight.

There's a buzz of electricity sweeping over my skin as the magic I try so hard to control bubbles to the surface. I don't understand this reaction; it's not something I've ever experienced before. Is he causing it? Is he pulling at my defenses to—no. I made a conscious decision to trust Parker and to make my own opinions about him. This doesn't feel like an evil type of magic; it doesn't feel like anything I've felt before. It's more intoxicating. Almost like my magic and I are enjoying it—whatever it is.

I glance down at my wrist, at the tattoo resting there, and trace it with the fingers of my other hand. I jerk my fingers away as I watch the tattoo glow a bit, as if it's trying to tell me something.

"What is it? What am I missing?"

This whole new magical destiny has been lackluster at best. I have no idea what's happening to me or how I'm supposed to reconcile myself with a life where magic is part of everyday life. And why am I feeling all of these emotions for a guy I just met? The part of me that has spent her whole life hiding who I am and controlling every outcome is losing her grip on reality. Everything is making me realize that I have no control over any part of my life. I thought leaving home would give me that sense of control—finally being out from under my aunt's thumb—but instead, it seems that everything is so much more out of my hands.

"Kennedy, are you okay?" Lily appears beside me with Parker right behind her.

"I don't know," I reply honestly. "I don't know what's happening to me."

"Talk to us," Parker says, leaning over so she can look at my face.

"I don't know what to say." I wrap my arms around my middle, as if I can hold it all in with a simple touch. "It almost feels like I've touched a live wire and now I'm feeling the aftereffects of it. And I can't catch my breath. The way I was raised, this..."—I wave my wrist in their direction—"All of it is too much. And now him ? He makes me feel unbalanced. He makes me—" I stomp my foot in frustration just as the courtyard comes alive around me.

The bench and garbage bins are pushed to the side and away from me, much like the furniture was in our apartment. I gasp and clutch my hands to my chest, staring at what I just did.

The girls stare as well before Parker turns back to me. "Our magic is tied to our emotions. What were you thinking just then?"

"That I wanted to protect myself," I say quietly as images of Bennett's handsome face flash in my mind. He makes me want things, he makes me want him , and I'm not used to it.

"Then protect yourself again."

I glance up just in time to see Parker rush over to one of the flower planters on the side and pick up a bunch of pebbles. Without warning she throws them in the air at me.

In a split second, I know I can step out of the way and be fine, but for some reason, I

don't. Instead, I raise my hand and push my intention at the rocks. They hit an invisible wall before being launched back. Parker ducks at the last moment before standing up and looking at me in complete wonder.

"Again."

She grabs more rocks and this time chucks them at me. I don't even hesitate to bring up my hand, pushing them right back. The movement is so natural for me, it feels like I was meant to be doing just this. The panic I felt earlier is replaced with wonder and a bit of exhilaration.

Parker ducks again as I push more rocks her way, and then we're all laughing, this newfound high sending me reeling. Parker throws another handful, and instead of pushing it away, I send it up, hovering over our heads, before I let them drop away from us, making sure it doesn't hit the girls. I grin, looking up when a noise catches my attention and I spin around to find a very confused Bennett staring at me.

"What was that?"

Chapter Fifteen

KENNEDY

We're back in the apartment, with Bennett, who is sitting on the couch, while I try to get my heart rate back to normal. My mind keeps tumbling over every terrible outcome this could have, just like my aunt has taught me, and it's taking everything for me to stay calm.

"This is our best lead. He can help," Parker says.

"I can't believe you just spewed our secret at him without a second's hesitation." I turn on her, forfeiting any kind of regular heart rate.

"I couldn't help it. He asked and the answer was on my lips before I could think about it!"

"Maybe you should learn to control your tongue!"

"Maybe you should stop being such a stick in the mud!"

"Girls," Lily's voice is quiet, but somehow it does the trick as I spin to look at her.

"Maybe we shouldn't be having this conversation here?"

She makes her eyes bigger as she motions at Bennett and Parker and I turn to look at him. He raises his hand in a little wave and I groan out loud. Grabbing Parker's hand I drag her into my room with Lily close behind us.

"We'll be right back," Lily says before shutting the door behind her.

"Do you really think it's okay for him to know about us?"

"Why do you say 'him' like a curse?" Lily asks just as Parker points at me with a?—

"Technically, it's you who outed us."

I glare at the two girls, my dismay rising, as they exchange a look and then grin at me. I throw my hands up in exasperation. They're so frustrating; they're going to drive me and my magic to do something else outrageous.

"What happened to sisterhood?" I ask. "I thought it's us against the world and all that."

"Oh, this is sisterhood. This is us not standing in the way of true?—"

Lily slaps her hand over Parker's mouth, cutting off whatever she was going to say. "What Parker is trying to get at," Lily begins in her soothing voice, "is that we have a lot of questions and he's the best person we know who might have answers."

"What about Olivia?" I ask.

"Olivia can teach us the practical but she can't tell us our history. It's why I wanted his help in the first place. He knows his Scottish history," Parker says after another glance at Lily.

"What are you scheming?"

I glance between the two girls and Parker immediately raises her hands up in surrender.

"I'm innocent of any scheming."

"This is never true." I roll my eyes as pressure builds between my eyebrows. It feels like the last few weeks have been adding pressure daily and I'm close to exploding—or maybe that's exactly what happened tonight. "Okay, fine," I finally say, because it feels like I'm outvoted anyway, "we just need basic information right? This doesn't change much."

Except for the part where no normal person is allowed to know about magic or fire will rain down from the sky. Okay, maybe my aunt didn't exactly say it in those words, but according to her, people knowing about magic only causes problems for witches. Then again, it's not just me in this situation. I have to keep reminding myself of that. Maybe if Lily and Parker believe we can trust Bennett, then this won't be a complete disaster. I already decided to give him a chance; I can't keep changing my mind because I'm scared. I have to stick to my convictions or I'm no better off than my aunt.

The girls nod and I turn to the door, pulling it open. Bennett stands immediately from where he's been sitting on the couch. "I have so many questions. Can you fly? On broomsticks? Wait, is that offensive to ask? I'm sorry!" His face is eager and he doesn't even pause. "Do you need to twitch your nose or wiggle a finger? Wait, wait. Is that offensive? Oh oh, can you talk to animals? And potions? Can you make potions?" He grins, finally running out of breath as he looks at the three of us in my bedroom's doorway.

"I spoke too soon," I say as Bennett meets my gaze, his grin blinding.

BENNETT

Magic is real. It will take a while for that to sink in, but it also feels appropriate somehow. Growing up in the Borders, I always thought there was something magical

about the country. Now, after all the years I've spent studying Scottish lore, was there another outcome? Maybe, maybe not. I can freak out about this later though, because right now, staying calm and rational is the only way to keep Kennedy from simply kicking me out of the apartment. Without so many words, I can tell this is difficult for her, especially since I overheard them saying that keeping magic a secret is a rule. Whose rule, I'm not sure, but maybe if I prove myself trustworthy enough, she'll tell me one day.

I'm on the sofa while Kennedy paces near the windows with Lily and Parker occupying the two chairs opposite each other. Well, I know they're there, but I can't seem to take my eyes off Kennedy.

"If I may say something—" I begin, but Kennedy doesn't let me finish.

"You may not," she replies immediately.

"I'm going to say something anyway."

"Of course, because you do what you want."

"Kennedy." I stand, catching her before she can make another circle around the room. I don't touch her but simply step into her path. She glances up at me, her breath catching and I hope it's because we're back in each other's orbit. Being this close to her is getting to me and I hope she feels it too. She doesn't move away, so I take that as a positive sign and stay put. "I want to help. Can you please let me?"

I know that I should be asking all three of them, but my heart just wants to know if Kennedy approves. So far, I only know a few things about this girl. She's fearless, kind—to everyone but me—and she pushes all my buttons. How can I not be attracted to that? But now I want to know more, and the need to help, to see if I can make this better for her somehow is difficult to ignore.

"Why?"

"What?"

"Why do you want to help?" Her words are barely a whisper and I wonder what's hidden under all that armor. She asks the question like she can't believe someone would ever actually want to do such a thing. It sends all of my protective instincts on high alert.

"Because something incredible is happening here. Parker has only given me basic information, but now a lot of it makes sense. This is new to the three of you. I don't want you to be scared or worried. If there is something I can do to help, then that's what I'd like to do." I'm trying so hard not to scare her. I have no idea what will convince her that this has nothing to do with me and everything to do with her. "I think you can use a friend. And I can be that, if you let me."

The word 'friend' burns on the way out and her eyes snap up to mine, searching for something I can't even fathom putting a name to. She stands there for a moment, contemplating.

"I still don't trust you. I hope you don't expect me to," she finally says, and I think I may have been holding my breath.

"I would never expect you to trust me. Trust is earned, but will you let me help?"

She stares at me for a moment longer before turning to glance at the girls. I don't take my eyes off her, and I see the moment she makes her decision. She turns back to me, giving me a tentative nod.

"Okay, good, then where do we start?"

She motions me back to the sofa and I obey immediately because I don't want anything to jeopardize this truce we're creating. I glance at the other girls and they're watching me with a look I can't quite read. Kennedy starts to pace again, and just as usual, my attention is drawn to her immediately. Her long hair is in disarray from dancing earlier, but also because she keeps tugging on it. She's shed her tall boots, but the jumper and skirt combo she's wearing make her look capable and comforting at the same time. I'm not sure why those two descriptions are what keep coming to mind, but it's as if she can take on a whole storm by herself but then also give the best hugs.

My mind immediately latches on to that image. Her arms wrapped around me, fitting perfectly against my chest. I blink and then my mind is back on us dancing, my hands on her waist, as I pull her closer...

"Hello?" I jerk as Kennedy claps her hands in front of my face and I realize I haven't heard a word she's said. "If you're not going to pay attention, class dismissed." She nods toward the door.

I shake my head quickly, sitting up. "I'm paying attention. I promise."

Parker chuckles and I glance at her, just to watch her smirk. "Yes, you are," she says with a twinkle in her eye.

I frown in confusion, but she only continues to smirk.

"Anyway, as I was saying, this is new to us and we need to figure out what caused it."

"Caused what?" I turn my attention back to Kennedy in time to see her roll her eyes.

"This." She raises her arm, pulling the sweater down to expose her wrist. I'm on my feet instantly, moving around the table toward her once more. My fingers wrap

around her wrist gently and I cannot tell which one of us inhales sharply because suddenly I'm not breathing at all, my entire being focused on the feel of her skin under my fingertips. The moment lasts a heartbeat, then two, and then I'm breathing again.

"It appeared the first night we were together." Kennedy's voice is barely above a whisper and I look away from the tattoo to meet her gaze. Our eyes clash and all the air in the room seems to disappear as my head swims from the lack of oxygen.

We're standing close—much closer than I initially anticipated and it would take almost no movement on my part to tug her completely against me. The tension vibrates my body with anticipation as I breathe her in. Kennedy's scent is something keen to a morning air fresh from the dew and sunshine. It makes me think of spring and renewed possibilities and hope. She sways toward me, almost like she can feel the pull as well, and then, just as she gets closer, she pulls back, taking her wrist back and severing the connection.

The oxygen rushes back to my brain and I remember we're not alone. I tear my gaze from Kennedy, only to find Parker and Lily's amused eyes on us.

"You said—" I clear my throat, trying to get back to even footing. "It just appeared?"

"Yes." Now it's Kennedy's turn to clear her throat. "We were at the fountain, we touched the water, and these appeared."

Her hair has fallen forward over her shoulders and I fight the urge to push it back. It's taking every ounce of my self-control not to move toward her now.

"The fountain has long been believed to hold many secrets." I try to pull on my years of study for some semblance of professionalism. "Each of the women displayed holds a meaning, as well as the animals—really, every part of it. Maybe there's something

there, a hidden meaning between the obvious. Not everything is always visible at the surface. There are also a lot of relics around the city that could hold historical information that might help you track down what's happening."

Kennedy looks at me then and our gazes hold as something passes between us—something that's only for the two of us. Her eyes are soft and hopeful yet determined, and I realize I am in so much trouble.

Chapter Sixteen

KENNEDY

Today is the first day Bennett and I are meeting for research. With everyone breathing down my neck—and considering Bennett saw me use magic—I can't get out of it. My aunt would say it's the perfect example of me failing to keep myself in check. I allowed myself to have a little fun and it ruined everything.

Okay, I know I'm being dramatic, but getting her voice out of my head is extremely difficult. It'll take some time. I at least quieted her doubts when it comes to Bennett, enough to agree to work with him. He still makes me unsettled, and I don't seem to have any control over the way he ruffles all my feathers. I think it'll take some time before I can let my walls down any more than I already have with him. The jury is still out on how beneficial working together will be, but the girls voted and I trust them. That's shocking in itself, but it also feels like a win. It feels like I'm moving forward for the first time in my life.

Bennett asked me to meet in front of the National Library of Scotland. I've been to the Central Library across the street but have yet to visit this one. It looks glorious and I think I'm about to spend a lot of time here. I researched all about it before coming, obviously. I made lists of the areas that need my attention first. Fun fact, this library is also pretty great about doing various types of exhibitions and I'm a big fan of those.

Not that I'm excited about sharing my first experience with this library with him. Who is late. I glance around again as I run my fingers over the amethyst necklace I'm

now wearing daily.

Just another point to add to the list of things I don't like about this man. A list that didn't start out all that long and is getting shorter and shorter as the time goes on, which I find incredibly annoying. It's almost like I have to keep making up reasons to keep the list alive and well, when in reality it's just me being stubborn. I think it's safer if I keep him at a distance, but not because I still think he's evil. Simply because he makes me feel things I don't understand or know how to deal with right now.

"Hiya!"

I turn to watch him jog up, his coat flapping in the wind, hair wild. How can someone look so hurried and yet so put together at the same time is beyond me.

"You're late."

"Or are you just early?" He stops right in front of me, giving me a front-seat view of his full megawatt grin and I'm blinded for a moment.

Okay, brain. Work . Any moment now.

"I think it's punctual to arrive a few minutes early."

Bennett lifts his sleeve to look at the watch and turns it so I can see it. "According to this," he points, "I am a few minutes early."

I roll my eyes but realize this is on me; I'm the one who keeps my watch a few minutes ahead and keeps forgetting about it, but I'm going to do the immature thing and not admit it. "Either way, let's go."

I turn toward the library, keeping my eyes forward, but I swear he grins again.

There's something about him that makes me fully aware of where he is and what he's doing at all times. It's quite disturbing.

Oh, I can add that to the list!

At least he doesn't hesitate to follow—before beating me to the front and pulling the door open. I stare at him for a moment, a bit taken aback. If I'm being honest, I'm not used to anyone opening the door for me. It's such a small gesture and yet...okay, now my heart is doing that skipping-the-beat thing. Next, I'm going to develop butterflies. I need to chill.

I step inside the library with a quick thanks and head for the staircase. It's large and carries a quote written on the slopes of it. It looks different from the pictures I've seen and I stop to stare at it.

"The stairs are updated with information relating to the exhibit that is currently run by the library," Bennett supplies and I glance at him. "It's why you might've seen a map on the stairs or a picture of an author before."

"Oh," is all I manage because he knew exactly what I was looking at.

"We should start down here," Bennett calls out when I take a step up.

I turn to see him near one of the doors by a glass display. "I thought the history section was upstairs."

"It is, but I have a room with a few books that might interest you."

I follow him into said room, keeping my gaze on our surroundings and not on the fact that this space is much smaller than I expected. It's more like a walk-in closet with shelves on all four walls and a small desk in the middle.

"What is this?"

"My office, of sorts." He chuckles at my raised eyebrow. "The library is kindly letting me use the space for my research."

"How many strings did you have to pull?"

"Only one." Bennett grins again and I have to look away. "My best pal has some connections with the library, so he made it happen."

I nod, walking over to the desk to see the stack of papers and journals, as well as books. There are also stacks of books on the floor and more covering one of the two chairs.

"Here." Bennett grabs the stack off the chair before placing it on the floor and pulling the chair over to the desk.

"How do you get anything done in here? It's a mess."

I already have the itch to rearrange things and tidy up.

"I call it organized chaos." He's grinning again, I can tell even without looking in his direction. He feels a little like the sun—even behind clouds, I can feel the warmth on my skin.

Instead of arguing with him, I go for the chair and pull out my laptop. As I open the designated folder on my desktop, Bennett settles beside me. With a few clicks, I have a new document open with a few columns already prepared so I can fill in the information.

"You're very organized," Bennett comments and I nod.

"I find it is best to be prepared."

"Did you also color code this?" Bennett leans closer, his breath on my neck and I have to restrain myself from leaning back, just so I can get a little closer.

Something is definitely wrong with me. Maybe I need more sleep. The stress has to be getting to me. "You told me you had some books on witch lore." It's best that I stick to business. Whatever my hormones are doing—maybe I can keep them distracted.

I don't miss the quick flash of teeth as Bennett grins and gets up to grab a few books.

"I think we can read through these first and see if they have any information on thistles or how they relate to magic. This is Scotland, so there will be a lot of information on thistles, but I think we can sift through unnecessary information."

I grab the first volume, finally glancing over at him, because I need to see his response to my next comment. "You're taking all of this quite well."

Bennett shrugs, before meeting my eye and I can't look away even if I tried. Which I don't. I give myself permission to look at him. There's a gleam in his eye that makes me want to respond in kind, but I don't. All my fears are wrapped up in this tight knot, and for some reason, Bennett's response feels like the one thing that might finally loosen it.

I hold my breath as he speaks. "I'm not sure what to say about it. It just feels like a part of life. When you've been studying this for as long as I have, you can't assume there isn't a sense of truth to it, but even more so, I want there to be truth in it. At least in the good bits. There's far too much bad in the world."

"According to most witch lore, there's also plenty of bad in the magic world," I point

out, proud of myself for keeping my voice even. How can he think magic is good? My aunt has always said that the moment a regular person knows about magic, it's a disaster. They don't accept us for who we are, so we should keep ourselves hidden.

Bennett, however, is blowing all of those ideas out of the water.

"Balance is important." Bennett flashes another grin. "There will always be good and evil in the world, but I believe good will always prevail. It has already; just look at you and your power. How can you not believe in the good?"

I swallow my gasp as my body freezes at his question. He's looking at me with the most genuine expression and I fight the sudden urge to stand and hug him. Instead, I clear my throat and ask. "Have you experienced both in your own life?"

Because I'm watching him closely, I can tell the question hits close to home, but we don't know each other well enough to be spilling all of our secrets, so I don't expect him to reply. Yet, he surprises me again. "Yes. Sometimes more bad than good, but that doesn't mean I see the world as bad all the time."

He's so honest; I don't know what to do with that. This makes me want to peel back more of his layers and see what it is that makes him who he is. I don't understand the impulse, or why I feel it so strongly. I don't have these types of reactions toward people. Typically, I'm all about keeping my distance, but with him, already, I don't want to.

That's quite terrifying.

"Well, those are quite the rose-colored glasses," I say, hoping to put some distance back between us.

"I don't think they're rose-colored. I think they're realistic. Everything is about

balance, so why not try to find it in every aspect of life?"

"Because there's always more bad than good," I say. It's all I've ever been taught. I don't know how to think otherwise.

"But what if you had the power to tip the scales?"

His question is quietly spoken, as if he's afraid to spook me and I find myself looking at him again. He's watching me steadily, like he actually wants me to answer, but I don't know how to answer, because his question makes me the 'good' in the equation and all I've ever been—according to my aunt—is a vessel for evil.

"You think that we can be what tips the scales to good?" I ask instead of saying all of my fears out loud.

"I think you already have."

BENNETT

I'm pretty sure this girl might be the death of me. In the best way possible. Because when she looks at me with that open vulnerability, I want to protect her from everything horrible that's ever happened or will ever happen to her. I don't think she knows just how expressive her eyes are. She puts on this air of indifference, these walls to keep herself protected, but the glimpses of her heart still shine through, and I want nothing more than to see all of it.

She blinks at my words, unsure how to take them, and I wonder if I've said too much. Kennedy makes me want to tell her everything about myself, and that's not normal for me. Nicholas and Lana know me better than anyone else, but typically, I keep the important parts of me hidden. Here, though, I'm baring my soul to this girl. In a roundabout way, but still. I need to cool it before I scare her away. I'm already

surprised she's letting me help and I don't want to mess that up.

"There's a passage here." I clear my throat and try to get back to business. "It talks about what I would qualify as natural magic. The witches who practiced did a lot with plants and nature in general." I pull the book open to the appropriate section I marked earlier for research and place it in front of her on the desk.

"They were called herbalists and healers, and they kept the devil away. Which is something the monarchy feared during this time."

"Why is that?"

"During the 1590s, Princess Anne of Denmark was sailing to Scotland and ran into a series of storms that nearly capsized her ship. King James IV went after her and was also met with storms that seemingly came out of nowhere. He became convinced he was being tormented by witches and that hysteria just continued to spread."

"So, it wasn't that something actually happened, they just thought it did?"

"Correct. It was mostly the perception of things and how someone with a lot of reach and power spun that perception to the public."

"So, not unlike anything that happens nowadays." Kennedy chuckles with no humor and I nod, but my eyes are on her once more and I think I understand where this reluctance is coming from.

"Is that what you're afraid of? Being persecuted for your magic?"

She glances up at me sharply, as if surprised I could guess such a thing, but it really doesn't take much to make the assumption. Even spending a few hours with Kennedy, I can tell she's afraid of her power—of magic in general. What I can't tell is if it's

because something happened to her or there's another reason driving that fear.

"We were told that there will be people after our power. How can I not be unsettled?"

Unsettled: another word for fearful but without admitting as much. The need to protect this girl from all harm rises once more. She really is opening up all kinds of impulses in me.

"You're not alone in this, you know," I say and she glances at me again. "You have Parker and Lily," I hurry to add before I insert myself into the narrative. Not that I don't want to. I just don't think she wants me to.

"Right," she says before looking back down at the book and then at her computer.

She's taking notes in her document, her fingers flying over the keys seamlessly. I want to say it, I want to tell her that I'm also here and this is not a one-time thing. What I can tell her is that I'll see it through, helping them figure it all out. This connection between them is new to all of them and it is understandable that the power Kennedy has shown since that night is nerve-racking if she's never experienced it before. Parker hasn't been upfront about a lot of things, and I actually appreciate her loyalty to Kennedy, but I can tell there's more to all of it and I hope that with time, Kennedy will be able to tell me about it herself. That she'll be able to trust me.

This is goal number one on a long list of goals when it comes to this beautiful girl. I just hope my track record of accomplishing goals holds.

Chapter Seventeen

KENNEDY

We spend the next two hours reading over all kinds of lore. I know Parker said that he was already studying Scottish history with this major, but I'm still surprised. In all my studies, I would never choose witch lore as my focus. It seems too dangerous to be so close to it, but Bennett has so much information that it's a little astonishing.

We've been looking to see if there are any mentions of The Ross Fountain in any of the witch lore, but so far, there's nothing. I found a lot of information about the four female figures representing science, arts, poetry, and industry, but nothing that suggests magic.

"You said there was a glow," Bennett says, his head in another book.

"There was. It started at the top and made its way down until it was close enough to touch."

"And you touched it."

"I don't like your accusatory tone." I raise an eyebrow and he looks up at that, grinning.

"I would've done the same." He shrugs before looking back down again.

I glare at the top of his head, but I can't stop the tiny smile that blossoms on my lips.

He may be annoying, but in the last few hours, we have come to a comfortable partnership. Or something along those lines.

He also fully would've touched the glowy orb without a second thought. I can totally see it. He seems like the adventurous type.

"But there's no mention of the fountain in any of this lore. It came to the city much later in its history, past the witch trials or hunts," he continues, his head once again buried in a book. "So, there has to be a reason it plays such a big part in what happened to you, but I can't see us finding it in any of these books. There is some mention of objects carrying power or memory, but I'm not sure what to make of that. Maybe we should ask?—"

"No!" I snap out of my staring at his head as his words register. He looks up at me, giving me his full attention as I try to keep my heart from leaping out of my chest. Telling people is completely out of the question. I can barely reconcile myself with the fact that Bennett knows. So far, he's been very normal about everything, but the warnings are still in my head, louder than ever. I have to protect myself. And I have to protect the girls. "I—I don't think it's a good idea to ask anyone," I try again, keeping my voice more controlled.

"Okay, we don't have to." Bennett's voice is calming, careful, and I feel better instantly. "But what do you say about going to the fountain itself and seeing if we can find anything?"

I think about that before I nod. We haven't been back to the fountain since it happened, but maybe going with someone who knows more about history than I do would be helpful.

"When—" I start when Bennett's phone rings. He gives me an apologetic look while I nod towards it.

"MacKay," he answers, throwing an easy smile my way, but as soon as whoever is on the other line talks, the smile diminishes. I watch the change, a more serious look coming into Bennett's eyes. "Sure, I can come by." He hangs up, staring at the phone for a moment before looking up at me.

"I'm sorry, Kennedy. My academic supervisor has a question regarding my project and asked if I can stop by."

"Don't worry. I'll head back to the apartment and we can do the fountain later."

"Thank you so much for understanding," he says, standing up and reaching for his jacket. "I'll make it up to you."

"No worries."

We're suddenly so cordial it hurts. I watch as he gives me another quick grin and heads for the door.

"It'll lock from inside when you leave, so just pull it all the way closed."

"Okay, thanks."

And then with a wave, he was gone. I sit in the chair staring at my laptop, wondering if I was actually going to ask him to go grab some food and head to the fountain. Did my brain simply forget that we didn't like him or trust him? It must've. I shake my head and glance back at my laptop. I'll finish this bout of notes and then head back to the flat. The walk home will help me clear my mind of any foolish notions, I'm sure.

BENNETT

This call couldn't have come at a worse time. I think Kennedy and I have finally

reached a level of comradeship where she wasn't glaring at me every five minutes. The fountain was such a good idea, and I was going to take it a step further and ask if she wanted to get dinner beforehand. Neither one of us ate lunch. There's a slight chance she might've actually agreed.

But no, Professor Stewart had to call.

When I step into his office after knocking, I find him behind his desk, reading over some papers. "Good evening," I call out and he looks up.

"Bennett, good, you're here. Take a seat."

I do, settling in front of the desk in one of the leather chairs, a bit confused as to why it is that I'm here. We typically have a check-in once every month to see how my project is going—and I just saw him.

"I was looking over your notes," Professor Stewart dives directly in, as usual. "I think it would be a good idea to do a bit more research regarding some of the ancient relics. I know you wanted to start with the Stone of Destiny, but I believe there are better options."

"Relics?"

"Yes, there are a few that are spoken of directly in literature, those that hold power of their own. Or it is believed to do so. There are also areas around Edinburgh that are believed to be more powerful than others. If you are going to make your concentration on the magical aspects of Scottish history, it would be good to keep your options open to something that hasn't been as researched as the standard, well-known objects."

I think over his words, my mind spinning with thoughts. He was unenthusiastic about

me studying the witches lore of Scotland before and now he's offering options. I'm not sure why that is.

"What caused this change?" I ask, leaning forward. "I thought you didn't feel strongly enough about this idea."

"Nothing is new under the sun, Mr. MacKay. You have asked for feedback on the notes that you submitted, and I am providing such."

This is, of course, the whole point of an academic supervisor. He can guide me in what areas of study are the most impressive for doctorate degrees if that is what I choose to pursue after my master's.

"When you mention tangible aspects, is there a specific object you're thinking of?"

"I know Mr. Wellington is doing an article on the Stone of Destiny." Of course he would know what Nicholas is working on; I'm not sure why I thought he wouldn't be aware. "But that's too easy. There are other pieces of history that speak of holding power. Like the crown jewels or the Witches Stone."

"The Witches Stone? I've never heard of such a thing."

"Then it would be the perfect area of the lore to study."

He nods as if the conversation is over before he leans over to hand me my notes. I take them automatically, my mind on his words. I've read a lot about Scottish lore, but the Witches Stone has never come up in my studies. Maybe it's been called something else?

I leave the office behind, my mind already mulling over the information. During the 16th century, many areas of Scotland suffered unrest because of civil upheaval, and

women were often persecuted for being witches. There are places around the country—small villages—that hold untold histories of such an unjust time. I can't even imagine what these people suffered because they dared to be themselves.

My mind goes immediately to Kennedy and the fear she so clearly carries for having magical powers. I know I've been very calm about it in front of her, but a part of me is completely amazed and slightly freaked out by the fact that magic exists. What I told her stands true though—I do think she's part of the good in this world. Maybe this new direction will help me help her—and the girls. Some of the lesser-known villages might have historical knowledge that has never made it to the books. It's definitely something to look into.

I walk back through The Meadows, the chill high in the air. Despite that, there are people playing football and rugby in the green space. Since the park is bordered by one of the University of Edinburgh's campuses, as well as the main university library and a high school, there are always students here. The space used to house a loch, but it was drained in the 1700s to create the park. Before it was drained and piped water supply was introduced, it actually provided most of the drinking water in town.

Sometimes when I walk through areas of Edinburgh, I picture what it looked like all those years ago. The park used to house many more mature elm trees until an elm disease took a good number of them out. If I squint long enough, I can almost see the old Meadows underneath the present park. It's something that I love about Edinburgh. If you look hard enough, you can look into the past. Which is exactly what I'm doing for my thesis...and now for Kennedy and the girls.

If nothing else, I am good at this part, and I will use my powers for good.

Chapter Eighteen

KENNEDY

"So again, why are we in the forest?" Lily asks as I push aside a branch, holding it so she can pass as we try to keep up with Parker's determined walk.

"To commune with the ancestors, duh. And it's not a forest, it's Craigmillar Park," Parker throws over her shoulder as she moves off the path and into the trees.

"What ancestors? My grandparents are from Cleveland," Lily says and the chuckle escapes me before I can help myself, just as Parker throws a glare over her shoulder.

"Not you too," Parker whines, "I thought complaining about everything was Kennedy's thing."

"It only feels like I complain about everything because you never stop to think things through," I say.

Parker laughs. "Why do I need to when I have you for that?"

I roll my eyes as Lily chuckles. It's been a few weeks since we touched the glowy fountain water, and so far, my powers are the only ones that have manifested. Last night, Olivia told us that it might have something to do with my response to magic, and I suppose looking at it logically, I do have the strongest negative emotions when it comes to it. Magic has always been a nightmare. Almost like a lingering terrible dream that has followed me throughout the day, just waiting to affect me in some

horrific way. I've spent the majority of my life actively suppressing my magic, keeping myself away from relationships in fear that I might do something that will show people who I really am. Now, here I am, inviting magic into my day like it's a friend. No wonder I'm the most emotional about it.

"Kennedy, honestly, you need to chill, my darling. You're going to give yourself an ulcer."

"But can't you just magic it away?" I snap, because at this point I'm pretty sure I'm shaking. The longer we're in these woods, the more I feel the pressure of my fear pressing down on me. Every time I think I have a handle on my emotions, they throw me for a loop. I guess I never expected to deal with my whole childhood in one fell swoop, but wouldn't that have been nice? Instead, every day brings with it new challenges. I am trying, though, so there's that.

"Oh, she's making jokes. Is this a defense mechanism or are you actually feeling better?"

I offer Parker a glare, and she laughs, walking farther ahead. I feel a slight pressure on my hand and glance down to find Lily's fingers wrapped around my pinky and ring finger, giving it a slight squeeze. I offer her a tiny squeeze back, taking comfort in the fact that I'm not doing this alone. There are three of us. We're all collectively losing our minds, apparently, walking into unknown woods in complete darkness.

"Miss Olivia was very strict on this part," Parker calls over her shoulder. "We need to get to the clearing and light the candles at high midnight noon."

"That sounds dumb and doesn't even make sense," I mumble, but Parker somehow hears me anyway.

"Regardless of your opinion," she turns around so I can see her eye roll, "we are still

doing it because I want to know more about my magic and this tattoo on my wrist and we have gotten nowhere with your book research."

"I'm not sure how this is supposed to give us answers though," Lily says, her voice soft.

I nod in agreement as Parker stops and faces us. "I don't know anything either," she admits, sighing. "But we have some kind of direction finally since the moon is in the right place and I am not going to miss the opportunity just because I don't understand it fully. Miss Olivia said that this will cleanse our auras and center us in this bond, so we can be more open to discovering our destinies. I don't want to do nothing."

I stare at Parker, completely in awe of her bravery. I don't think I've ever been particularly brave about anything. Coming to Edinburgh is probably the most courageous thing I've ever done. Parker, on the other hand, steps into everything with her whole being. I glance over at Lily and I see her soft curl of the lips and while she's such a contrast to Parker's loud personality, she's just as brave. I can see the excitement shining in her eyes.

I want to be more like them.

I want to let myself discover what I'm actually capable of.

"Okay, then we should get going," I say.

Parker grins. "We don't have far to go since we're here. I counted the steps and it should be right beyond these." She announces before pushing through the bushes behind her.

Lily and I exchange a look and follow. We find ourselves in a small clearing with the trees standing around like a wall except for the place we came through the bushes. I

glance up and find the trees are all leaning toward the middle, creating a small circular space right above. I can see the moon here, slightly off from center and I assume once the time is right, it will be right in the middle of the opening.

"This is incredible," Lily breathes out and I turn my attention to her only to find her looking at the wall of trees. I follow her gaze and find that the trunks have flowers growing on them.

"It's us," Parker whispers, her voice full of wonder. I step closer, unable to take my eyes off the beautiful sight in front of me. The vines weave around the trunks and the three colors seem to glow in the dark.

They're flowers. Hellebore, Borage, and Solidago.

My last name, Parker's, and Lily's.

"This doesn't make sense," I say, touching the petals of a Hellebore gently. I've never seen flowers grow in such a way around the trunks of trees.

"It's not supposed to make sense," Lily replies, "It's magic."

I look over my shoulder at the two girls—at the two witches—and the feeling of rightness, of belonging, shows up so abruptly it nearly takes all the breath from my lungs.

Suddenly, the small clearing is alight as if the sun is out, sending everything around us into a sparkly glow. I step forward and look up, just as the girls do the same, and we see the moon is right overhead, directly in the center of the small opening.

Parker takes out the three candles from her bag and hands them over to us before she lights her own and then transfers the flame to us. The sparkle in the air magnifies and

it's almost like we're standing in a shower of suspended glitter. I can't seem to find a place to look—the moon, the glow around us, the girls—not just strangers anymore but sister witches.

"Shall we do this thing?" Lily asks and I laugh at the way she sounds just like Parker.

Parker laughs as well and then we point our candles to the center, the flames joining as we all three say, "Let's do this thing."

My heart swells, just as the magic rushes over my skin. If I looked in the mirror right now, would I be glowing with the same light that shines around us? I glance at the girls and they're all grinning, looking around in wonder. It feels like in this moment, anything is possible.

Somehow, I have found my place in the world and it's beautiful.

The feeling of rightness doesn't dissipate as we leave the clearing behind and head back to our apartment. There was a moment after we said the words that felt like someone almost patted us on the back, but other than that, nothing else happened. We held the candles and watched the moon pass over us, and the sparkles extinguished. I'm not sure what we expected, but I do think we all walked away more sure of ourselves somehow. I guess now we see what will be revealed to us as we move forward.

"Is that your arch nemesis?" Parker's question breaks through my thoughts and I look over in the direction she's pointing.

Sure enough, Bennett is coming up to the front door of the tenement from the side. He looks up as if he heard Parker's question and freezes in his tracks. Then he raises his hand high in the air and waves with the enthusiasm of someone who has downed five energy drinks.

"Oh, he is very excited to see you," Lily says, and I shake my head.

"He's always like that," I say and Parker barks out a laugh.

"He's usually a little happy, this is hyperactive puppy," she whispers hurriedly as Bennett jogs over to us.

"Good evening, ladies, out for a very late night walk?" he asks, but his eyes are only on me. Now that he's close I can't seem to look away, almost like his presence is hypnotizing.

It's been days since I've seen him. We haven't had a chance to meet up for any research, since he's been busy with his schoolwork and I've been busy with mine. I didn't think it would feel like I haven't seen him in years.

"Why, yes, Bennett. A very late night walk," Parker replies and I don't have to look at her to hear the amusement in her voice.

"Oh! In regards to—" He stops, his eyes big as he tries to come up with the correct term.

"You can just say magic; it won't hurt us," Parker says and that finally makes me tear my gaze away from Bennet.

"Parker!"

"What? He knows."

"Yes, but the rest of Edinburgh doesn't so maybe don't announce it so readily?" I say, keeping my voice hushed.

"Okaaay." Parker drags the word out. "We went on a shmagical walk in the shmagical forest."

"Parker!"

"It's after midnight, Kennedy. If anyone is around to hear about it, they have earned the right."

"I—"

But she's already looping her arm through Lily's elbow and pulling her away. "Have fun, kids," Parker calls out as they both walk away laughing. I stare after them in complete amazement. They're so comfortable with it all, I can't get over it.

"You know you can talk to me about it without any fear."

Bennett's words jerk my attention back to him. There's a note of hope in his voice that I can't ignore, no matter how much I want to. I think I have been getting better at trusting in this whole magical destiny, but the grasp of my upbringing still has me firmly in its clench.

"You look tired," I find myself saying as I give him a closer look. His hair is in more disarray than I've seen it and his shirt is a little wrinkled under the open jacket.

"It's been a long week." He shrugs and I stuff my hands in my pockets to keep myself from reaching out. These impulses just seem to continue when I'm around him and I can't figure out how to deal with them.

"You're also out late," I point out.

He nods. "I had dinner at my friend's flat tonight. We always run late."

He looks at me then and I stare right back, and that spark I felt back in the woods ignites again but differently. There's more intensity to it and I don't think it has anything to do with magic. It's just the two of us...

"What did you want to tell me?" I mentally shake myself, trying to focus on the part that puts us in our corners. He's helping me with research, that's all.

"Ah, yes. I've been doing some research on areas around Scotland in general that commemorate the witch trials—I'm sorry—and have you been to the castle yet?"

I blink my eyes surprised at the apology, and then shake my head. "No, not yet."

"There's a fountain—a water fountain— that's near the castle as a memorial to the trials. I'm not sure if it would be helpful to go, but I've been thinking about it. Maybe if you visit places that hold significance to your heritage, you may be able to get more answers. Kind of like what happened at The Ross Fountain."

"So you think," I try to process his train of thought, "that if I, what, touch these memorials, more powers will show up?"

"Maybe not more powers, but it could open up memories or show you visions?" He looks sheepish, shrugging in the most adorable way. "I'm flying blind here when it comes to the magical, but books aren't helping for once, so maybe we try a magical way?"

"A magical way?"

"Some of the stories talk about witches being able to glimpse pieces of the past. What better place to do that than the city brimming with history?"

He's making sense, of course he is, but the idea is terrifying to me. What if someone

sees? What if something terrible happens? I'm not sure I'm ready to have my magic anywhere near a place where people could see.

"I think I need to talk to the girls. I don't—" I have to push the words past my lips. "I don't have intuitive powers, that I know of, so I'm not sure how effective it would be. Either way, I need to discuss it with the others."

I can't tell him Parker has intuition; that doesn't feel like my information to share, but I think talking to them is the right decision anyway.

"Yes, of course. That makes sense. Just let me know."

I nod again, as it's the only thing I can do at this moment and then we just stand there, staring at each other. Bennett chuckles and then motions for the door to our tenement building. We walk inside in silence, the air around us full of tension. He bids me good night before heading upstairs and I'm not sure why, but this feels almost like him walking me home after a date. All the awkwardness included.

Chapter Nineteen

BENNETT

"So when do I get to meet her?"

It's the weekend and it's been over a week since I walked Kennedy to her door like an awkward teenager on his first date. I'm still not sure what came over me, but everything about Kennedy just makes me feel slightly unhinged. We were supposed to meet up and go to The Witches Well since the girls approved the plan, but she got busy with university work. We texted a few times, but it feels like I suddenly don't know what to say to her.

Lana continues to watch me as she sips her coffee. We're spending Saturday morning in New Town because she desperately wanted Scott's in the Park coffee and to sit and people-watch near the monument. We're waiting for Nicholas to get off the phone now, so we can take a walk in Princes Street Gardens, which is great because I want to take some pictures of the fountain for research purposes.

"I have no idea who you're talking about," I reply to Lana, taking a sip of my own coffee. We're sitting on the outskirts of the outdoor café and there are plenty of people to watch, but Lana's whole attention is on me.

"Don't play pretend, big brother. Nicholas spilled the beans."

I roll my eyes before looking over my shoulder at my friend who's near the edge of the small green space, his phone to his ear. Of course, he had to tell Lana, because he

cannot keep anything from his little sister.

"Come on, Bennett. You haven't liked anyone in years! I want to meet her. I bet she'll like me."

"She needs to like me first," I grumble, taking another sip.

"See, I'd be perfect for this. I'm an amazing wingman...woman?" She nods, pleased with herself. "Yes, wingwoman. I can talk you up."

"You can talk, alright," I say, just as Nicholas comes back to the table.

"What are we talking about?" he asks.

I throw a glare his way. "How you can't keep anything to yourself, apparently."

"Lana," Nicholas turns his attention to his sister, "you were supposed to ease into the subject slowly. You know how sensitive he can be."

"I know, I know," Lana sighs dramatically. "He's such a baby, but he has to grow up one day. It's best we push him out of the nest sooner rather than later."

"No wonder you're related. You're both nuts." I take another sip of my coffee, looking out into the throng of people, but I can't hide my pleasure. I adore these two too much to actually be mad at them.

I am concerned that I'm not adorable enough for Kennedy to take down her walls and that's a real problem. There's a lot under that carefully crafted persona and I want to know all about it, but Kennedy won't talk to me about anything except magic research stuff. Honestly, I'm nervous she'll stop talking to me about that too because I haven't been all that helpful so far. It's not like I know how to navigate the magical world.

This is my first time being introduced to it.

Maybe I should text her. I have no idea what she's doing today. I wanted to see if we could go to the well, but my plans with Nicholas and Lana were already in place and I felt bad blowing them off. They'd have probably understood, but who knows how Kennedy would feel about it.

I should text her and see, right?

"Hello, Earth to Bennett!" Lana waves her hand in front of my face and I refocus on the girl. She's grinning at me in that way that makes her look even younger than her fifteen years.

"I'm here," I say.

"Are you? Or are you in fantasyland with your one and only?" she asks.

I open my mouth to reply, but then freeze and sit up straight as my eyes meet Kennedy's over Lana's shoulder. She's flanked by Parker and Lily, but my attention is only on her.

Somehow, she looks more beautiful than I remember. Her long hair is falling freely around her shoulders, a dark green scarf is wrapped around her neck, and she's wearing a long black coat. She looks cozy and gorgeous and I suddenly don't know how to speak.

Lana notices my attention and twists in her seat then jerks back to me with a huge grin and jumps up.

"Lana!"

"Oh my gosh, you are gorgeous!" Lana runs right up to Kennedy as if they've known each other for years, grabbing her hand. "Bennett, have you told her how gorgeous she is?"

Kennedy is completely frozen in place and I take two seconds to marvel at the fact that Lana knew exactly who I was looking at between the three girls. Maybe it's just that Nicholas didn't leave anything out when he was spilling my secrets to his sister. I jump to my feet, my face probably bright red as Lana continues chattering.

"Of course not," she says, turning back to the girls. "Excuse him for his very dumb brain. I'm Lana. Bennett's self-appointed baby sister and wingwoman. Tell me, what is it that you look for in a guy?"

Nicholas starts choking as he tries to keep his laugh at bay and I would like the ground to open up and swallow me whole. Parker and Lily are trying to keep the grins off their faces, but they're definitely failing as Kennedy looks up to meet my eyes. Her gaze is different than I expect though, and I think I glimpse amusement in those gorgeous hazel eyes. It's all the encouragement my brain needs to restart itself.

"Excuse her. She has an overactive imagination," I say stepping toward the girls, just as Nicholas stands as well.

"So, you don't think I'm gorgeous?" Kennedy's question stops me in my tracks and the little wicked gleam in her eyes is new and so very attractive.

My brain once again stops working, so it's Nicholas who steps forward.

"Excuse my friend and my sister, they're related by their crazy. I'm Nicholas." He extends his hand but not to Kennedy. To Parker.

The girl looks at it for a moment and then at my friend before narrowing her eyes and

linking her arm through Kennedy's elbow. "Parker, this is Kennedy, and that's Lily," she says, raising an eyebrow at Nicholas.

He smirks and then turns his extended hand to Lily because Lana is still holding Kennedy's hand. Lily steps forward, shaking his hand with a smile and a glance at the other girls.

"Nice to meet you," she says. I get my normal motor function back and step up behind Lana, grabbing her by the shoulders and gently moving her away from Kennedy.

"Lana, let go of Kennedy's hand," I say, keeping my voice low, but Lana won't have it.

"Why? We're besties now." She steps out of my grasp and toward Kennedy, taking Lily's spot beside her and looping her arm through Kennedy's other elbow.

"You're from America, right? I was born there, but haven't been back since I was a baby. I'm totally English." She grins, barely pausing for a breath. "Tell me, is it true you can drive for ten hours and still be in the same state? I heard California might fall into the ocean. Is that true? Also, do you like coffee? Did you come to Scott's in the Park for their mocha? It's so good!"

Lily and Parker move away from Kennedy, heading toward the coffee stand.

"I'll get us coffee," Parker calls over her shoulder as I continue to stare at Kennedy.

"Yes to all of the above," Kennedy says, giving Lana one of her rare smiles as she glances down at the girl. The part of my heart that's already in danger of falling moves closer to that cliff as I look at the way she's accepting Lana. Something squeezes inside of my chest as I look at the two of them, and when Kennedy looks up

to meet my gaze once more, I'm afraid the cliff edge is long far behind me.

KENNEDY

I was not prepared to see him today. The girls and I decided to practice some of the magic we've been carrying inside of us and the knowledge we've learned from all the research. Nothing about the thistle tattoo just yet, but with Olivia's guidance, we've learned some of the more practical. She has been slowly sharing her knowledge of the mystical, making sure we're feeling comfortable talking about it.

Today, the girls and I came out to get some coffee and walk by the fountain, to see if our magic has any effect on it or vice versa since we haven't been back to it all together since everything happened. There's also apparently a tourist magic shop in New Town that carries a bunch of actual magical items. Olivia told us we should visit.

All of this is nice and good, and Bennett was nowhere in the plans. Especially when his proximity is sending me into a spiral.

He looks so cozy today—there's no other description. Instead of his carefully tailored slacks, button-up shirts, and crewnecks, he's wearing jeans and a hoodie, with a warmer dark jacket thrown over the top. He's like one of those models for one of the luxurious boutiques on George Street, comfortable yet chic. Just like everything else about him, it throws me for a loop.

The girl beside me has completely attached herself to my side, spewing questions that I answer almost automatically.

"I've never been to Texas. They say it's huge. Does everyone wear cowboy hats?"

"No, not everyone." I chuckle as the girls return with the coffees.

I take mine from Lily while Lana keeps her grip on my elbow.

"We're going to walk to the gardens. Do you want to come with us?"

"Lana, they might have plans," Bennett's friend says as he comes back over. I don't miss the way his eyes flick to Parker. Finally, I have something to tease her about. She stops on the other side of me, as far away from him as possible, sipping her coffee quietly. It feels like there's history there, which is surprising considering she's never mentioned knowing anyone but Bennett in the city. The way Nicholas is looking at her though...oh yes, there will definitely be questions later.

"We don't have plans." I nearly burn my tongue as Lily speaks up, a small sparkle in her eyes. Parker and I both turn to her and she shrugs. "Well, our plans included a walk in the park, so we can join."

I'm not exactly sure what Lily is thinking, but Lana does a little hop in place, making her dark curls bounce adorably.

"Perfect! I love the park and I have a million questions."

"Lana, maybe don't overwhelm Kennedy all at once?" Bennett speaks up.

"Okay, fine. I will only overwhelm a little. Shall we?"

Everyone turns toward the direction of the park at once, leaving the coffee stand and the Scott Monument at our backs. Parker and Lily take the lead, with Lana and me in the middle and Bennett and Nicholas behind us. Lana pulls me along, chattering away, and even though I cannot see Bennett, I am so very aware of him that it's distracting.

The weather is nice today, overcast, with little wind, so there are more people out and

about. Not that I mind. I feel like the crowds help keep our little group a bit more separated, which helps me breathe a little easier. I'm not sure if that actually makes sense, but my brain is desperate for some kind of sense right now. So I guess I'm making up my own.

"Kennedy," Lana leans a little closer as we cross the street, lowering her voice. I look over at her and notice that the guys are on the other side of the street, separated by the flow of cars. Parker and Lily stop near the entrance to the park, waiting, as I turn my attention to Lana.

"What is it?"

The girl looks a little unsure now and glances over her shoulder once before quickly looking back at me. "I know Bennett can be a lot," she says, keeping her voice low and her words fast, suddenly sounding so much older than her teenage years. It makes me realize I don't know anything about this girl or what drives her, but the serious look in her eyes makes me want to hear everything she has to say. "He's like a hyperactive puppy most of the time, but he has the best heart of anyone I know," she continues. "It's just my brother and me here and Bennett takes care of me like I'm his own sister, without a second thought. My own family—they're not great. And I'm not always...okay. I don't think Nicholas and I would be who we are without Bennett being part of our little family."

"I'm not sure why you're telling me this," I say.

Lana beams. "I don't have much information, just that he's helping you with some school project and he might've broken your suitcase—that wasn't really his fault. I tend to...overact. I'm working on it but I was at Minor Injuries Clinic and Nicholas was out of town. Anyway..." She barely pauses, but my mind is busy processing this new information. Anyone in his position would probably be too distracted to stop for long and even though I don't want it to, my heart softens. I can see they have a close-

knit relationship and her words just solidify that fact for me.

"I know he also almost broke your phone," she continues, "so, you might not like him all that much right now, which like, I totally get it. If he broke my phone, or nearly, I'd be quite upset myself, but give him a chance to be your friend. If he offered to help, he will put his whole heart into it, and having Bennett on your side is the best thing that can happen to you. My brother and I should know."

"Are we good?" Nicholas asks coming up and I realize the light has changed and people are moving toward us.

"Yes, we're good," I reply, giving Lana a little conspiratorial wink. "We were just waiting for you slowpokes."

Then, without waiting for a reply I pull Lana with me toward the other girls. Parker gives me a questioning look, but I simply shake my head a little. I need time to process Lana's petition on Bennett's behalf. I can't deny her words because I've seen these parts of Bennett in the weeks I've known him. He has that way about him—where he makes me want to tell him all of my secrets after spending even a few minutes in his presence. He brings comfort, and honestly, that's not exactly something I ever expected to find in another person. Especially since my aunt has continuously warned me away from trusting regular people. I can't deny that Bennett has surprised me every step of the way.

I'm trying so hard to fight against my upbringing. Even now, my mind goes over that last argument, when my aunt told me I would no longer be family if I left for Edinburgh the way I did. The fear in her eyes, the warnings shouted at me as if I would hear them better at that volume. She's so afraid of regular people, of how they react to magic, she has shut herself completely away from it all.

I can't be that person. I can't and I won't. I'm trying—trying to see this experience in a

different light. Not through the eyes of my aunt, but through the eyes of possibility. Maybe, just maybe, I can trust myself to start looking at Bennett like that too. Or maybe, if I'm honest with myself, I have already been doing that.

Chapter Twenty

BENNETT

"What do you think they're talking about?" Nicholas' question breaks through my thoughts.

I tear my gaze away from the back of Kennedy's head to glance at him. "Who knows? Lana is probably embarrassing me further."

"I meant Parker and Lily," Nicholas says.

I laugh. "Ah, of course. Parker." I kind of had a feeling Nicholas would be interested because I know my friend and he has a thing for the wild in spirit. He would be flabbergasted to know she's a witch though, and I'm not sure he'll have a good time accepting that considering his mission in life is to stay away from the magical.

"Why do you say it like that, mate?" Nicholas asks.

"Because," I reply and then speed up as we reach the fountain.

Lana is still talking, but I can see the girls glance at each other and I know it's time to step in.

"Lana," I say, coming up behind her and taking her by the shoulders, "I need you for a moment over here."

Then, before she can protest, I pull her away. I meet Kennedy's eyes and then nod toward the fountain. She offers me a grateful nod and hurries over to the girls.

"What? What! Why do you need me?" Lana stutters, turning in my arms, but I keep leading her away to where Nicholas is waiting.

"I need you to give Kennedy a moment with her friends, okay?" I say as we stop.

The girl turns and narrows her eyes at me. When she tries to step around me, I stay in her path. "Lana, I'm serious." The quiet firmness in my voice does the trick and Lana focuses on me.

"Are they okay?" she asks.

I nod. "Yes, of course. The fountain is part of the project for Kennedy, so let her have a moment, okay?"

I turn my body slightly so we can look over at the girls. They're walking slowly around the circumference of the fountain, studying the different animals and objects on the base. Kennedy has her phone out, and she's taking pictures or a video as Lily says something to her.

The concentration on Kennedy's face is so attractive I have to blink against the sight a few times.

I feel a slight tug on my jacket and I look over at Lana, who's grinning at me. "She's great, Bennett. She put up with all of my questions and listened like she actually cared to hear what I had to say. Even you two pretend to listen sometimes, but she didn't."

"Hey, I don't pretend," Nicholas argues, but Lana only rams her elbow into his

stomach, her attention on me.

"Don't mess this up. I'd like her as a sister-in-law."

Then she takes out her phone and walks over to one of the benches without waiting for a reply. Her words send my mind spinning, but I don't find any of them scary—just exhilarating.

"I can't tell if you raised her well or not," I comment as I turn to watch the three witches walk around the fountain.

Nicholas steps up beside me, sighing a little. "I don't know either, but I do agree with her. Don't mess this up."

I'm trying not to, but I honestly can't tell how well I'm doing.

KENNEDY

"Nothing right?" Parker asks once we've made a circle around the fountain.

Lily and I both shake our heads no. I'm not sure what we expected but it definitely wasn't nothing. I took a lot of videos and photos of all the elements of the fountain, hoping to do more research later. The pictures I've found in books or online are typically from farther away.

"So, what's next? Do we head over to the shop?" Lily asks, glancing over at the other half of our newly formed group. Lana notices our attention and jumps to her feet, rushing over to us. I really like this girl. She's carefree and upfront about her thoughts and feelings in the way I wish I could be. I guess that's the life of a teenager, although my teenage years were much more—repressed.

"Isn't the fountain the coolest? One of my favorite places in the city," she says, arriving beside me. "But sadly, our time together has come to an end. Only for today though, because Bennett must bring you by for dinner one of these days," she says loudly enough for the boys to hear as they make their way over to us as well. I see the way Bennett's eyes grow round and I try hard not to laugh.

"My brother and I need to go, but Bennett has no plans for the rest of the day, so he's all yours. Make sure he eats at some point today. He's really bad about that sometimes. It was nice to meet you." She gives Parker and Lily a little wave and then turns and grabs her brother and pulls him away. "Bye!"

I feel like we've just been visited by a tornado and we're left in its wake. I glance at Bennett who just looks incredulous.

"Let's divide and conquer," Parker says, breaking the sudden silence. She hooks her arms through Lily's elbow and pulls her to her side. "Lily and I will visit the shop, you and Bennett go visit that well you've been talking about."

"What? But I thought—" I start but Parker is already moving away with Lily.

"We'll get the supplies, you get the information. Perfect division of labor." Lily laughs and waves as Parker pulls her away.

And then there were two. I turn toward Bennett slowly, unsure how to proceed, but it feels like everyone else is making the decisions for us and I need to give him some kind of an out to make it fair.

"We don't have to go today. If you had plans?—"

"No plans. Let's go." He beams at me then and I can't bring myself to argue. We have to visit the well anyway, so it makes sense to go together. We planned it before after

all.

Yes, Kennedy, that sounds very rational. Stay in the rational.

The silent pep talk helps as Bennett motions in the direction we came from and then toward the other side of the castle. "Shall we go through the park or the back way?"

I glance back toward the park and incline my head in that direction. Bennett falls into step beside me comfortably, and if I'm being honest with myself, this feels nice. The weather is perfect for walking and the park feels like a little oasis in the busy city.

"I'm sorry if Lana was too much. She tends to just bulldoze over people."

"I think she might get that from someone else I know," I say, and Bennett rewards me with a chuckle.

"Okay, fair. I might've been an influence a time or two."

"You're close with the family?"

"It's just Nicholas and Lana. Their parents don't really care enough to participate in their lives. They're back in Wales—or maybe in The States now, I forget. Nicholas has been taking care of Lana since she was six, and when I met them a little over five years ago, they adopted me into their family of two like I've always been a part of it."

"What about your own family?" I realize I know nothing about him, not even any of the basic facts.

"It's just me now. My parents...my mum—well, she left when I was five years old. My dad checked out of life after that. He went to The U.S. and then France. I actually have no idea which country he's in right now. I haven't spoken to him in years. My

grandma raised me, but she passed away after I finished my undergraduate degree."

"Oh, I'm so sorry." I raise my hand to reach for him but stop myself. The impulse is so natural it shocks me. I've never been someone who reaches out. Maybe being around the girls is teaching me how to be more open about my feelings, but I still don't touch him.

"Thank you." He looks at me with those expressive eyes of his and I take a tiny step to close the space between us almost automatically. Our shoulders brush and that feels right somehow. "What about you?"

"My aunt raised me," I find myself answering readily and I almost chuckle at the absurdity of it. "My parents passed away when I was very young. I don't remember them."

"I'm sorry too." Bennett bumps his shoulders against mine and I shrug. "You're close with your aunt?"

I start to speak but then stop because I can't even begin to put into words what my relationship with her is like. So instead I just shrug again. "Not particularly."

Bennett doesn't push and I'm grateful for that. Instead, he walks to match my pace, keeping himself right beside me, and for some reason, that warms my heart more than his words would've.

"You still haven't been to the castle?" Bennett changes the topic and I'm so grateful I could hug him. Which means I clutch my fingers in my pockets instead, because what kind of behavior is that?

"No, I still haven't. I feel like all I've done is suffer through meetings at the university. Most of my classes are independent study, but there are a lot of student

meetings."

"Ah, yes. They really try to make sure you don't feel alone as an international student."

We leave the park behind and head up The Mound, which takes all the wind out of me, so I don't speak, and thankfully, Bennett doesn't push me to. When we reach the top, I stop to catch my breath and Bennett grins.

"Does it ever get easier?" I ask.

Bennet chuckles. "Nope," he says and I'm happy to hear he's slightly winded as well.

"Oh, good to know."

"Come on. Let's shortcut through The Writer's Museum courtyard."

I perk up immediately. The courtyard and the museum are on my list of things to see.

Chapter Twenty-One

BENNETT

I take her through The Writer's Museum courtyard, and the way her eyes light up looking around brings me immense joy. I make a mental note to come back and actually show her around the museum. It's small, but it feels very appropriate for anyone who likes books.

When we step out into the Royal Mile, the streets are busy. The Royal Mile is lined with shops and restaurants, so people are meandering in and out as Kennedy and I turn to the right and head uphill. I open my mouth to speak but then stop myself. She opened up a little bit to me, and I know that was a lot for her, so now I'm afraid I'll break this teetering partnership with some dump quip. This is not a good look on me.

"What?" she says and I glance at her only to find her watching me.

"What what?" I reply.

She tries to hide her amusement, but there's a little of it in her eyes. "Were you going to deliver an impressive fact about how the mile is not actually a mile?"

I stop in my tracks because that's exactly what I was going to say. Kennedy gives me a small smile as she turns to glance at me over her shoulder. "How did you know?"

"It seems a very 'you' thing to say is all." She shrugs as I fall into step beside her again.

I don't know what to say to that, because I'm both surprised and elated that she knows this about me.

"Well, go on. Tell me. You'll feel better." She surprises me yet again and I can't tell if she's serious or not. She looks at me and gives me a firm nod.

I grin. "The Royal Mile is actually a Scots mile, which hasn't been used since the 18th century. The length is 1.13 miles, but the name stuck."

Kennedy is right, I do feel better. She listens to me as if she doesn't already know this information and if I wasn't a goner for her before, I am so much worse off now.

"You knew all that, didn't you?" I ask, because I have to know.

"Yes, but I still like hearing it. You have a way—a passion when it comes to history that I appreciate."

I think I've died and gone to heaven. Why is that the greatest compliment I have ever received? Suddenly, my whole vocabulary is gone and I have no idea how to respond, so I simply lead her around the groups of people toward the memorial and walk up to the castle esplanade, heading toward the Tartan Weaving Mill wall. Stepping around the building, one would miss it if they didn't know it was there. Right on the wall is an iron drinking fountain with a plaque placed above it. The drinking fountain was put there as a memorial for all the witches burned in this promenade.

The plaque features a bronze relief of witches' heads entangled with a snake. The Foxglove plant in it—which is mostly withered from the cold and barely hanging onto life—is highlighted with the head of Aesculapius and his daughter Hygeia intertwined with it. In mythology, Aesculapius is the god of medicine, and his daughter is the goddess of health. There's a hole below the snake's head that once had water flowing out of it, but now the fountain is used as a planter. Kennedy stops when

we reach the wall, a tiny gasp escaping her lips. She places a hand to her throat, her breaths becoming shallow.

"Kennedy?" I'm at her side immediately and when I step around to look at her face I see tears there.

"It's so sad," she says, her voice small. "So many lives lost, innocent lives lost for nothing but foolish notions of people in power. I can feel so many emotions—" She stops as she tries to put into words what's happening, but doesn't seem to be able to.

A single tear escapes and I don't find the impulse when I move toward her. She steps into my arms willingly, wrapping her arms around my middle as I hold her close. I already knew she'd fit perfectly, but this feels even more so somehow. The need to protect her from all the sadness in the world arises in me and I squeeze her just a tad tighter, to make sure she knows I'm here. I'm rewarded by a tight squeeze back before she moves out of my arms.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean—I don't know what came over me." She wipes at her tears and I reach into my pocket to produce a handkerchief. She stares at the piece of cloth as if she's never seen one before. "You carry a handkerchief in your pocket?"

"Like a proper gentleman," I reply, and she takes it with a shaky thanks. After dabbing at her face, she turns toward the fountain once more.

"I don't understand what came over me," she whispers, almost to herself. "There were so many emotions..." She stops talking and takes another deep breath. I watch her study the fountain, looking over the intricate design and the words written on the plaque.

"Foxglove," she says, stepping closer to study the plant etched on the plaque, "used medicinally but it can also be poisonous."

"You know your plants."

"It comes with the territory. This is one part of my...well, it is something I could study without any problems. I love plants." She shrugs, continuing to study the fountain. I have no idea what she's looking for or how this will be helpful, but I'm putting all of my bets on her—and her magic. If stories are to be believed—and they should be considering magic is real—then many of these places will hold significant power or meaning to the witches.

"There's something here," Kennedy says, and then she reaches out, placing a hand against the protruding head of the snake. She gasps when her hand makes contact and then I watch her close her eyes against whatever she is feeling or seeing.

"The good and the evil, two sides to every story," Kennedy says, opening her eyes and taking a step back. She beams, looking down, and I follow her gaze only to watch the nearly dead plant spring to life. New leaves unfurl, the color green and vibrant—a striking contrast to the gloomy cold surrounding us.

"Wow."

"Wow is right," Kennedy says, moving back again to stand beside me. She places a hand to her forehead for a moment, as if feeling lightheaded, and I'm ready to catch her if need be. She seems to shake it off and then moves just a tiny bit closer. Her arm is pressed against mine and I don't dare move, lest she break the contact.

"The memorial was erected to remind people that it's important to stay informed and to stay open-minded. Magic was believed to be evil, but in reality, it's the people who make that decision every time." Kennedy speaks in a soft voice, seeming like she's somewhere far away—maybe even in the past. It's almost like someone is giving her this information. She speaks the words as if she knows the truth behind them and I have no idea what she saw when she touched the fountain.

I don't dare ask.

"Most of those killed in the name of witchcraft were innocent people who simply stood up for what they believed in, but it didn't matter. People fear what they do not understand; that has been the basis of humanity since the beginning."

There's more to this than her words—a hurt brewing underneath it all. I wonder who placed it there. Maybe one day she'll be keen to share. I don't want to push right now, but her reluctance would make sense when it pertains to magic. Fear, I understand, but hurt would drive that reluctance so much deeper. She's fought the magic every step of the way and I didn't understand until now. Looking at the sadness in her eyes, the way she seems to fold in on herself—I fight the urge to reach out and take her into my arms again, but as if she heard me, she straightens her spine, rolling back her shoulders and looks at me.

"I feel the power here, but it's not one that will give us any answers. My"—she lowers her voice, leaning closer for a moment—"magic doesn't feel like it did at The Ross Fountain."

I'm slightly distracted by her proximity and the scent of flowers she carries with her before I realize she's waiting for me to say something.

"Right. We didn't know how these places would affect your magic." I clear my throat, trying to focus on the reason we're here and not the enticing way Kennedy smells. When she sighs and pouts a little, my brain short-circuits again. The need to fix this for her is blinding.

"But we'll keep looking. The books talked about artifacts having memories; that's why we're looking for these places, right?"

Kennedy nods before she raises her arm and pulls back the sweater and jacket from

her wrist. The thistle tattoo is still there, just as intricate and beautiful as the first time I saw it. Maybe it's not something Kennedy wants to hear, but it suits her. She pulls the fabric back into place and then turns to me with a little smile on her lips. If she asked me to go to the moon right now, I'd find a way.

"Okay, we keep looking."

After our little outing, I have no idea how to act. I feel like she opened up to me more than she ever has before. It feels special, and I want to nurture that, but I don't want to push. We spoke at the Black Cat once, texted links of various websites back and forth, and haven't seen each other in four days. I've reached the point where I'm counting hours and minutes, but I can't admit that out loud lest I lose all respect. Or something. It's scary for me to think that I'm this attached already. That old wound of being left rises, but I squelch it down. It's been years since I let myself dwell on that.

When my phone rings, I'm much too eager to answer it, which probably means I have already lost whatever respect there was to lose. I'm a mess. However, it's not Kennedy.

"Professor Stewart," I greet him, slightly confused, "to what do I owe the pleasure?" He doesn't typically do phone calls unless something is wrong, so I instantly push away my laptop and notebook to focus my attention on him.

"I was wondering if you have a progress report for your project."

Now I'm even more confused. "The first part of the outline is due next week; did you want to see it early?"

"If you have it finished."

"I don't."

I'm not exactly sure why he's hovering this much over this project. One thing I've heard about him is that he stays pretty hands-off during the whole process, and I like that. I have the due dates in my diary and on my phone calendar, so I'm up to date on that, but he's emailed me twice since we met last and seems to want weekly updates now.

"When will that be finished?"

"End of next week, by the due date."

There's a moment of silence and I push the hair back as I lean on the table in front of me to wait him out.

"I was hoping you had more initiative than that," Professor Stewart finally says and I sit up straighter.

"I believe that I have shown exemplary work since the beginning of my studies here and I have never missed a deadline. I have plenty of information, but I want a chance to organize it properly and double-check everything before it is presented to you."

"You're right, you're right." He sighs and I have the urge to say something else, but I hold myself back. "I'm very interested in your study, that is all."

We hang up after I promise I'll have everything on time, and I lean back, completely confused. Sure, he could be interested in the project, but I've never heard of him being this interested before. Maybe this is an area he's been wanting to study but hasn't had a chance because of his schedule. After all, he did mention the Witches Stone—which I haven't mentioned to the girls yet. So he must still be doing research on the side.

I shake my head and get back to my laptop. I'm deep into forums about magic,

specifically anything relating to magic and tattoo correlation. There is a lot to go through, but so much of it seems made up, and because I'm not the one who possesses magic, I can only pick out the information and take notes to present to the girls.

My eye catches on a forum's title and I click to open it, marveling at the 347 comments under it. People really got into it. I start reading, amazed at the ways people speak about magic.

When I'm halfway through the comments, I start to perk up. I write it all out and grab my phone. I think it's time Kennedy and I met up.

Chapter Twenty-Two

KENNEDY

It's becoming significantly harder not to text him all the time. There's been a definite shift in our relationship, but I'm not comfortable putting any kind of labels on it because I still don't know how I feel. My aunt's voice not to trust him is on a loop in my head, and it's been going on for so long that it's difficult to drown it out. I think I'm doing better at giving him a chance, but that just scares me that much more.

I came to the Black Sheep Coffee in New Town because being at the flat put me in too close proximity to him. Last week we discovered that Parker angry-bakes, which Lily and I find adorable and hilarious at the same time. So we have a lot of baked goods at the flat and being away from the temptation—well, temptations—is good for me. This café is large and specifically equipped for students and remote workers to settle in for a long day of work, so I don't feel bad about taking up space. I could've gone to The Black Cat, but the girls are there and I need to focus on the paper and not anything magical.

When my phone buzzes with an incoming text, a thrill of anticipation shoots through me. My response is automatic as a smile blossoms on my face when I see Bennett's name, and...oh no...this...this won't do. I close my eyes, take a few deep breaths, and then give myself permission to look at his text.

I found something, can we meet?

I glance at the tattoo on my wrist and then back at the phone.

At the fountain?

I can be there in fifteen.

I reply okay and then pack up my things. Before I leave the café, I make a stop at the bathroom to take a look at myself in the mirror. I didn't get dressed to impress today. I'm in my go-to oversized knit sweater, black jeans, and combat boots. I run a hand over my unruly hair and then jerk it back, staring at it as if it has offended me.

What is wrong with me? I don't need to fix my hair.

When I step into Princes Street Gardens, I come in at the West entrance, which means I can see the fountain and the castle looming over it.

"Hiya," I say to the castle, still in awe of it, even after seeing it almost daily.

As I walk down the hill toward the fountain, I see him .

He's standing opposite the benches, more underneath the castle, hands in his pockets. Today, he's wearing another one of his comfy-looking hoodies with a long coat over it and jeans. His hair is mussed by the wind, and his hands I'm sure. I've seen him do it enough times to expect it.

His brow is furrowed and he watches the water from the fountain like his life depends on it. This gives me a moment to study him without being noticed. He really is so handsome, he's breathtaking. I've had crushes before, of course, but not on anyone this gorgeous. He's also smart, which I find incredibly attractive. And he's got a great sense of style. Oh, and he's a good dancer...

Why am I listing attributes that I like? I'm not here for a date. He said he had information for me. I need to get a hold of myself, and—he looks up then, as if he

could hear me berating myself. Our eyes meet and his mouth breaks into a grin that makes me stumble over my own feet. He jogs up to me as I reach the fountain, a little breathless.

"Hiya," he says. "Thanks for meeting me."

"You said you found something." I give him a little shrug and try to keep my breathing even. I'm definitely struggling with his proximity.

"It's more than that. We should also try something."

"Try?"

"Yes, in research, experimentation is often the best way to glean information."

"Yes, I am aware of the way research works," I reply, narrowing my eyes a little. I'm not sure where this is going and my warning bells are once again ringing.

"I stopped over at the store on my way over and I think we should do a little experiment."

"Bennett, what is it?"

He grins at me and then he pulls out a tiny object from his pocket. I take a step toward him as he opens up his palm and then I'm flung back as if someone shoved me. My own magic flares up in response, but I pull it back at the last moment as I land hard on my butt, my body shaking from the impact.

Bennett is beside me in a moment.

"Kennedy! Oh, I'm sorry. What was that?"

He kneels by me as I glare up at him and then my eyes focus on the item behind him on the ground. It's a small object, maybe the size of a quarter, and clear. Except not totally clear. There's a tiny yellow flower in what looks like amber and I can feel my magic reacting to it.

"What kind of a store did you stop at?" I ask through gritted teeth, as he helps me to my feet.

"Black Moon Botanica near Victoria Street."

"You went to a witch shop?" I hiss, jerking my arm away. This is exactly the kind of crap my aunt has always warned me about—one of the many. Normal people messing with magic they should never be near.

When I was very young, my aunt went over defensive magic with me—barely—but it's the one thing she made sure I could control so I don't hurt anyone accidentally. It was only instinct that kept me from hurting Bennett now.

"I found this forum online that talked about plants that can enhance abilities and I thought since you had?—"

"That plant doesn't enhance," I say, glancing over my shoulder at the people who are now looking at us and lower my voice. "That's St. John's wort, a plant that wards off witches. It's meant to be protective."

Everyone in the witch community knows of St. John's wort, especially if the witch is anywhere near the UK, since it mostly grows here. Even someone like me, who did a lot of her studies in private, is still well-versed in what kinds of items to keep away from. The plant has a long history of being planted around towns to ward off magic.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know."

"Of course you didn't. You should've checked, you could've seen—" I snap, frustration and anger rising within me. Anger at myself mostly. I let my guard down and now I'm paying the price. What if he brought something worse? Something that could've really hurt me? Or my friends? "I can't do this," I say, and then I turn on my heels and stomp away.

BENNETT

I can't believe I messed up this badly. Just when it felt like Kennedy was beginning to soften toward me, I go and make a stupid mistake like this. I grab the pendant off the ground and tuck it back inside the handkerchief it came in. I'm assuming that's what kept it from reacting to her immediately, but I suppose that is something I need to ask the girls. I follow after Kennedy, who took off toward Old Town, and as if she can feel me, she throws a glare over her shoulder but doesn't slow down.

We're halfway up The Mound when she twirls on me, her eyes blazing. "Do you even realize how dangerous that was? What if you really hurt me? Or what if I hurt you?"

"Hurt me?"

"There's defensive types of magic, something that every witch is trained in, but not something we use often because...well, it's a lot. It could've activated without me even knowing it, as a reflex, if you brought out something stronger than that." She points to my pocket and sighs—the sound is tired and frustrated at the same time and I feel like an idiot. In wanting to fix this for her, I made things worse.

"I can feel it now. I couldn't before but it's there. If I didn't pull my magic back, I could've hexed you at the least, making you sick or...Bennett?—"

"I'm sorry, please—you have to know I would never hurt you."

"Not on purpose, maybe," she whispers and then turns back around and keeps walking. There's a shattered look in her eyes for a moment before she's moving away, and I can't believe I put it there.

I'm not sure now is the right time to tell her that I would rather throw myself in front of a bus than let it hit her. The forum and the woman at the shop were both wrong and I was too excited to double-check my sources. I just wanted to be useful to her—so she keeps me in her life—and I messed up. Again. The need to make it up to her is enormous but I keep my distance as we reach the top of The Mound and she climbs up to the Royal Mile before she pivots.

When we step into a familiar close, I should've known she was heading toward The Black Cat. I'm pretty sure I don't want to go in there if the girls are inside, but there's no way I can walk away without making it right between us. Whatever reprimand I'm about to get, I deserve it.

Chapter Twenty-Three

KENNEDY

" I don't think this is going to work," I announce walking into The Black Cat with Bennett on my heels. I don't hold the door open but he catches it in time. There are only two other customers in the café beside the girls and they glance at me in surprise before going back to their conversation.

"Hello to you too, Kennedy," Parker greets me, before looking over my shoulder, "And Bennett."

"Parker, it's lovely to see you." Bennett makes a beeline for the counter while I walk over to the table near the window where Lily is on her laptop. I wave at Olivia, who's behind the counter, before I drop myself down to the seat opposite Lily and Parker.

"What can't you do?" Parker asks, sitting down in front of me and handing me a glass of water. She narrows her eyes, giving me a quick look before glancing at Bennett. I'm throwing so much emotional energy out, she probably doesn't even need to be a witch to feel it.

"Him." I point to where Bennett is leaning against the counter, greeting Olivia.

"When did you do him?" Lily whispers and I nearly choke on the sip of water. Glancing at her, I find her holding back her glee, and I roll my eyes.

"I expect this from Parker," I say.

"I take that as a compliment," Parker replies. Because of course she would. I take another swig of water, angling myself so I don't see Bennett, but there's not much I can do because I swear my whole body is so aware of him that it's as if I now have eyes in the back of my head.

"But seriously. What's up?" Lily asks.

"Seriously, he's ridiculous." I try to keep myself calm, but terrible—much worse than what happened—scenarios are currently on repeat in my head and I can't seem to control the rising terror. "There's a way to do things and the way things should be done, and there are rules to follow so the world doesn't spin out of control."

"Did something happen?" Lily asks, her voice a bit more gentle.

"What happened is that he's Mr. Know-It-All who doesn't check his sources before he makes stupid decisions, and frankly, his attitude is really grating on my nerves. He's especially annoying the longer I have to look at his face."

"You know I can hear you," Bennett says.

"Oh good, I thought I wasn't being loud enough," I reply, not bothering to look at him.

I feel his gaze on me. I am so acutely aware of him at all times, it's disturbing. The rational part of my brain is telling me I'm acting like a complete brat and I need to calm down, but the emotional part of me is freaking out that I could've seriously hurt him. It's making me completely crazy how concerned I am with his well-being. So all rationality has left the building and I'm in flight mode.

"Kennedy," Parker brings my attention back to her, "I thought it was going better with him. You seemed to have come to an agreement?"

"It was. Until he decided to read some forum online that talked about some plants and then went to the Black Moon to buy said plant—St. John's wort, mind you—that sent me flying and landing on my butt in front of the fountain!" I'm out of breath as I finish, the dread now a settled companion in my chest. The girls stare at me in shock.

"Okay, we're closed!" Olivia's voice rings out around us and the customers hurry to leave.

In a matter of minutes, the café is empty, save for us and Bennett. He looks like a lost puppy and I have the urge to comfort him, which I squash. He is in the wrong here, not me. I shouldn't be the one comforting him.

"Bennett, let me see it." Olivia puts out her hand and I lean back in my chair instinctively. Bennett glances at the four of us, a bit unsure, before reaching into his pocket.

"It's dangerous, I don't want to hurt anyone." He's addressing the room, but his eyes are on me and that urge to go to him grows.

"I am much stronger than some tiny trinket," Olivia says, before leaning toward him across the bar. It doesn't escape me how comfortable she is with him knowing about magic. She told him herself about her powers, after all. "Now, please?"

Bennett sighs and pulls out the piece of cloth. That's what must've stopped the effect originally. There's magic in it as well; I can feel it now that I can see it.

Olivia takes it carefully, unwrapping it one corner at a time. "You're correct, my darling," Olivia says to me, a proud look in her eyes. "St. John's wort. This plant has caused many a terror in these parts. It's poisonous to people and animals alike, and it has often made them sick, which in turn made people call it witchcraft."

"It's not magical?" I ask going over every piece of information I have on it in my head.

"Oh, it is, but the fear it brings to mortals is just a plant being a plant. It affects us differently."

"It threw me at least four feet back," I say and Lily gasps.

"That much? Are you okay?" Parker asks, and I nod.

"Your magic has spent most of your life suppressed. It's like a child, discovering all of these things for the first time. You had basic defense training, correct?" I nod and Olivia gives me a kind smile. For some reason it makes me want to cry. "It reacted like a child would who feels in danger."

"So you're saying with time, we can hold the pendant as well?" Lily asks and Olivia nods.

"With time, you will be able to use the power within the pendant to your own advantage."

It seems like an unreachable goal, something that could never happen to me, but maybe that statement doesn't hold as much truth as it used to.

"Who sold this to you?" Olivia asks Bennett and he tears his gaze away from me before replying.

"She was probably in her fifties, long gray hair, curly at the very ends only. She had a colorful braid on one side of her head."

"Ah, that makes sense. Margie."

"What makes sense?" Parker asks.

Olivia shakes her head. "There are a few witches around these parts that love to prank unsuspecting tourists. I'm sure Margie didn't expect you to come across an actual witch."

"How is that a prank?" I ask, confused.

"The way this repels magic, it attracts certain wildlife, like crows and squirrels."

I glance at the girls, my mind completely boggled.

"Seriously?" Bennett asks.

"Aye," Olivia answers. "Now, I think this is a good time as any to have a little witchy 101."

"And on that note, thank you for nearly killing me, please try not to come again," I say, shooing Bennett toward the door with my hand. The girls chuckle and he looks like I kicked him.

"I will never make such a foolish mistake ever again and I will never put you in danger and I will?—"

"He's staying," Olivia announces, with a little chuckle. "He's a part of this now, so he might as well learn."

I'm still reeling from the intensity of his gaze and his words, trying to make sense of all of these conflicting feelings. "What do you mean he's part of this?"

"Like it or not, Kennedy," Olivia says, walking over to the entrance to her kitchen,

"you're a team. You should learn how to work together."

BENNETT

I would like to be more than just a teammate, but I will take what I can if it lets me stay near her.

The shop is closed and the girls are sitting at the table near the window with the large pothos plant, while I stand near the bar.

"Come now," Olivia says coming back out from the kitchen, a basket full of items in her arms. She places it in front of the girls and then motions for me to take a seat. Next to Kennedy.

I have to apologize to her properly. It feels like if I don't make it right now, I'll never get a chance to. She's too important to me already to let that happen, but I also can't interrupt this. This is their time; I'm only here to observe.

"Does he have to sit here?" Kennedy mumbles and then she jerks in place.

I steal a glance and find her glaring at Parker, who's grinning in return. I don't dare comment. Olivia steps up to the table with her little basket of items and places it in front of me.

My curiosity is at an all-time high, but I keep my hands folded in front of me for fear of being kicked out. Pet surprises me when she jumps into my lap, giving me one long look before settling comfortably to watch the table, her head on my arm.

"Traitor," Kennedy mumbles at the cat and I swear Pet gives her a loaded look before transferring her gaze to the table. I don't even dare to breathe too loudly at this point.

"Magic is all around us, darlings," Olivia begins, taking items out of the basket. "Certain things channel it and certain things repel it. It is important to learn what to use and what not to use."

"What are these for?" Lily asks, picking up one of the small glass vials Olivia placed in front of us.

"Decorations, perfumes, and mini spells."

The girls perk up immediately at that last one. Kennedy leans forward, her chin in her hand as she watches Olivia. I suppress my smile at her eagerness, but clearly not well enough because she shoots me a glare before refocusing on Olivia.

"We're going to do a spell?" Parker asks and Olivia nods.

"I'm going to place ingredients in front of you and I want you to fill each jar with at least two but up to five of the ingredients. Listen to your intuition, listen to your magic. What does it long for?"

I watch Olivia bring out satchels and little boxes, all labeled, and now it's my turn to sit up at attention.

"These"—I point to the three closest to me—"they're poisonous plants. Aren't these for bad spells?"

I feel foolish the moment I ask because three sets of eyes are now glaring at me.

"I didn't mean that you're bad—" I start, but Olivia places a hand on my shoulder, stopping my words.

"Just like with the St. John's wort, the plants themselves are not good or evil. They

simply are. It is up to those with power to wield them for good or for evil." Olivia picks up a little satchel and shows it to me. "You're right, petunia flowers have been feared as they can cause allergic reactions in people and animals. However, they can also repel spirits and are believed to be beacons of hope and good fortune. There are two sides to every coin and two opinions to every story. It is up to us to be educated so we know how and when to use the knowledge."

"That's amazing," I say. Studying witch lore in Scotland is mostly studying how magic has been a cause of all the bad in the world, how it must be warded off and protected against, but this is a different way to look at things.

"Take only what calls to you." Olivia focuses back on the girls. "When you place the ingredients inside the vial, make sure the heavier ingredients are at the bottom, like a foundation."

The girls reach for vials immediately, but there's a pause as they study the other ingredients in front of them. I'm supposed to be watching all of them, but I'm only being drawn to Kennedy. She looks beautiful, with a slight crease between her brows as her eyes flicker around the items. I can see the moment something snags, her gaze resting on the little box labeled 'blue lace agate.' I expect her to reach for it, but she doesn't. Instead, she moves back to looking at the items. Maybe if I hadn't spent all this time with her, I wouldn't understand it, but I think I do. She's afraid of listening to her magic. She focuses on a different item, but her eyes keep being drawn back.

I want to say something, I want to encourage her, but then I feel a slight pressure on my shoulder and look up to find Olivia's hand there again. She gives me the tiniest shake of her head, as if she can read my thoughts, and I nod. Kennedy needs to do this on her own, I get it, but the instinct to fix this for her doesn't go away.

I glance at the other girls and see that they noticed it too. Their own jars have items next to them, but they haven't placed them in yet. They're sneaking glances at

Kennedy, and all of a sudden I feel even more honored being here. This isn't a simple lesson; it feels like a lot more than that.

Kennedy suddenly looks up at me and our eyes clash. I didn't mean for her to catch me staring, but now I can't look away. Without words, I want her to know that I'm here to support her and that she's not alone in any of this. She has the girls and Olivia, but she also has me. More than any of that, I believe with my whole being that Kennedy is capable of anything. I want her to believe in herself the way I believe in her.

There's a glimmer of something in her eyes before she tears her gaze away and focuses back on the table. She reaches for the box again, this time opening it up and picking out some of the stone shards into her palm. She doesn't set them aside like the girls did but places them directly into the glass vial. Then, without hesitation, she reaches for the lavender and places it on top. Once the vial is filled, she takes it in both of her hands and closes her eyes for a brief moment before she opens them again and places the cork over the vial. There's a stillness where she simply looks at the vial after she places it on the table and then she looks up with a smile.

"Very good, my darlings," Olivia says and I tear my gaze away from Kennedy once more to realize the others have finished their vials as well. Parker meets my eye with a smirk and it's warm in here all of a sudden. "Tell me about your jars," Olivia prompts, looking at Lily.

Lily raises her jar, showing it off. I was not paying attention to what the others chose, but now I'm listening. "This is rose quartz and these are rose petals," she says, looking up at Olivia.

"What was your intention?"

"Love."

One simple word, but my cheeks are on fire and I'm fighting the urge to look at Kennedy. Instead, I shift in my seat, receiving an annoyed look from Pet.

"Very good. Parker?"

"This has citrine and cinnamon. I went for abundance," Parker says, proudly displaying her vial. It's interesting to see the difference in what called to them, but it also makes sense somehow.

All of the attention turns to Kennedy next and she shrugs. "I'm not...I'm not too sure why these called to me. I haven't made this combination before, but this is blue lace agate and this is lavender." She seems so unsure about her words that I have the urge to reach out and take her hand.

Then I watch as Parker and Lily do so, unwrapping her death grip on the little jar and taking both her hands. I watch as the girls look at each other, a quiet understanding passing between them, and feel like I'm intruding on a private moment. For a second, I think I'm seeing things but then I realize there's a soft glow around them, like a tiny light emanating and outlining them all together.

"Can you see it?" I whisper as Pet sits up on my lap to watch the girls.

"It's their bond," Olivia says and I look up to see her watching the girls, her eyes shining with unshed tears. "It's beautiful."

I agree. I turn back to them, my eyes once again finding Kennedy. She looks more like herself somehow. Beautiful and bright and shining with a soft kind of calmness.

"What called to me?" She turns, directing her question to Olivia but looking at me.

"Inner peace," Olivia replies and Kennedy grins, her eyes locked on mine and my

heart is in her hands.

Page 24

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Chapter Twenty-Four

KENNEDY

I feel elated after making our mini spell jars. The power that I've feared for so long is seeping through in the nicest of ways, almost comforting me. It is such a new concept for me. I've never known a time when I didn't fear my magic, but here I am, learning to love it.

Love? Is that really what it is? I thought I might grow to like it, but it feels more...potent than a simple like.

Parker, Lily, and I leave the café after hugging Olivia, our little jars in our pockets. Bennett left first and I think he's still feeling bad about bringing that trinket to me and sending me flying. I was determined to hold onto the anger when it comes to him, but I can't seem to muster up much of it right now. It might be different tomorrow.

"How long are you going to keep Bennett in the doghouse?" Parker asks, hooking her arm through my elbow. Lily takes my other, a potted ZZ plant in her other arm, squishing me between them as we walk toward our building.

"Forever," I reply and Lily barks a laugh. Parker and I look at her in surprise and she shrugs.

"What? I think you're getting worse at lying," she says.

Parker reaches across me to high-five Lily, and I roll my eyes.

"You keep forgetting to be on my side when it comes to these things," I mumble and Parker shakes her head.

"One day you'll realize that this is us being on your side."

"What a weird way to put that," I comment, looking over at the plant Lily is carrying. "Did you confiscate one of Olivia's plant babies?"

"No, actually." Lily moves her whole body so she can show it off. "It's for you, to add to your growing plant collection."

My eyes sting. No one has ever seen me the way these girls do. My aunt didn't keep many plants in the house. It was like anything even remotely associated with the magical world was banned even when it didn't make complete sense.

"Lily is an enabler," Parker says, and Lily nods very serious-like, and I chuckle. I open my mouth to reply but then I'm distracted by the magpie that's landed on a restaurant overhang ahead of us.

"What is it?" Parker asks, glancing around. Her intuition powers are definitely growing.

"I'm not sure, but it feels like—" It's going to sound insane if I say it out loud, but I have to tell someone. "I think that magpie is following me around."

The girls turn to where I'm pointing and I swear the bird meets each of their eyes before looking back at me.

"There are a lot of magpies in the city," Lily says.

I nod. "That's why I thought I was imagining it, but I don't know how to explain it

except that it's the same magpie. I can feel it watching me."

The feeling I got toward it the first time I saw her is the same—I know that it's a her and I know there's no danger, but my magic is sensitive to her, that much I understand. The magpie holds my gaze for another long moment and I make a face at her. "If you're going to keep following me around, can't you at least bring a friend?" I say and the girls look at me as if I've lost my mind.

"Don't you know that nursery rhyme? One for sorrow, two for joy. This one always comes alone. It feels like a bad omen."

"Kennedy, you actively try not to believe in your magic, but you trust your destiny to some random nursery rhyme?" Parker asks, clearly bewildered.

The magpie gives me a very long look, as if she's agreeing with Parker, and then takes off.

"Okay, maybe we should ask Olivia," I say, feeling chastised by my friend—and a bird.

"Back to Bennett though."

This time my groan is so loud some people look our way. "Let's not go back to Bennett, how about that?"

"Kennedy, he was trying to help. I think you should take that into consideration. That's all," Lily says, hugging my arm tightly for a moment before placing her head on my shoulder. I touch my head to hers because she's right of course.

The boy was bouncing on the balls of his heels with excitement while waiting for me. He's untaught in the ways of magic, but he's put his whole self into trying to help us. I

can't keep overlooking that for my own self-preservation.

"Okay, I'll think about it," I agree.

Olivia asked me to look over the café tomorrow morning and I think the alone time will do me some good. Maybe get some of these confusing thoughts situated. The one thing I finally don't feel confused about is this friendship. Parker and Lily are good for my soul. Maybe the fountain knew what it was doing after all.

BENNETT

"Am I not seeing you tomorrow night?" Nicholas asks by way of greeting as I burst through his front door. Since I have a set of keys to his flat, I just texted him a heads-up and showed up.

"He probably did something stupid and needs consoling," Lana calls from her bedroom.

I wave at her through the open doorway as she grabs some things and comes out into the living room. Nicholas is on the couch, a laptop on his lap, and I see a large puzzle on the table in front of him. Lana comes in holding a blanket and a pillow and plops down in front of the puzzle as I grab myself a drink from the kitchen. I don't comment on her observation, because how does a teenage girl call it so well?

"Okay, spill it," Nicholas says when I take a seat on the couch near him.

Lana looks up from the floor, placing her head on her hand as she waits for me to reply.

"Maybe I shouldn't have come," I mumble and Lana waves it away.

"This is what family is for. Tell us how you messed up and we'll help you fix it."

I stare at Lana first and then Nicholas, unsure of how to actually put into words what I did. I can't tell them about the magic, but I suppose even without the magic aspect, I was overly excited and didn't do what I usually do—which is triple check everything. Twice.

"Well, as you know, I've been helping Kennedy with a project?—"

"How is Kennedy by the way? Has she mentioned me?"

"Lana, please." Nicholas shakes his head at his sister, before looking at me. "Continue."

"Well, I did some research and was excited to share, but I might not have double-checked my sources and she was—she had an allergic reaction to an item I bought."

"Oh no, is she okay?" Lana leans forward disrupting her puzzle pieces.

"Yes, she's fine. It was mild." I run a hand over my face, frustration coursing through me. I feel dumb even talking about this, but I have no one else to talk to, and I need an outsider's opinion—as limited as it will be without all the facts.

"It just feels like everything I do is causing more harm than being helpful. Maybe it's time to stop trying?"

"What?" Nicholas and Lana exclaim together, startling me.

"That's the dumbest thing I've?—"

"Lana," Nicholas cuts her off and then puts his laptop aside to face me. "You

wouldn't be thinking this if there wasn't more to it. What's really on your mind?"

There is more to it. Of course there is and this is exactly why I came to him. He sees through me, even before I realize there's more to it.

"I don't know. I just—maybe it would be better if I left her alone. She deserves someone who won't put her in danger, of all things. Someone who will cherish her and respect her and be there for her."

"And you're not that person?"

"Maybe I'm not."

"That's so dramatic," Lana mumbles, rolling her eyes.

"I think it's smart. She's in a place in her life where she probably doesn't need someone like me?—"

"Ugh! Why would you say that? That's stupid," Lana says and when I look at her, she looks angry, but I can tell she's not really angry at me.

"You're the best person I know, for you to think otherwise is sheer stupidity."

"Lana—" I say.

"No, you're just scared. You've never liked a girl before, not like this. So you're scared."

"I'm not?—"

"I have to agree with Lana," Nicholas says, interrupting me. "I think this has more to

do with your fear that she will turn into your mother and leave."

"Nicholas," I want to protest, but he hit the nail on the head. The truth slams into me like a physical assault and it takes me a moment to find my words. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Denial will always be your first point of defense, my friend, but I will tell you something; I know you know I'm right or this wouldn't be the case."

Of course he's right. I know he's right. It's why I spent the majority of my life in relationships that always had an expiration date. I know people will always have an expiration date. Nicholas and Lana are the first people in my life who stayed past that, but the thing with Kennedy, it feels like something real—like something important. I want to be her best friend and her partner. I want to cheer her on on the good days and comfort her on the bad days. I've never felt like that about anyone. I've never rushed in head—and heart—first.

Today, when I hurt her with my unverified research and then watched her make the mini spell jars, it showed me just how different our worlds truly are. Wouldn't she be better off with someone who could support her in her magic and not hinder her? Walking away might be the best thing I could do for her.

"I can see you overthinking it, mate," Nicholas says, just as Lana groans loudly. Again. She gets up from the floor, walking over to stand in front of me, her blanket still wrapped around her shoulders.

"You are being a very big dumb-dumb if you don't pursue Kennedy because you're scared. That's something he would do." She points to her brother before she points that finger back to me. "You are much smarter than him."

"Hey!"

"Shh, I'm monologuing." She places her hands on her waist, a very stern look on her face, slightly undermined by the fluffy blanket around her small frame. "You are my favorite brother for a reason, so don't ruin it now by being a dumb-dumb. Tell her how you feel—because I'm one hundred percent sure you haven't even done that yet—and then go from there. Because if she doesn't like you, that's one thing, but running away is just pathetic."

"Okay, I feel like I just got complimented and insulted at the same time?" I say, right before she falls on top of me, wrapping her arms around my neck.

"You deserve to be loved by someone amazing, Bennett."

I hold the small girl to me, blanket and all, as I look at her brother over her shoulder. There's a bit of sadness in that gaze, his own troubles and family history at the surface. They've had their own share of being left behind, and I think that's why we bonded so strongly that very first day. If Lana is right about anything though, it is the fact that I do need to tell Kennedy how I feel once and for all and then see where that leaves me.

Chapter Twenty-Five

KENNEDY

The streets are quiet as I walk toward The Black Cat the next morning. It's been a while since I've been outside before the sun has risen and the difference is stark.

Edinburgh is beautiful in any light, but the early morning shadows cast by the buildings coupled with the mist in the air make it look otherworldly. The streets are also mostly empty and that's not a regular occurrence around these parts. I like it. It almost feels like I'm the only person in the whole city. A sudden desire to let my magic come out to play makes me stumble over the uneven pavement. I place a hand on my heart and the other on my forehead, checking my temperature. I don't appear to be sick, so maybe this means I'm actually coming to terms with who I am; that's not something I thought I'd ever reach.

I'm earlier than I'm supposed to be, but Olivia gave me a key, so I let myself in. When Olivia asked if I could look after the coffee shop this morning I didn't hesitate to say yes. It's just the distraction I need. An image of Bennett flashes before my eyes and I push it away, focusing on Petunia.

"Hello, pretty girl. Did you sleep well?" I walk over to her bed at the end of the bar as Pet stretches, presenting her head for scratches. I oblige, and she rewards me with a quick purr before she jumps down and heads toward her food and water bowls. I follow close behind, making sure she has enough before I glance at the paper on the counter.

Hello, my darling, thank you for looking after the shop. There are a few regulars who come in for black coffee and breakfast on their way to work. Other than that, it should be quiet. Enjoy the peace before the storm. And then make sure to enjoy the storm. Those come to us to shake things up in our lives and make them more interesting. xxx

"Any idea what she means by the storm?" I ask Pet, glancing up from the note. The cat gives me a long stare and then heads back to her perch.

Moving toward the kitchen, I decide to make myself some coffee and a toastie—or a grilled cheese sandwich, but I like the English term for it better—before anyone shows up.

I've just put the toastie on the frying pan when the bell over the door dings. I don't remember leaving it unlocked, but maybe I did, and since the lights are on, someone might've thought we were open already.

"Hiya," I call, stepping through the macramé curtain, "we're not o—" The words die on my lips as I stare at Bennett.

He looks just as surprised to see me.

"What are you doing here?" we ask at the same time, just as Pet walks over to headbutt his shoulder. He gives her scratches while he continues to stare at me.

"Olivia asked if I could look after the café this morning," he finally says and then it clicks.

The storm Olivia mentioned.

She should give Parker lessons in meddling.

"Olivia asked me, so you can go. I'm already here."

"So am I."

Can't argue with that logic, but I still will. "The two of us aren't necessary. It's not supposed to be busy, so I'll be fine."

"And if you're not?"

"Then I'll call the girls."

"And if they're busy?"

"Bennett."

"Ah, she does know my name. I was beginning to wonder."

I roll my eyes as he comes closer and motions to the kitchen. "Let me make myself a coffee and then I'll sit quietly in the corner."

"You can—oh no!" I turn around, racing back into the kitchen only to find my toastie is burning.

"Don't touch it!" Bennett pushes past me and grabs a towel before he takes the pan off the burner. I watch as he moves around the kitchen expertly, disposing of the burnt food before he turns to me.

"What exactly were you trying to make?" he asks, and I shrug a little dejected.

"One of those tomato cheese toasties. Olivia made one for me last time and it was so delicious."

I pout a little and Bennett chuckles.

"What?" I narrow my eyes.

"Nothing." He sobers up, but the gleam in his eye doesn't go away. "Come here, I'll show you."

I perk up immediately. He steps to the fridge and pulls out the ingredients before grabbing a knife and handing it to me, handle first. I look at it and then him in question.

"I know you learn best by doing," he says and the warm feeling in my chest increases. He always seems to see me exactly for who I am and understand me at the same time. I have no idea how that's possible, but it's become a very evident truth in my life.

I step closer to the cutting board and he places a tomato in front of me.

"We can also use some of the tomato sauce as well, but having a fresh one in the toastie is how my grandma used to make it." He motions for me to begin cutting. "Slice them thinly."

I line up the tomato and the knife and I'm about to slice into it when Bennett's hand lands on top of mine. I glance up at him in surprise, the warmth of his palm spreading through the rest of me instantly. I'm always so aware of him. When he was sitting beside me last night during our magic lesson I spent more time trying not to focus on him than I should've. He's affecting me in all the ways I'm not prepared for.

"That's too thick," he says, his voice low. His breath ruffles my hair and I realize just how close we're standing. My shoulder is against his chest, his left hand at the small of my back, while his right hand is on my own holding the knife. I breathe in, because apparently I can't control myself. Bennett always smells so nice—like a forest after

rain.

I'm supposed to move away, I know it, but I can't seem to make myself move. Instead, my body has a mind of its own, nearly sinking into him and the feeling of his arms around me. He makes me feel safe, something I don't know if I've ever truly allowed myself to feel.

Suddenly, it's very important for me to be closer to him, but I keep myself very still, not giving in to the unfamiliar desire. Since the moment he came into my life, he's been pushing me past my comfort zone. I feel his sharp inhale against my side, as if he too is trying not to break whatever thin layer of quiet intensity that has built. Then he moves just a tiny bit closer, almost like he's also pulled by this invisible string between us.

His eyes fly to my lips and back to my eyes and then I do the same thing. The air around us grows heavy and I'm swaying toward him. A warm feeling spreads through me and I can't tell where it's coming from or what it is, only that I want it to continue.

Something catches my attention out of the corner of the eye and then Bennett says, "Are you doing this?"

I'm frozen for a moment and then I realize what he's talking about. The spices display that's in front of us, the water from my cup, along with some of the dried flowers Olivia has placed around the kitchen are floating in the air.

I forget how to breathe, shock radiating through me, battling the warmth. Bennett steps behind me, placing his hands on my elbows.

"Don't be afraid of it; let it flow." His voice is in my ear, sending pleasing shivers down my skin as I watch the spices, flowers, and water stay suspended. With him at my back and his quiet encouragement, I don't instantly pull away.

I can feel the magic all around me. Now that I'm aware of it, I understand that it is what I felt spreading like a warm glow. Bennett stays close, but he's no longer touching me, taking a step back, as if giving me the space. Then it's my turn to do something that shocks us both. I take a step back into his arms as I raise my own. His hand drops to my hips and the moment I feel his touch I let more of the magic out. This time with direction.

The spices spin in a slow circle with the movement of my hand, as the flowers and water stay suspended. I let the spices back on the shelf and focus on the flowers and the water, sending them spinning together over our heads.

I lean fully into Bennett's arms as we both look up at the display above us. I move it one way and then the other before I carefully deposit the water back into the cup and the flowers back on the shelves.

My body feels alive, buzzing with the magic and the feel of Bennett at my back.

"You are incredible," Bennett whispers in my ear, his arms around me, and just like that, for the first time, I think so too.

BENNETT

I'm afraid to breathe too suddenly lest I break the spell. Kennedy in my arms—it feels like a dream. One I don't want to wake up from. I already knew how perfectly she would fit there after we danced at the cèilidh and hugged at the fountain. But this? It's different. It's like she was made to spend her life in the circle of my arms. More than just her proximity, I can't get over the trust she just showed me. She let her magic free with me here. This feels monumental for her.

I've watched her struggle to come to terms with her magic for weeks and here she is letting herself have fun with it. I don't want to do anything to disrupt that.

"I don't know what came over me," Kennedy finally says, turning her face so she can look up at me. This puts her lips close to mine and I flex my hands against her hips to keep myself from closing the remaining distance. This doesn't feel like the time for it. Her eyes are shining with excitement, her smile lighting up her face in a way that's mesmerizing.

"You are incredible," I repeat because I need her to hear it again. She should hear it every day for the rest of her life.

"I actually feel incredible," she whispers, almost shyly. "I never knew magic could feel so—freeing."

It seems like it takes a lot out of her to admit it and it has to go back to her fear of magic. She's never opened up about what has caused it, but I've watched her battle with it since the moment I knew she had magic. There are a million things I want to say to her—my feelings on the tip of my tongue—but this is her time. I don't want to take away from it, no matter how much my own skin is buzzing from the power of it all.

I settle for, "Thank you, for letting me be a part of it."

She gives me another shy smile, her voice very soft when she speaks. "Thank you for being a part of it."

It's like I've been punched straight in my heart. There's tension in the air and magic that seems to have nothing to do with the magical.

This moment—it's the moment . I can feel it. Her eyes are on mine and I think she tilts her head just a little, and it's all the invitation I need. My own head lowers toward her, and we're pulled to each other just like we've been from the beginning.

But then, before I can kiss her, the bell to the front door chimes, and Kennedy and I spring apart.

"Did you not lock it?" she asks.

"I was too surprised to see you," I reply.

We stare at each other for a moment and I want to move toward her when someone calls out a greeting.

"I'll take care of it," I say, and step out to meet the customer.

My whole body is buzzing with energy I've never experienced before. If I didn't believe in magic before, I think I would be a believer now because everything about Kennedy feels magical.

The man greets me and I try to focus on what he's saying, instead of the phantom sensation of Kennedy in my arms. Pet is lying on her bed near the counter, but she raises her head enough to give me a look that I can only translate as judgment. She glances behind me at the kitchen and I nearly roll my own eyes at the cat.

"Is that okay?" The man's voice breaks through my thoughts.

"Yes, of course. Coming right up."

I hurry to fulfill his simple order, while I actively try not to feel judged by the cat or yearn to be back in the kitchen with Kennedy in my arms. The moment the man leaves, I step up to lock the door, but then realize it's time to open. More people are coming in and then Kennedy and I are dancing around each other, trying to fulfill the orders.

When we both end up in the kitchen at the same time, words tumble out of me before I can stop them. "Would you like to go to dinner with me tomorrow night?"

She freezes in place and then looks over at me and gives me the greatest present. "Yes."

Chapter Twenty-Six

KENNEDY

I have no idea why I agreed so readily, except that I couldn't say no. I've forgiven him before I realized I have. There's absolutely nothing in me that could've kept me from going to dinner with Bennett. After the early morning near-kiss in the café—that is what was going to happen, right? I'm not making it up, am I?—I've been walking in a daze.

"Are you going to remember to breathe?" Parker asks from behind me and I turn to find her and Lily watching me from the living room. "And maybe actually drink that water you've been holding for the last five minutes?"

I glance down at the glass in my hands and realize I have been holding it without taking a sip. I down the water and then rinse the cup and walk over to the girls.

"I'm breathing," I say and Lily chuckles.

"Barely. Do you want to talk about it?"

I haven't mentioned the café...event to them—because, well, actually I'm not sure why. Maybe because I constantly feel like I'm losing my mind when it comes to my life and I'm used to holding it all in because there's never been anyone to talk things through? Wow, that was a loaded emotional realization and I take a few deep breaths, turning to the girls. It feels like I should talk to them. Bennett will be here soon and I need to know how I'm supposed to be feeling about the whole thing.

"Okay, so something happened?—"

Lily squeals, clapping her hands together, shocking me.

"I knew it," Parker says, pointing at Lily and I shake my head at the two of them.

"Maybe let me finish."

"Why? You're going to tell us that Bennett and you have been sneaking off to the darkest close off the Royal Mile for all the kissing, no?"

My face definitely flames red because the girls sit up immediately, leaning toward me.

"Seriously?"

"No!" I exclaim, waving my hands in front of me. "But something might've happened that's similar? We didn't kiss, but maybe we were going to?"

The girls exchange a look and then Parker motions for me to come take a seat. "Start at the beginning"

I rehash the situation, their grins growing broader by the minute.

"I stand by my earlier statement; I knew it," Parker says when I'm done, leaning back with a satisfied smirk.

I have no idea what to make of that. "Knew what? Can you explain it to me , because I know nothing." I slump back in my seat, arms crossed.

"You've never had a boyfriend before?" Lily asks gently and I glance at her, shaking

my head a little.

"Emotional attachments were strictly prohibited," I say, the sadness a little easier to handle today. It almost seems like the more I learn about myself and the closer I get to the girls, the pain of my childhood becomes less pronounced somehow. I haven't shared much with them, but they need to know. It's suddenly important to me that they understand.

"My aunt—she was very particular with who and how I could spend my time. When she was my age—" I haven't shared this with anyone, ever, but these girls have quickly become closer than family, and I want to tell them. "When she was my age she had this boyfriend, Jeremy. He didn't know about magic, but he told her he loved her and she trusted him enough to tell him about her powers. It didn't go well."

I take a deep breath because this story is the thing that shaped my whole childhood, it shaped who my aunt became. The girls don't speak, waiting for me to find the words.

"He was shocked, of course, but he said he accepted her for who she was and then he started using her. Making her do magic for him, manipulating her, and saying that if she truly loved him, she would do these things for him."

Lily gasps and she and Parker move to the couch on each side of me. Lily places her chin on my shoulder as Parker takes my hand and my heart settles, feeling safe enough to keep going.

"It was emotional abuse, plain and simple. He never raised his hand to her, but he didn't have to. He broke her and when she finally found enough strength to break up with him, she did the one thing we're not supposed to do. She used magic on him. A potion to make him forget because she knew it was the only way she could escape."

I stop talking, the horror of it washing over me again, as if for the first time. I was

thirteen when my aunt told me this story, the first time I came to her because I liked a boy. She forbade me to pursue my feelings and wrote out a whole new list of things I wasn't allowed to do when it came to my magic.

"That's so tough," Lily says, wrapping her arms around me for a hug. Parker does the same, the two girls squeezing me between them and I feel the tension leave me, as if they're taking it all away—but I'm not done yet, they have to know the rest.

"When I left, my aunt said to never come back. She said I broke her trust, that I didn't choose her and her way of life. But I couldn't. I couldn't spend my whole life afraid of who I am, keeping everyone at arm's length. She couldn't handle it and I couldn't stay. So, all of this, it's new to me."

Even our friendship. I don't say that, but they understand it anyway.

"I'm glad you're here," Parker says, giving me another tight squeeze. "I'm glad you were brave enough to decide for yourself and that you came here and that you're part of this witchy sisterhood of ours."

"I agree," Lily adds.

They've changed my life already in the short time that we've known each other. I guess it really is true, that sometimes, it's not about the length of time you know someone, it is about how deeply. The most important of friendships can form in a few hours spent together.

"Thank you for sharing this with us," Lily says, leaning back. "And while I don't have much experience when it comes to relationships either, I will say, that Bennett doesn't strike me as someone who would do that. He has accepted you—he accepted us—because I believe he has a good and open heart. Also, he definitely wanted to kiss you because that boy is slightly unhinged when it comes to you."

Parker laughs, standing up. "That's the best way to put it, Lily girl." She reaches down and pulls me to my feet. "Now, let's get you something more fun to wear on this date that's not a date yet."

She doesn't even wait for a reply, but drags me to her room, with Lily close behind.

BENNETT

I'm nervous. To the point where I have to keep tugging on my scarf and coat, as I sit fully dressed on my sofa, just so I don't keep running my hands through my hair. Technically, I know this isn't a date. I didn't officially ask her and she didn't officially accept. Yes, I asked her to dinner, but it doesn't really count when she might be thinking it's for research. Or me trying to make up for my mistake? My head is a very complicated space right now.

While it might not be a date, it still feels like so much more. Since the café yesterday morning, I've spent the majority of my time thinking of how that could've played out differently. Then again, that's nothing new when it comes to Kennedy. I've been overthinking every interaction I have with her since the moment we met. I don't want to be that person, but I am being that person. She's quickly becoming a very important part of my life. I want to make sure I treat her right. Which is probably why I feel like I'm losing my mind as I wait to go downstairs and meet her.

Even though it's not an official date, it feels like it. I put some thought into my outfit. A white button-up, with a dark blue crewneck over it and dark blue jeans. I'm wearing my long black coat, with a green and blue tartan scarf. My hair is artistically arranged in disarray because anything else is a bit pointless in this wind.

The reminder on my phone goes off and I jump to my feet, heading for the door. I take the stairs much too quickly and have to pause in front of her door before I knock. Acting like a complete lunatic won't win me any points, so I try for a more

sophisticated approach. If I'm lucky, I might actually pull it off. Then the door opens and Kennedy is there and everything I could've said or done completely flies out the window as I take her in.

She's wearing one of her cozy oversized jumpers, the deep Burgundy the color of leaves in autumn. Instead of jeans or one of her layered skirts, she's wearing a short black one that flairs out around her thighs and tall black boots over dark tights. Her hair is more curled than I've ever seen it, falling around her shoulders in a very enticing way. She's done something to her eyes because they seem bigger and brighter somehow. My eyes snag on her lips, shiny and pink and I fight the urge to simply take her into my arms and finish what was interrupted yesterday.

"Are you going to greet each other or just stand there drooling?" Parker's voice breaks through my thoughts and both Kennedy and I turn to look at her and Lily standing to the right of the door. They look so amused I fear I maybe did start drooling and I quickly wipe at my face. That earns me a smile from Kennedy and I grin.

"Hello," I say and she nods.

"Hi."

"Riveting," Parker comments, before shoving a jacket into my hands. "Help her put it on."

I open up the coat immediately, presenting it to Kennedy and she steps into it quickly. I give my hands only three seconds to linger over her shoulders before I step back.

"Thank you," Kennedy says, pulling her hair out of the way and buttoning the coat.

"Alright, have her home at a reasonable time. Don't?—"

Lily slaps a hand over Parker's mouth and then tugs her away. "Have fun!"

Kennedy grabs her bag and steps out of the flat, shutting the door behind her.

"I will ask you to excuse them for their behavior. We should probably get a television or something."

I chuckle and shake my head. "They're great. I'm glad you have them as friends."

"Hold onto that feeling," Kennedy says, and I nod seriously, before motioning her to go down the stairs first. Though the staircases in these tenement buildings aren't really built for convenience, we reach the bottom quickly, and I push the door open ahead of me for Kennedy to go out.

The weather has been slightly warmer than usual for winter in Edinburgh, but tonight I can feel a chill in the air. I pull my coat closed and check over Kennedy, to make sure she's also all good. My hand itches, reaching for her before I can stop myself, but I drop it before Kennedy sees me. I'm not sure where we stand and I don't want to ruin anything before it gets started, so I need to calm myself and put some distance between us.

I turn toward the Royal Mile, motioning for Kennedy to follow. "Would you like to walk or take the bus?" I ask.

She cocks her head to the side as if confused by my question. Or maybe she's seeing something else, and I try not to fidget in place.

"Let's walk," she finally says and I turn immediately. I can't mess this up. I simply can't.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

KENNEDY

"Where are we going?"

We stepped out of the apartment building and headed toward Old Town. It gets darker so much faster these days. So the streets are already in shadows. As usual, I have no idea what to expect from him. I don't have to be an empath to know he still feels bad about what happened the other day, but I can also tell what happened at the café is there as well. He's being extra careful around me on both of those counts and I'm honestly not sure what to do with that. I got so used to his chaotic personality that this demure Bennett feels off.

"I'm taking you to one of my favorite places in the city," he replies, walking a little ahead of me. He's keeping more distance between us and I realize I don't like it. That might actually tell me more about my feelings than any conversation I had with the girls.

"Bennett," I call out, stopping in the middle of the sidewalk. People go around me as Bennett turns around, glancing at me and the distance between us in question. "Are you going to lead me there like a tour guide or would you mind walking beside me?"

His eyes grow round at my question before he runs a hand over his hair, disheveling it further. An older couple walks around me, chuckling a little. "You tell him," the lady says and I grin.

Bennett jogs up to me and offers his arm. The older couple stop behind me, giving us a tiny round of applause, and now I have to take his arm, don't I? I'm shaking my head with a mock-stern expression as I loop my arm through his elbow.

"That's better. Treat your lassie right," the older man says and then starts walking away. Bennett and I exchange a look, but instead of correcting him, we burst out laughing.

"You had to call me out in front of everyone?"

"Absolutely." But I don't take my arm back and Bennett doesn't say anything else as we continue down the hill toward New Town.

"Do you ever want to live anywhere else?" I ask, because it feels like I need to be the one to take the initiative right now or he's going to be this lost puppy forever, not knowing what to do.

Bennett glances at me. "I'm not sure. Maybe? I always think there's much of the world to see, but Scotland feels like home right now. If that changes in the future, then I'll move. Right now, I can't imagine being anywhere else." He says that last part staring straight into my eyes and my whole body tingles from the way he seems to be seeing all of me, all at once.

We're at a crosswalk, and it takes me a moment to realize people have started to cross while we're still standing still, staring at each other. There's a moment where no one else exists and then, we both look away and start walking

We pass the museum at the bottom of The Mound, heading toward Scott Monument, but we don't stop there.

"What about you? What do you want to do after graduation?" Bennett asks and I open

my mouth to reply but then realize I don't have a ready answer to that anymore.

When I left home, I was so sure about my choices. Sure enough, I left my aunt behind, even though she told me she'd never accept me back if I walked out. Now, with the magic brewing right under my skin and the acceptance and friendship I've found with the girls, I don't think my plans feel as sure anymore.

"You don't actually have to know," Bennett says, breaking through my thoughts.

I glance at him sharply, wondering how he can always tell exactly what I'm thinking. "I thought I knew, but when you asked just now, I realized that so many variables have changed, and I don't have an answer anymore," I say. My honesty surprises even me.

"Even without some magical destiny, there is no written rule that says you have to have it all figured out by a certain age." Bennett shrugs, pulling us around a crowd of people as we cross the street again.

"I guess I never really imagined that this...part of me would ever affect my future in any way." What Lily said about Bennett returns; about him being good in that way that makes me want to keep talking, to tell him my actual thoughts on the matter. "I'm sure you remember Olivia saying that my powers are like that of a child. It's because I spent most of my life suppressing them, hiding them deep inside of me so no one would see."

"And then you got a very visible tattoo to make sure you can't hide anymore."

I glance at Bennett, surprised at the observation. I'd never thought of it that way, but isn't that the truest way to look at it? The tattoo, the connection to the girls—it pushed my magic to the front of my being, the way nothing ever has before. It's like it knew this would be the only way to make me face these parts of myself.

"You're smarter than you look," I say, bumping our already close shoulders together. Bennett takes that opportunity to keep me that much closer and then I realize where we are. "St James Quarter? Are we going shopping?"

"Don't think I'm letting that smart comment pass," Bennett says and then pulls me away from the mall and up the hill. "No, we're going to the hill."

I turn in the direction he's pointing, and of course, Calton Hill, one of the best overlooks in the city and a place I haven't made a journey to yet.

"Did you secretly look at my Edinburgh bucket list?"

"I don't have to look at any list to know what you would like."

Somehow, I believe that. He seems to read me in a way that makes me think he possesses some kind of magic of his own. He sees me and through me in ways that terrify and thrill me at the same time. When that voice of caution starts to rise inside my mind, the years of learned behavior, he seems to quiet them now more than rile them up. Maybe that means there's hope for me yet.

"Ready for the climb?" Bennett asks as we reach a set of stairs.

"Most definitely."

BENNETT

There's a quiet tension around us as we make our way up the hill. There are a few ways to get up here, but Kennedy turns toward the very steep uphill option.

"Are you sure?" I ask.

She nods. "Yes." Her voice is full of determination. "I'm about to sound like a dog with asthma and too much excitement, but I'm determined. I know this is the quickest path to the top."

She doesn't wait for me but starts the steep walk up. I may be in shape, but the hills of Edinburgh continue to win every battle I have with them, so I'm also breathing heavily by the time we step into the clearing at the top.

"Wow," Kennedy says as she tries to catch her breath, her eyes on the few structures that occupy the top of Calton Hill.

The Nelson Monument is to our right, the National Monument is in front of us, and the City Observatory is on the left.

"You know," Kennedy takes another breath, "I don't actually know why that Parthenon-looking structure isn't finished."

"Because," I reach for her hand, but opt to take her sleeve instead, tugging her after me as I walk toward it, "the city didn't have enough funds to finish it back in the mid-1800s, so they never did."

"Well, that seems like a bummer."

She's still trying to settle her escalated heart rate, so I take it slow as I walk her into the little area in front of the Nelson Monument. She's still looking behind us when I step into her line of sight. She gasps as her eyes meet mine and then I'm the one unable to look away. She's a little flushed from the climb and the rapidly cooling temperatures, her hair wild from the wind. I have the urge to reach up and bundle her more into her jacket and scarf, but instead, I place my hands on her shoulders and turn her 180 degrees. I can tell the moment she sees the view. Instead of moving forward like I expect her to, she takes a tiny step back, right into my body, as she

inhales. I don't dare move, my hands still on her shoulders as she looks out over the city.

From this spot, we can see the castle, rising up over the city. The Scott Monument is hidden by the Balmoral Hotel's large clock tower. The city is alive with lights and movement, and for a moment, Kennedy and I simply stand still, watching it all move by.

"Hiya," Kennedy whispers.

"Who are you saying hello to?" I keep my voice low, right near her ear.

She shivers a little and then looks up at me over her shoulder. "The castle."

I grin because it doesn't surprise me in the least. Kennedy would be the type of person to greet the castle every time she sees her. My eyes lift to watch the castle as well. From this direction, it almost blends in with the volcano it's resting upon, jagged tops of the buildings creating a downward set of steps, leading from the left, down the incline to the right. It's so much longer when you look at it from afar, seeing the whole for what it was meant to be—a stronghold. For some reason, Kennedy's attachment to it makes me like her that much more.

"Can we go up there?" Kennedy asks, looking up at the tower behind me.

Honestly, she could ask me anything at this point and I would do my best to make it happen. There's quiet happiness in her that shines brighter than the sun and I want to be the one to always nurture that.

"We can see," I reply, taking a step back and finally retracting my hands. When we walk up the stairs to the entrance, I'm glad to see it's still open. "It was closed for renovations for a while, but I guess they opened it back up."

I pay the lady at the entrance and motion for Kennedy to go ahead. She shakes her head and motions for me first. "If I'm going to be dying every single one of these," she glances at the sign, "143 steps up, I need you to walk ahead."

The lady at the entrance tries and fails to hide her chuckle, and when I grin, Kennedy only glares. I raise my arms in surrender and step in first. The stairs are narrow and winding and not the safest, but I make sure to take it slow. When we reach the top, I'm out of breath again as well.

There's a narrow door at the very top and an attendant on the other side of it. I say hello and wait for Kennedy. She pushes through the door and then steps in the opposite direction of me on the turret, whispering something to the girl.

"Kennedy?" I go to follow her but the girl at the door shakes her head at me.

"Give her a moment," she says, with a little shake of her head.

I glance at her and then at where Kennedy went, but I stay put. Not even thirty seconds later, Kennedy comes back around and gives me a tiny nod.

"Is everything okay? Do you need something? Is this too much?—"

"Bennett," Kennedy interrupts, "I'm fine, I just needed to fix my skirt."

The girl next to me chuckles and Kennedy shrugs, while my face flames red. I'm overreacting for nothing.

"Come on." Kennedy is the one to grab the sleeve of my jacket now, pulling me around the small turret. The view from up here is beautiful, even in the low light of the early evening. Kennedy pulls out her phone and takes a few pictures, but I can't stop staring at her. She turns to look at me over her shoulder, her hair flowing behind

her in the wind. The image goes straight to my heart and bursts it open. She twists all the way around and takes a picture of me before she pulls her camera down and cocks her head to the side.

"Are you having a physical reaction to the height? Do you need to sit down?" She takes a step toward me and I shake my head.

"You're beautiful and I was only taking the time to admire you."

Kennedy freezes and I'm surprised at the words because they seem like too much too soon and I don't want to scare her away, but she only smiles. "Let's go see the half-finished one next." She doesn't wait for a reply, but takes the sleeve of my coat and pulls me behind her. If she wants to lead me around for the rest of my life, I think I'll be a very willing participant.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

KENNEDY

My body is abuzz from Bennett's simple compliment as I prepare myself not to break my neck going down these much-too-dangerous stairs. He delivered it as a fact and there's something so incredibly attractive about that, now I can't get his voice out of my head.

"Would you like a picture together?" The girl at the door stops us before we can head down, and I glance at Bennett, slightly frozen. He nods, almost eagerly, handing over his phone. I step back over to him and we turn to face the girl. Suddenly, I don't know what to do with my hands—or the rest of my body for that matter. Bennett steps up beside me and I feel a slight pressure on the small of my back. I glance up at him and find him watching me with a soft look in his eyes, and then before I know what I'm doing, I break out into a grin, leaning a little more fully against him. We stand like that for a long moment, with the wind twirling around us and the feel of being the only two people in the whole world.

"Here you go." The girl's voice breaks through our staring contest and we both turn to find her grinning at us as she hands Bennett his phone. He thanks her and then leads me down the tower.

We thank the lady at the bottom of the stairs and then step back out. The few minutes it took us to descend the stairs made the outside much darker, but there are spotlights on the buildings, so I can see them well. I walk straight toward the National Monument, marveling at how they could build half of it and then never go back to

finish it.

And also marveling at the fact that I think my brain malfunctioned there for a moment. Did we even take a picture?

There are people around the monument, taking pictures, but we're losing light fast. I take out my phone and snap a few, suddenly in need of remembering this moment. My magic is buzzing right under my skin, like it too is feeling the array of emotions.

"Do you want to climb up there?" Bennett's voice breaks through my thoughts and I turn my head to find him right behind me. It would take barely any movement on my part to lean back against him and I fight the urge to do so. Whatever this thing between us is, it feels almost as monumental as this monument. I don't want to look back at it later and find it half-finished.

The reality of that slams into me, nearly taking the breath out of my lungs. This is a lot deeper than some passing like—this feels like a connection of epic proportions—which terrifies me to no end. What do I do with all of these feelings? What if his aren't as deep as mine?

"Hey." Bennett steps around so he can peer down into my face, but I can't meet his eyes now. Instead, I stare at the buttons on his coat, determined to memorize them. "Kennedy." There's a tone behind my name, a tone I can't seem to ignore. He says it with so much gentleness, like it's the most precious word in the world. My skin feels like it's on fire.

Bennett's hand grabs mine, pulling me away from the monument and toward the collection of trees and bushes on the right. I'm too blinded by my emotions to protest and then I'm too stunned to speak, as he drops my hand and cups my face in both of his.

"Kennedy, you're glowing."

At first, I'm not sure what he means by that and then I feel it more than see it. My skin on fire was my magic—the power of it so large that it can't be contained. I've never lost control in this way before, but it seems that every time I'm around Bennett I learn something new about my magic.

"Do you see it?" I ask as I raise my hand between us, letting the tiny sparks dance, hovering over the top of my palm.

"I see it. You're beautiful."

My eyes fly up to meet his over the flying sparkles and the magnitude behind his gaze nearly takes me to my knees.

He sees me—all of me—and he thinks I'm beautiful.

He's not running away, he's staying right here, beside me. Watching over me, protecting me. His back is to the rest of the people, so I'm not seen by busybody onlookers.

All of these little truths are wrapped into one Bennett MacKay and when the tears come, I'm not even surprised.

"Oh." Bennett's face immediately transforms into one of worry while his eyes roam over me as if trying to see if I'm hurt anywhere. "Did I do something? Tell me how to fix it."

"You didn't do anything," I say, as I let the magic go, sending little sparks into the air.

"I keep messing up, don't I?" he asks before his hand is on my cheek and the gentle

swipe of his finger catches my tear. My body bursts out in goosebumps and I want to move closer.

"Bennett—"

"I'm sorry, I never seem to know what to say or do around you," he says, his gaze steady on mine as he finally retracts his hand and stuffs it in his pocket. He looks so unsure of himself and I have an almost irresistible desire to hug him, but he's still rambling. His accent is so much more pronounced than I've ever heard it before, sending tiny goosebumps over my skin.

"Am I being too much? Should I give you more space? I'm not—I keep acting like a complete idiot around you and I can't seem to help it. Even though I want to be able to help it and not act like a lunatic because I like you and I want you to like me, but it's like I'm incapable of being a normal human being around you and I keep making things worse and I have no idea how to tell you how I feel and?—"

He freezes, his eyes round as if he doesn't realize his slip, but I'm sure I look crazy, grinning at him like an idiot. "I think you just did."

BENNETT

I'm silently cursing the winter daylight hours because what I wanted to do was pull Kennedy right into my arms. Instead, we got interrupted by one of the workers, telling us to head down because the sun has set.

We make our way down the steep decline and I try to control my impulse to reach out and take Kennedy's hand. She didn't seem opposed to my confession. In fact, she's never smiled at me quite like that before, but she didn't exactly proclaim her own feelings and I might be freaking out—internally. And slightly externally.

"Are you hungry?" I ask when step back out on the street. "I did ask you for dinner, and we haven't eaten yet. Sorry about that. I?—"

"Do you like Mòr Bakehouse?" Kennedy interrupts me, turning so she stops right in front of me. I nearly run into her but catch myself at the last moment. Her words don't register at first and when she takes the front of my jacket into her hand and pulls me behind her my brain completely leaves the station. I follow obediently until we stop in front of the bakery, and finally, her words make sense.

"Are you sure you don't want some sit-down restaurant? There are loads around here."

"Could we grab a Cornish pasty and some coffee and head to the fountain?"

She looks so unsure of herself suddenly, my protective instincts explode. If she asked for the stars right now, looking at me like that, I would go get them.

"Yes, that sounds great. You're not too cold?"

"No, I'm perfect."

You are . I swallow the words before they can escape because I feel like I've already word-vomited all over this non-date and now I have no idea where we stand.

We get in line behind a few people and Kennedy focuses her attention on the array of baked goods, while I focus my attention on her. In my typical fashion, I'm overthinking everything. But no, I won't take any of it back. It was time I told her how I felt and now I will just have to deal with the consequences of my actions.

My thoughts are once again interrupted when I'm asked to order, and I insist on paying before we walk away with our steak pasties and hot lattes. Kennedy holds

both in her hands, not eating or drinking.

"Did you want to sit down and eat?" I ask as we pass a few benches near St James Quarter.

"Could we eat at Princes Street Gardens?"

"Of course."

We navigate the crowds of people, keeping close to each other, but not quite touching. We keep getting separated as people pass by and I really want to be holding her hand right about now. It takes us no time at all to reach Princes Street Gardens and head down the stairs toward the fountain.

"Did you know," Kennedy begins, her voice low and a little unsure, "the first night I arrived in Edinburgh, the girls and I went to the bakery and got this exact food before heading to the fountain?"

"I knew you had your tattoo event at the fountain. Is that when it happened?"

"Yes. We were all supposed to be living in individual flats but somehow we all ended up at our current one, so we went to the leasing office to speak to them about it, but it was closed. And then we were hungry, so it made sense."

There are benches lined up all along the walkway in the middle of the park, as well as a few near the fountain. It's cold outside but not windy. The fountain is on and the water sparkles in the strobe lights aimed at it. Kennedy beelines for the bench under the tree opposite the fountain and takes a seat, looking up at me expectantly. I nod and take a seat beside her. The benches are wide enough to fit four people, so I leave a little room between us. Then a man comes up to sit on the other side of me and I move closer to Kennedy to give him space. She scoots to the end of the bench and

then reaches over for my coat and pulls me toward her. We end up side by side, and I think I stop breathing for a moment.

I have this problem often when I'm around her.

She takes a bite of her food and I follow suit. It seems like she's working herself up to saying something and I want to be fully engaged with whatever that is. It's another few minutes before she finally places her half-eaten pasty on her lap and looks out at the fountain.

"It seems that important things happen when I'm near the fountain. It feels only appropriate that I bring you here."

Everything in me freezes, anticipation heavy in my bones. I don't want to jump to conclusions, but jumping is exactly what I want to do if this is heading where I think this is heading.

"My life changed when I met the girls," she says, a gentle curl to her lips, "and it changed again when I met you." She takes a deep breath and then turns her body to face mine. I don't dare move, watching her face and the sparkle in her eye. "I think it's changing again."

"Changing?"

"Yes. Because when I met you, you drove me nuts. I think you still do, but in a different way." She reaches over suddenly and moves some of the hair off my forehead with her fingers. It's barely even a touch but I feel it throughout my whole being. "To answer the question you've been wanting to ask—yes. I like you too." She grins at me lighting up the whole park with that look on her face and spark in her eyes and I think I'm officially the happiest man alive.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

KENNEDY

" W hy is Parker angry-baking again?" Lily asks as I step out of my room and she comes out of the bathroom. It's seven in the morning a week later and Parker is in the kitchen, banging some baking trays around. I'm not exactly sure what it is this time, but last time it had something to do with Bennett's best friend.

"Parker, honey," I say, coming into the kitchen slowly, "what is it?"

"I swear, if that boy-child comes around telling me that?—"

"Okay, put the tray down."

As she's ranting, she turns, the tray gripped tightly in her hand, like she's getting ready to swing. The chocolate chips and the dough she already rolled are floating behind her. There's some flour on her face and hands and she looks so ridiculous, I try but I fail to hold in a chuckle. Lily glances at me and then she's trying not to laugh and Parker stares at us as if we're the ones who have lost our minds.

"It's not funny!"

"I'm sure it's not." I try to keep the giggles under control, but she looks far from a menacing force right now.

"He told me that I'm foolish for believing in some tea leaves for my future when 'it's

been scientifically proven that it's only our minds that create the pictures we see." Her voice has taken on an exaggerated British accent as she rolls her eyes and turns back to her cookies. She hasn't been super upfront with us about her dislike of that man, but there's definitely something there. Lily and I are patiently waiting until she trusts us. It's not that I want her to be this riled, but her baked goods are the best.

"Is this about Nicholas?" Lily asks gently and Parker growls very loudly.

"Do not say that name within these walls. This is our sacred place."

She continues to mold the cookies before adding the chocolate ships at the top. "Where did you even see him?"

"I stopped at Waterstones yesterday to look at some art books and saw this book on tarot and tea leaf reading so I grabbed it and then got myself a cup of tea because it seemed very appropriate, and he showed up!"

When I got home last night, Parker was already in her room—I assumed sleeping, but apparently, she was planning her revenge.

"Are you going to murder him with the cookies?"

"Are you kidding me? He's in no way coming close to these. He doesn't deserve my cookies and I wouldn't waste time poisoning them. He'd enjoy that too much."

That doesn't make much sense, but I don't think I should point that out. She gets back to the baking, the ingredients finally settling on the counter in front of her as Lily and I take a few steps back.

"Parker, do you think—" Lily begins but Parker twirls on her immediately.

"Don't even go there. This...dude...seems to think magic is stupid and that in turn makes him the dumbest person alive."

Lily and I exchange a look, but we don't comment. Instead, we both sidestep her to pour a cup of coffee before we sneak the first batch of baked cookies off the cooling sheet.

"Hey!"

"These are so amazing," I say around a mouthful, backing toward my room.

"So amazing." Lily does the same, heading toward her room.

"You know the rule. No eating the baked goods until I'm sat?—"

"Satisfied they're good and done," Lily and I say in unison. We both shut our doors quickly as Parker shoots a bunch of flour our way. I nearly spill my coffee. She must be practicing her magic because she's getting very good at controlling it.

As I get dressed I mull over the fact that I should be practicing it just as much. If not more. Compared to the other girls, my magic is the youngest, simply because it's been the least used. I can definitely feel it growing and developing as the days go by, but I'm still so hesitant. I want to be brave. I want to let myself be more me than I ever have been before. The girls have definitely nurtured that in me, supporting me in a way I've never been supported before. Even the magical display I put on at the hill last week was new and different for me. I try not to blush just thinking about it.

My phone dings with a text and I grab it off the bed, my face blossoming into a grin. I'm sure I look ridiculous. Good thing no one can see me.

Good morning. Have a good meeting with your peers. I'll see you at the café at 3.

Bennett has been sending me good morning messages for a week straight now, ever since our little not-date that turned into a date on Calton Hill. He had to go to Glasgow at the beginning of the week, so we haven't had a chance to meet up, but we both seem to be renewed in our pursuit of information regarding the tattoo and the magic. I might also like the excuse to see him and I'm trying to reconcile myself to these new feelings.

Good morning to you. Have a good check-in with your professor. See you at 3!

I almost add a little heart before I catch myself. This is really no time to be losing my heart—I mean, my head. We're just getting to know each other.

I grab all my things and head toward The Meadows. I've been feeling a bit lightheaded these days, which is unusual for me, but I'm determined to stay on top of everything. Today we're meeting at Soderberg for our "you're not alone" get-together. It's a bakery and a café, right on campus. The university has put these meetings together and they're nice. I don't mind them as much as I thought I would and since Bennett is busy anyway...

"Parker, please don't burn down the kitchen," I call as I hurry past her.

"I am a brilliant witch, Kennedy! That's insulting!" she shouts after me as Lily waves from her position on the couch, her laptop on her lap.

Shoes, coat, gloves, and I'm out the door, but the feeling of belonging stays with me as I race out into the cool Edinburgh morning.

BENNETT

I'm very distracted as I meet up with Professor Stewart and a few of his colleagues. Today's meeting is mostly me listening in on a discussion they've been having within

the department. I'm supposed to go to a lecture next week regarding this as well, so this gives me a bit of a heads-up. Yet I can't seem to focus for longer than a few sentences before my mind wanders again.

Back to Kennedy. Always back to Kennedy.

"Bennett, when are you planning on taking a trip down to the village?" Professor Stewart breaks through my thoughts and thankfully I'm paying enough attention to reply.

"Possibly next week, after the lectures."

So far, Professor Stewart has approved my outline and the different relics I've been using to support my research. It's been very helpful to use the information I've gathered to share with Kennedy and the girls. They've spent some time visiting the different places around Edinburgh this past week to see if they can glean anything from the past. Nothing so far, but they do seem to be getting more comfortable with their magic. Especially Kennedy.

I suppress a groan just as Professor Mund launches into another discussion on environmental impact regarding historical factors. I try to stay focused, but he's been making the exact same argument any time these professors meet and I think they also would like him to do more research before he does one of his tirades.

"Bennett, a minute?" Professor Stewart calls once the meeting is over.

I'm antsy to leave, but I can't ignore him. I pack up my laptop and notebook before coming over to where he's standing near the windows.

"Did you get the email I sent?"

"Yes. I'm planning on doing a walk through Mary King's Close as well."

"Make sure you do not miss out on these opportunities. Nothing can be more important than this right now. It is your future."

He's clearly noticed my mind wandering. I nod, and then I'm dismissed. It's not that I'm not grateful to have Professor Stewart as an advisor, but in the last few weeks, it has felt like I'm doing research for him specifically. The email he sent was regarding various structures of the closes during the witch trials era and Mary King's Close was mentioned enough that it feels like I need to head down there. The city runs tours of the close, specifically concentrating on the living conditions in the city during those times, but Professor Stewart believes there might be something concerning the witch trials. Many of the buildings in the city carry information written right on them and often these notes are discovered in random rooms that I would need to go and check myself. It doesn't hurt to head down there, I suppose.

However, the moment I leave the university behind all of my attention is on Kennedy. The anticipation continues to rise as I head to the Black Cat. It's been a few days since I've been there, but the moment I step in, I feel the same kind of comfort I feel anytime I'm there.

"Good afternoon, Bennett," Olivia greets me from behind the counter. I offer her a greeting, but my eyes are already scanning the room for Kennedy.

"She'll be right out," Olivia says with a knowing look, nodding toward the kitchen. A table opens up near the window—the same table we always seem to sit at—and I leave my bag and coat there before turning to the counter.

"A latte?" Olivia asks over her shoulder, already expertly preparing the drink. I chuckle, because of course she knows exactly what I like by now. I've been here enough times. Pet has walked over the counter to sit in my line of sight and I oblige

by walking over to give her scratches. She doesn't seem satisfied with mere pets, however, because she launches herself into my arms. I catch her easily and she settles against my chest with a purr.

"You're spoiling her," Olivia comments and I look down at the cat before I answer.

"I think it's the other way around."

"You've never had a cat?" Olivia asks.

"No. Growing up, my grandma wasn't a big fan of animals in the house and since I became a student, I haven't had a lot of opportunities."

"I think you will have to get used to animals being part of your life. Maybe you should get one?"

Before I can comment on that cryptic statement, Kennedy comes out of the kitchen. Immediately my whole attention is on her. She's wearing one of her oversized knit jumpers, this one a deep green, and a black skirt. Her hair is as wild as usual, the amethyst necklace she's always wearing catching the light and blinding me for a moment. There's a glow about her, the same one I've been seeing since the moment we met, but it seems brighter now. I wonder if anyone else can see it.

A tiny bite on my hand jerks my attention to the cat in my arms. Pet's mouth is around my finger, where I stopped petting her when Kennedy came out. The cat gives me an annoyed look and I oblige with more scratches. She settles back in and I look up to find Kennedy silently chuckling.

"I think we've been replaced," Kennedy says, turning to Olivia, just as the older woman places my coffee on the counter.

"I believe so."

I glance between the two and then down at the cat and it seems like they're all in on some inside joke I'm not privy to—but I don't even mind.

Kennedy picks up my coffee cup and leads me to the table. I take a seat opposite her, Pet still in my arms, but the moment I'm seated, the cat flips over, settling on my lap instead.

"She really does like you a lot," Kennedy comments, and I look up to find her watching me with a soft look in her eyes. She hasn't quite looked at me like that before and it makes me feel lightheaded. "How was your meeting?" she asks as I try to get my brain to restart.

I reach over and take a sip of my coffee before I reply.

"It was good. Professor Stewart wants me to visit Mary King's Close and head over to Forres to visit the Witches Stone. He's having me focus on some specific relics of the past, which I think would be helpful to you."

"But you're annoyed."

"How can you tell?" I'm surprised because I didn't think it was that obvious.

"I can just tell." She smiles and my heart does that super loud pounding thing as if to remind me I need oxygen to survive. I exhale and take another sip of my latte.

A plate is slid in front of me before I can say anything and I glance up at Olivia in surprise.

"You look like you could use a bit of sugar," she says, nodding down at the plate. I

glance down to find a scone with clotted cream and jam. "You're not skipping meals, are you?"

"Maybe sometimes. Professor Stewart has been extremely demanding lately."

Olivia does an uncharacteristic for her puff, rolling her eyes. Kennedy and I stare at her in surprise.

"Olivia, is there something we need to know?" Kennedy asks.

"Only that professor of yours is a meddler. He's been at the university for years and his research has been less than orthodox at times. He also walks around with a stick up his arse, excuse the language."

"What?" I'm completely flabbergasted. "You know Professor Stewart?"

"Oh, love, I know most of the lecturers at the university, specifically within the history department. I used to teach there."

"You did?" Kennedy asks.

"Aye, until I decided I wanted a change of pace, and here I am." With that, she turns back to the customers that just walked in, and I glance at Kennedy. She looks completely shocked, so I guess it wasn't just me who didn't know this information.

"She taught at the university," Kennedy says as if she needs to utter the words to make sense of them.

"She's not wrong about the professor though, he has been...difficult."

Kennedy doesn't seem to be listening to what I'm saying. She's watching Olivia with

a new kind of look—I can't quite place it. It might be hope, but that doesn't make sense, does it?

I reach across the table and touch my fingertips to hers. She jerks her gaze back to mine and then moves her fingers just a fraction closer, leaving them leaning against my hand. I soak in the small contact like a desert soaks up the first drop of rain and don't dare move.

"What is it?" I ask.

"I don't know...I guess, it's just amazing to me that she was a professor. When I was younger—" She stops for a moment, eyes flickering down to Pet and then back to me. "When I was younger I wanted to teach, but my aunt always said it was too dangerous. Many careers were not approved by her. I resolved to be a researcher, and even that didn't sit well with her when I told her I was going to Edinburgh. We haven't spoken since I left."

I don't hesitate to flip my hand over and tug hers into mine. She holds on as if she needs a physical tether and I'm more than willing to be that for her.

"Since coming here, I'm learning more and more about all the possibilities in front of me. It's exhilarating and terrifying at the same time." Then she looks up at me with such an open expression, it's a good thing I'm sitting down. I think...I think I would give this girl the whole world if she asked for it. Especially if she's going to keep looking at me like that.

Chapter Thirty

KENNEDY

I can't get it out of my head—Olivia taught at the University of Edinburgh. It seems so unbelievably unreal. I really should stop being so amazed by things, but I don't think that's changing anytime soon. Every little bit of life I've experienced since coming to Edinburgh has been life-altering.

"What are you so deeply in thought about?" Parker asks, plopping herself down on the couch beside me. It's Saturday and we, as roommates, have decided that it's bonding time for us. We've all been running around separately, but we need to take some time to actually process things together, which is why we're heading near Dean Village soon to look at St. Bernard's Well for magical properties.

"Did you know that Olivia taught at the University of Edinburgh?" I ask, turning to her just as Lily steps out of her bedroom, her trusty laptop in hand.

"Oh yeah, she mentioned it. She said she loved it, but she loves having the coffee shop now and the freedom to teach when she wants to," Parker replies.

"Was I the only one who didn't know?" I glance at Lily and she nods.

"Is it important?" she asks.

Isn't that a loaded question? I'm still amazed I opened up to Bennett about it so readily, but I suppose if we're going to make us work, I have to be upfront about

things. He already knows my biggest secret anyway.

"I didn't think it was possible," I say, after taking a deep centering breath. "Growing up with my aunt...I was resigned to be someone in the background. Even though I stood up to her and came here, my life goal was still to be a researcher. Someone who was never seen, only heard through her work. But—" I stop for a moment and glance at the girls. They're watching me patiently, giving me the space to find the words. There's simple encouragement in their stillness so I carry on. "I've always wanted to be a teacher. I'm not sure why, but I have this desire...to nurture. I want to see minds develop and be there to guide them. Maybe it's simply what I wish I'd had for all those years, but maybe—I don't know. Does it sound crazy?"

There's a split second when I ask the question that I think they will say yes, but there's no hesitation in either of them as they both nearly shout no.

"Are you kidding me? You would be an amazing teacher. You have this unhinged planner vibe about you, so you can definitely handle a classroom. There's also the whole Mother Nature thing about you." Parker leans back, waving her hands in front of me.

"Was that a compliment?" I ask.

"It was," Lily answers. "She's totally right. I can see you in a classroom setting."

My tears well up at their words and I don't even bother wiping them away. The girls move toward me immediately, hugging me from both sides as they sit next to me on the couch. It feels like I've cried more since coming to Edinburgh than in the last ten years, but it's like I'm finally allowed to have all of these emotions now, and I have people to share them with, which is something I never thought would happen.

"Okay, okay, no more tears," I announce, wiping them away and getting up. "We

have a well to look at."

Parker and Lily grin at me and then we're off. We take the bus to Fountainbridge and then head over to the Water of Leith entrance through the arch.

"Wow, I really like being near water," Lily says as soon as we walk past the bridge and hear the water through the trees. She seems almost giddy with excitement. It's adorable.

When we're past the entrance we have two options: to walk at the top or near the water. Lily immediately beelines for the water. Parker and I exchange a glance and follow her down.

"I've been wanting to go to the coast, but with studies and the research and looking for a job, it's been quite challenging to make time," Lily says, bouncing on the balls of her feet. There's a soft glow around her and it's getting brighter. It's definitely magic, even though outside of myself I've never seen it before. "We should take a trip though. When we all have time. I think it'd be fun."

"Lily," I call out since she's walking a bit in front of us.

She stops to look at me. "Do you have a water affinity?" I ask.

She furrows her brow, looking from me to the water and then back to me. "I don't think so? I never have before."

Parker and I pull her close to the wall bordering the water and lower our voices. Parker gives me a nod, letting me take the lead, but we're clearly thinking the same thing.

"How do you feel right now? How does your magic feel?" I never thought I'd be

asking such questions out loud.

Lily doesn't reply immediately, giving herself the time to think about it. "I'm not sure, my magic seems very...happy? It's the only emotion I can think of. Like it's been anticipating something and it has finally happened?"

"Lily girl, I think you do have an affinity to water," Parker says, wrapping her arms around her shoulders. "How have you never thought this?"

"I'm not sure. There isn't much water in the desert where we live and I've never been around so much of it before. So much of it...moving and living." She looks down at the water and while I am aware of it, I don't have the same kind of connection to it.

I glance at Parker and it suddenly makes me sad. Both of them have found their magic affinity, or at least have begun to discover it. I haven't seen a glimpse of mine.

"Kennedy, you'll figure yours out," Parker says, and I roll my eyes.

"You're not allowed to use your powers on me," I grumble and she chuckles.

"I don't have to be a witch to know you're bummed on your behalf while happy on Lily's."

"I am happy for Lily," I say, shaking it off. "And this isn't about me. It's about us. So let's go see this well."

BENNETT

I've spent most of my Saturday in meetings, running from one café to the next. Annoyingly enough, this has nothing to do with my own research and everything to do with Professor Stewart's. He argued that I need to learn the political ropes of the

way the university is run if I'm going to work for it. But, as usual, I'm mostly distracted and thinking about Kennedy. Especially since none of these meetings are yielding anything in the way of actual knowledge. It's more about making contacts and I'm not a fan of this part of the game.

"You have done well today," Professor Stewart says as we're leaving a café on George Street. It's past five in the evening and this is where I finally have the chance to say goodbye.

"Thank you for taking me along, Professor Stewart."

The man watches me for a long moment before he nods and turns to where a car is waiting for him. Once he's inside and pulling away, I feel like I can breathe again. I'm not sure what it is about being around him lately, but it feels—draining.

My phone vibrates with an incoming text and I glance down to see an all-caps message from Lana.

GET YOURSELF TO OURS ON TIME AND DONT FORGET ICECREAM...ok
ily byeeee

I chuckle, reply with a,

Yes your highness

and head for the bus. It takes me no time at all to get to their neighborhood, and I get off the bus a stop before heading into Sainsbury. As I look over various ice cream choices my mind once again is on Kennedy. I don't think I know what kind of ice cream she likes, and realizing this, it seems imperative that I have this information as soon as possible. That's a good enough excuse to text her, right?

Before I can talk myself out of it, I'm pulling out my phone and sending her a text.

What kind of ice cream do you like?

The moment I send it off, I feel kind of dumb. What are we, in high school? I also don't regret it either when a message pops up on my phone.

Wow, coming in with the tough questions.

Then there's a follow-up text.

Vanilla, but with something in it. Cheesecake, raspberries, chocolate. It's the perfect team player ice cream. You?

I stare at the phone, a stupid grin on my face at how seriously she took the question. There's something special about a person meeting you where you are.

I can't believe you'd disrespect chocolate like that!

Her response is immediate.

Vanilla can become chocolate, but chocolate cannot become vanilla.

The laugh that escapes me is much louder than is appropriate in public, but when I glance down the aisle, thankfully no one is there.

Your logic is indisputable.

I know.

I want to ask her another hundred questions, but I refrain. I want to at least appear

sort of chill. I pick out Lana's favorite —cookie dough—and head for the checkout when my phone buzzes again.

What prompted this important question?

I'm grinning down at Kennedy's text like she's the one standing before me now.

Picking up some ice cream for dinner at Nicholas's and I had to know.

Ah, of course. I'm assuming Lana requested it?

You know her so well already.

She's a good kid.

Four words and my heart swells all over again. It's important to me that Kennedy gets along with the most important people in my life. I can't deny it any longer that this is more than just a fleeting crush and the fact that both Lana and Kennedy seem to click brings me immense happiness.

How did it go with the girls today?

We're at the well now, although not sure why they call it that since we can't get inside.

St. Bernard's Well. That's right. They were going to see if they had any magical response to it.

So nothing at all?

Well, we think Lily discovered her affinity.

I finish paying for the ice cream, leaving the store behind as I read the text three times before I reply.

Are you okay?

There's a long pause and maybe I got it wrong. Maybe there's nothing behind those words and I'm only making up the tone.

But then she replies.

You could tell, huh? I just feel like I'm behind. I don't want to be the one to hold us back.

I stop in the middle of the street, staring at the text as if it's in a foreign language. The need to go to her is hard to resist, but I can't just run to her every time I want to. I dial her instead, fully expecting her not to answer, but after two rings she does.

"I didn't mean to dump that on you. I just—I don't know," she says by way of greeting. The desire to go to her escalates, but I stay put.

"Kennedy, you don't ever have to apologize for sharing your thoughts and feelings with me. Tell me what you need. To simply listen? A pep talk?"

I stop talking because I'm about to offer her everything. She doesn't reply right away and I have no idea what she might be thinking, but then she sighs a little and I can hear the change in her voice when she speaks. It's softer, more relaxed. "That's actually all I needed. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Chapter Thirty-One

KENNEDY

I t's been two weeks since he told me he liked me and I feel like one of those school girls with her first crush.

"Someone is very giddy," Lily comments from her spot on the couch, her head bent over her laptop as usual.

"Someone can't even see me," I reply, walking to the kitchen.

"Funny how you know she was talking about you," Parker comments. She's got an art book in front of her and both she and Lily are munching on muffins.

"Did you angry-bake again?" I ask, looking over the fresh from the oven muffins.

"I also regular-bake, you know."

"No, I don't know." I grab a muffin and then double back for another one, wrapping them in a paper towel to take with me. I fill up my water bottle, feeling the stares on my back. "What?"

"Did you take an extra muffin for your boyfriend?" Parker sing-songs and I turn to see her peeking over the couch.

Lily chuckles but doesn't look up from her computer.

"He's not my boyfriend." Which is technically true. We haven't exactly put labels on it.

"You mean he didn't ask you to go steady?" Parker gasps and Lily finally looks up from her laptop, laughing.

"Parker, this isn't the 1950s. Who does that anyway?"

"Don't lie. You would be thrilled with that type of question."

She's not wrong, of course. Not that I'll admit it. I've never been asked to be anyone's girlfriend before. I think there's a certain charm to it.

"There's the giddy," Lily says and I look up to see her pointing at me.

"I really don't like it when you two gang up on me." I pout dramatically and then reach for my bag. "I'm off to do more research since I'm the only one who's doing any."

"We thank you for your service," Parker calls out, as I head for the front door.

The thing is, we've all done research, but we've gotten no closer to any answers. I know that I'm not the weakest link, because there isn't one, objectively speaking, but I still feel like I'm failing them somehow. I haven't discovered my affinity, my active magic comes and goes whenever it pleases, and I haven't been able to find any kind of information regarding the thistle or the magic it carries. It most definitely means something to the three of us and the magic community, but what? We have no idea.

I will say that at least all this research has helped me feel closer to the magical. Considering how much of my life I spent hiding away from it, this time feels like I'm finally learning who I am and where I came from. It could be that's all we will get out

of this. For now, working with Bennett feels like we're covering all our bases and like I'm contributing something. Parker's contribution to it all is that she wants to practice our active magic more, but I'm struggling. Slow is the only pace I can go and I'm grateful the girls understand that about me. Tonight, Bennett and I are meeting at the library. He had a meeting that ran late with his academic advisor, so he's waiting for me in his office when I arrive. It's been a few days since I've been in here and it looks more chaotic somehow. There are even more books on the floor.

That awareness that I associate with Bennett has only grown since we've admitted our feelings. It still leaves me reeling but in the best way possible.

"Hi."

"Hi."

We stare at each other for a moment and then burst out laughing. His laugh is just as full as ever, but it feels even brighter somehow and it fills my heart to the fullest.

"You look beautiful, as always," he states like it's a matter of fact and I move before I know what I'm doing.

I step right into his arms as if I've been doing this my whole life and he folds me close to his body. There's no awkwardness in the way he holds me and I feel all the tension evaporate from my own. If it was up to me, I think I would stay like this for the next five to seven business days. I feel safe in that way that I've always dreamed of feeling—accepted and safe.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he whispers against my hair and I shake my head against his chest. He squeezes me a little tighter and I inhale the scent of him straight into my soul. His left hand takes a gentle journey up and down my back, sending pleasant tingles through my system. My hands curl around his shirt, making little fists

in the fabric and he exhales shakily. Maybe he needs this as much as I do. So I squeeze a little tighter for a moment, making sure he knows I'm here.

When I do finally pull back, I'm not sure how much time has passed. We lean away slowly, as if we're not ready to let go of each other. His gaze is laser focused on me and I'm lost in the depths of his eyes. His right hand pushes at the hair that's fallen in front of my face, tucking it behind my ear. The gentle touch sends goosebumps down my arms and my eyes snag on his lips. I jerk my gaze away, but it's too late. His own eyes darken as he looks at me and there's a moment of stillness before he lowers his head toward me.

A sudden knock on the door springs us apart like we're on fire. I stumble a little against the bookshelves, my hand on my heart.

"Fifteen minutes!" the voice on the other side of the door calls.

"Thanks, George," Bennett calls back. His voice sounds steady, as if I just hallucinated the heat between us, but when I glance at him, I find it's all still there.

"Fifteen minutes until they close the doors. We should get going," he says and I can only nod.

He grabs a few books and I put my coat back on, reaching for my bag. We leave the small room behind, wave to the security guard, and head out into the cold Edinburgh night.

"I'm sorry I couldn't meet earlier. The meeting ran later than I anticipated," Bennett says from beside me. He's keeping his stride shorter to stay close and I'm so pleased it's difficult not to keep grinning twenty-four-seven. He's always done this—well, except that one time he was kind of running from me. But besides that his little considerate behaviors are constantly making me feel like I'm special.

"It's alright. I was on campus until later today too."

He nods but I know he's disappointed. Because I am too. It's the first day in the last week we could meet up and all I got was a hug. And a near kiss.

My face heats up just thinking about it, so I duck a little, letting my hair fall forward.

"Oh!" I exclaim, startling Bennet. "I have something for you."

I stop in the middle of the street, nearly getting myself run over by people, and Bennett takes my elbow to lead me to the side as I go through my bag. "Tada." I produce a muffin, holding it on the palm of my hands. He looks at me over the top of the muffin, a grin spreading across his lips.

"Hold onto that for a minute," he says before he takes my elbow again and gently guides me down the street. When we step into a close, I realize we're in the Writer's Museum courtyard, but he doesn't stop. He leads me down the stairs until we reach the little sitting area. It technically belongs to the restaurant, but Bennett leads me to the corner and motions for me to sit. "I'll be right back."

He drops his bag and then jogs away. Seeing no other choice, I take a seat and wait. Thankfully, I'm bundled up in my long coat and tall boots, turtleneck pulled up. It takes Bennett less than ten minutes and he's jogging back, two cups in hand.

"Sorry, had to run back up to the Royal Mile."

He places a cup in front of me and then takes a seat across from me. He raises an eyebrow and I pull the muffin back out, handing it to him. After he takes it, I wrap my arms around the cup, inhaling the smell of coffee and absorbing the cup's warmth.

"Where did you get it?" Bennett asks before he opens his mouth to take a bite.

Before I know what I'm doing, I reach over, placing my hand over his mouth. He looks at me in shock, while I look at him in shock. My brain restarts after the feel of Bennett's lips on my palm register and I ask, "You're not allergic to anything, are you? These have blueberries."

Bennett shakes his head, no, so I remove my hand slowly. "Sorry, I just?—"

"It's okay." He places his hand over mine on the table, giving it a gentle squeeze. "I appreciate your care for my health."

"Honestly, I was more worried about myself. I have no idea what to do in such an emergency and the stress is bad for the heart."

Bennet gives a hearty laugh and I feel like we're back on even ground once again. "That makes a lot more sense." And then he takes a bite.

"To answer your question, Parker has this thing about angry-baking. It's how she processes her feelings."

"Interesting." Bennett doesn't pause as he finishes the muffin and I take a sip of my coffee. Caramel latte, my favorite.

Then something registers. "Bennett, did you have dinner?" He ate that muffin much too quickly.

"No, I came straight from the meeting."

"Bennett! Why didn't you say something?" I reach for my bag and pull out the other muffin. "Do you want me to get you something at the restaurant?"

He grabs my hand as I stand, pulling me back down to my seat. "Kennedy, I'm okay, I

promise. Can I show you what I found?"

I sit down, narrowing my eyes. "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

I nod, but I make a mental note to check next time we meet. For a second, I'm surprised at my thoughts. I'm planning a future with him, a short one, but still. This is new and this is different.

"Okay, show me."

Bennett grins, taking a bite of the second muffin before he reaches into his bag and pulls out a book I saw him pack.

"Here." He opens it to a marked page and points at the small picture in the corner. At first, I'm not sure what I'm looking at, just a tombstone, but then I notice it.

"A thistle?" I grab my phone and shine the light on the picture, trying to see it better. There, right under the tip of the headstone is the thistle.

"It looks similar to yours, right?"

I nod because he's right. I've seen so many versions of the thistle on so many buildings and signs around Edinburgh, but never something that looks like our tattoo. This one though...there's something about it that's very similar.

"I looked it up. This tombstone is at a small cemetery in Prestonfield. I wanted you and Lilly and Parker to decide what to do. The book doesn't have much information, just that certain families carried sigils. This one has a sigil, but it also has this thistle. It might be nothing but it might be..."

"Something." I look up at him, at his careful words and soft gaze and I realize he's being extra careful with me. He doesn't want his research to cause me harm again.

"I'm doing this correctly this time," he says, and suddenly there are tears in my eyes. Bennett reacts before I realize what's happening and he's beside me on the bench seat, peering down into my face. "Kennedy? What is it?"

"Nothing. I just—" How do I put into words just how special his small considerations make me feel? How pathetic do I sound that I'm eating it up like a sunflower does the sun after an overcast day?

"Just thank you. Thank you for helping us."

"I would do—" He stops as if he's about to say too much. "I am more than happy to help." He looks like he wants to say more and I wish he would, but I also don't think now is the time. So instead, I lean my head on his shoulder and he sighs in contentment. We stay like that for a little while as the city moves in front of us.

Chapter Thirty-Two

BENNETT

"How is she? Can I see her?" I ask the moment Parker opens the door.

"Good morning, Parker. How are you?" Parker replies.

I swallow my worry and try to remember my manners. "Good morning, Parker. How are you?"

She rolls her eyes. "She's in her room."

I nod and barely manage to take my shoes off as I walk into the flat. Lily is in the kitchen and I say hi, but don't stop. Kennedy's door is ajar and I step into the doorway, my heart in my throat. When she texted me that she couldn't meet because she's sick, I went into panic mode. It's been three days since I've seen her and it feels like too long already.

"Bennett." Her voice is hoarse and she gives me a weak smile from beneath her duvet and pillows.

"I didn't know what you needed so, I brought a few things," I say by way of greeting, stepping in, and placing the bags on the bed. Parker and Lily crowd in immediately, opening the bags.

"She's got a cold, she's not on her death bed," Parker comments, pulling out three

different cold and flu medicine boxes with ten sachets each. There's also some vapor rub and tea and chocolate. Lana always says I must bring chocolate when she's sick, so I went with it.

"I'll go make this." Lily grabs the medicine sachet and moves to go, but then doubles back to grab Parker and pull her behind her. Lily throws a quick wave my way and closes the door on her way out.

"You didn't have to bring anything," Kennedy says, her voice barely above a whisper now. I reach over as she tries to sit up, moving the pillows more comfortably behind her neck.

"I know, but I might've panicked." Maybe I should be embarrassed to admit it, but suddenly I'm not. I lean forward a little, keeping my gaze steady on Kennedy's. "You're important to me, so I wanted to make sure you have everything you may need."

Kennedy's eyes grow big and I would like to close the rest of this distance and kiss her senseless, but I know now is not the time.

"Thank you," she whispers, and I lean back but a fraction.

There's a knock on the door and Lily pokes her head in. "I have the drink. Would you like it now?"

Kennedy nods, and I help her as she sits up fully. Lily hands over the cup and then retreats, closing the door again. Kennedy takes the spoon and sips a few times before she drinks from the cup. I sit on the bed, watching her patiently. Once she's done, I take the cup from her and place it on the bedside table. She sinks down into her pillows and I lean over to help her get more comfortable. Before I can move away, she reaches for my shirt, tugging it closer to her.

"Don't go."

Her voice is small, but there's a lot of feeling behind that simple phrase, and I reach over, moving some of the hair off her forehead, cupping her cheek. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Promise?" Her voice is barely audible, and I can see she's fading fast, the sleeping agent in the medicine already doing its thing, but her eyes are clear enough as she looks at me and I nod.

"I promise."

She smiles, closing her eyes, but she doesn't let go of my shirt. Without hesitation, I lean down, scooping her up, comforter and all, and move her over just enough to climb into the space beside her. She curls into me immediately, as if she's been waiting for this exact moment. Her head is buried against my chest as I wrap my arm around her shoulders.

"Bennett," she says and I glance down to find her eyes closed, but she's smiling.

"Kennedy."

"I feel really safe," she says, and it sounds like she's telling me a secret. She opens her eyes, looking up at me and then she pulls her arm from under the covers and waves it in front of us, while still looking at me.

Suddenly, the plants near the window move and I glance over to find them growing bigger, spreading out across the top of the ceiling and weaving around the curtain rod. I glance back down at Kennedy and she's looking at the plants with a self-satisfied expression before she lowers her arm to wrap around my middle and settles against me once more.

"There, that's better."

I stare at the girl in my arms before I look over at the plants she just replenished in the most beautiful way. They're greener and fuller than before and if I didn't know any better, they look happy. I tuck Kennedy closer to my body and hold her as she rests.

KENNEDY

When I open my eyes, the room is cast in shadows. I don't even remember falling asleep, but I feel more rested. Still foggy, yet clear at the same time. I'm surrounded by warmth and a weight of comfort. I shift my head and realize that the weight is more than just comfort, it's an arm. Pulling back just a little I glance up and find Bennett's face just a few inches away from me. Immediately, I start to slide away, confused about finding him in my bed, but his eyes are closed and he looks so peaceful I can't seem to move. I search through my memories, pushing through the fog...and I did this. I asked him to stay. I made him promise not to leave.

The desire to hide is overwhelming, but it's not like I can go anywhere since I'd hide in my bed, which is currently occupied by the person I'm trying to hide from.

Never in my life did I expect things to go this way. I never expected to be brave enough to leave home and I certainly didn't expect to find acceptance when it comes to my magic. I most certainly didn't plan on Bennett.

But now that I let myself imagine a future, I can't see Bennett not in it.

I have no idea what to do with that.

My eyes catch on the windows and the plants now twining around the room. They weren't this grown when I went to sleep, were they? Wait...the realization slowly

comes. I did that.

I can't believe it. Did I honestly just use my magic without thinking? And in front of him? I mean, sure he knows about magic, but it's not the same. The frequency in which he sees me use magic is increasing—what does that mean? I should be more careful. Right? And I probably came on too strong too. Who am I to be clingy? Stupid fever scrambled my brain.

Ah, yes. I can blame the fever. That's a great plan.

"Are you going through a crisis?"

I jerk my head up in time to catch an easy smile grace his handsome face, while his eyes are still closed. I push against him immediately, but he pulls me closer instead, right to his side, his arm firmly around me.

"I don't know what you mean," I reply, trying to wiggle away half-heartedly. I won't admit this out loud, but I don't actually want to get away. He feels so solid and comforting.

"Right. Because you're not overthinking every action and reaction right now like your life depends on it."

"I don't think I appreciate you seeing inside my brain like that," I mumble and he chuckles. His whole body shakes and the arm that's right around my shoulders tightens to bring me closer before he leans down to place a kiss on the top of my head. I freeze at the casual show of affection, my entire being focused on the space where his lips touched the top of my forehead. Such a simple action, but it carries so much weight. It makes me feel important and cherished at the same time.

So, instead of my signature pulling away move, I surprise both of us by snuggling

closer.

"Wow, that's all it takes?" he asks, glancing down at me. I give him a quick look and then settle back in.

"Sometimes, but don't get used to it. I'm a complicated creature."

"Don't I know it."

I slap his stomach, but he catches my hand, twining our fingers together.

"Go to sleep, Kennedy. I'll be here."

Opening my eyes once more, I stare at our entwined hands over his stomach, a sting of tears suddenly there. I blink a few times, trying to push them back down. It feels like I've carried all of these wishes inside of me, like lightning bugs trapped in a mason jar, hovering in the middle, shining, but in this one suspended space.

Now, being here in Edinburgh, it's like the mason jar has broken away from around me and all the wishes are out there, in the space around me, coming alive one by one. I have a different solid space around me now. No longer walls that hold me in, but a support system that surrounds me. I snuggle in a little closer to Bennett, exhaling softly. He rubs his arms up and down my back in a slow progression, and I relax into sleep once more.

Chapter Thirty-Three

KENNEDY

The next morning he's gone, but I wake up with no sign of fever. The space beside me is crumpled, and it makes me think he stayed until the last possible moment before he had to go. My chest fills with warmth as I sit up. My eyes are immediately on the plants that are now growing ever more robust across the window and against the wall. My room is about to become a jungle.

"Kennedy, are you awake?" There's a knock on the door and then it opens slowly, Lily and Parker's heads peek in slowly. When they see me sitting up, Lily swings the door open and they pile in.

"You're alive! And no longer delirious?" Parker drops herself on the bed beside me, in her typical dramatic fashion, but before I have a chance to reply, Lily gasps, and we turn to her standing in the middle of the room, staring at my plants.

"Kennedy, did you do that?" she asks and I glance at the plants before I look back at the girls and shrug.

"Apparently in my delusional state, I am very prone to magical showing off?" I reply, leaning back against the pillows.

"This is incredible," Parker says jumping off the bed and joining Lily in front of the plants.

"Is this your affinity?" Lily asks and I stop rearranging myself on the bed to think it over. That didn't even occur to me, but I'm already shaking my head no.

"I don't think so. We are all attached to the earth, I've never done anything special when it comes to it."

Lily and Parker come back to the bed, Parker half lying beside me, while Lily perches at the end.

"But maybe we can ask Olivia?" she asks. "Sure, I can make plants grow, but this feels like a little more, don't you think?"

I look past her shoulders at the plants. They do seem robust and bigger than a regular pothos should be when it's this young. The ZZ plant will need to be repotted for sure. I nod, because I don't see any reason not to explore this further.

"But seriously, how are you feeling?" Parker asks, gazing up at me from her position against the pillows. "Rejuvenated by your boyfriend?"

"What? No," I say, glancing at her sharply. "He just?—"

"He just stayed with you every night, cuddling you to him like he can take all of your sickness into his body or something. We were barely allowed inside."

"Wait, what?" Now I'm confused. I thought the fever went away pretty quickly after I took the medication.

"You don't remember waking up fighting some invisible monster? We ran in here thinking something was wrong, but you wouldn't calm down. Bennett stepped out to use the bathroom and you only calmed when he rushed in and pulled you into his arms."

I sit up so quickly, my head spins. I only remember the flower magic and then waking up to him teasing me and the kiss on the forehead?—

"How long have I been sick?"

"Almost three days," Lily says, her voice gentle. I stare at her in shock and then glance around my room, giving it a more thorough study.

There are a few medicines on the table, some towels resting over the edge of the chair, and my phone, now plugged in to charge. I reach for it and see the date is indeed three days later. It also shows on "do not disturb." I remove the "do not disturb" and drop it back in my lap, completely flabbergasted.

"I don't remember it at all. I got sick so suddenly, and then, nothing."

"We're not surprised," Parker says. "The fever kept you under for the majority. Bennett hardly left your side."

"I thought he was only here for a night."

"No, he only left long enough to take a shower and call his professor. And only when one of us could sit with you. Today, he had a meeting in Glasgow he couldn't reschedule, so he left to catch a train early."

I am completely taken aback by this information. I lost three days to this fever without realizing it.

"Olivia has also been by," Lily says, reaching over to squeeze my hand. "She said that your body was working through some magical issues as well."

"Magical issues?"

"Well, not issues," Parker says, throwing Lily a look. "She said that your body was probably overloaded with so much magic use lately. It's not used to it, so it's readjusting."

"Am I always going to be sick like this? How come you haven't been sick?" I've never heard of such a thing.

"Because Lily and I have been using our magic actively our whole lives. You've had yours under lock and key. It's no wonder it's too much for your body."

My head is swimming all over again, but this time from all the information. It seems unreal somehow, like it's not something that would happen to me.

"Hey, it's okay." Parker moves closer, leaning her shoulder against mine as Lily takes my hand again. "We'll get through this. You'll be a magical pro in no time and your body will adjust."

"I'm just—I'm constantly amazed by how little I know about magic. It feels like it might never get easier, but at the same time, it feels like it's easier already."

I know it's because I have these girls by my side. I can feel our connection growing deeper and deeper with each conversation, each moment spent together. They're my support system and they have helped me so much that I really want to do something in return.

My phone buzzes and I search for it in the comforter. I have messages from school and my classmates and then there are a few from Bennett.

I hope when you wake up you feel refreshed. I'm sorry I had to leave. I tried to get out of it, but I'll be back as soon as I can. xx

That was sent this morning, around five. A few hours later, there's a follow-up.

I'm bringing you some coffee and a book I found because I fully believe you're awake and well now. xx

"He is a romantic," Parker comments, looking over my shoulder. "Coffee and books are truly what you need."

"And Bennett."

Parker and I jerk our attention to Lily so fast that I nearly have whiplash. She's sitting all prim and proper at the edge of my bed, but there's a wicked gleam in her eyes. Parker and I exchange a look before we burst out laughing.

"I think you may be a bad influence on Lily," I say, poking Parker in the shoulder.

"Me? You're the one with the boyfriend."

And for the first time, I don't even want to deny it. I lean back against the pillows, cradling my phone to my chest.

"Wow, she has accepted it. We have finally arrived," Parker says and Lily laughs.

"When will he be here?" Lily asks, "Do you need help taking a shower?"

I sit up immediately, making myself slightly lightheaded, and glance down at myself. I can't believe I didn't think of this. Bennett has seen me all gross like this—I want to hide all over again.

"She's freaking out. Are you freaking out?" Parker asks and then I feel her try to pry my hands off my face. "It's too late to freak out now. He's already seen you."

"Ah!" I grunt, falling back into the pillows and trying to pull the comforter over my head. Parker and Lily tug it down and I don't miss the amusement on their faces.

"Instead of being all dramatic, why don't you just take a shower?" Parker points out. I throw a glare her way but don't argue. At least I know that after seeing me as a complete disaster, Bennett is still coming back. I hold on to that thought as I head for the bathroom.

BENNETT

I've been away from her for half a day and I miss her terribly. I'm not sure what that says about me, but I will readily admit that I am beyond smitten. While the professors were droning on about the same subjects as the last time they met up, I wonder why I'm even here. It feels like Professor Stewart just wants to make sure I'm at every possible event, but I have no idea for what.

"Did you look over the notes I sent regarding your outline?" Professor Stewart asks after we said goodbye to the department head.

"Yes, I haven't had a chance to make any changes, but that is my project for next week."

Professor Stewart is staying in Glasgow, but I have a train to catch. I can't miss it.

"Mister MacKay, what is it that has your attention so divided these days?"

His question stops me because he's not one to usually ask any kind of personal questions. It's true that I have been distracted lately, but I don't think my work has suffered any. I actually believe it's been enhanced.

"My project will be submitted on time, I assure you of that," I reply, holding his gaze.

He watches me right back, unblinking, and I wonder what exactly he's thinking about.

"See that it is," he finally says before giving me a tiny nod and turning to walk away.

I have no idea what he's all about, but I will admit that I don't particularly care. There's a very beautiful girl waiting for me in Edinburgh. Thankfully, the train is on time and when I step out of Waverley Station on Princes Street it's already dark outside. I hurry over to The Black Cat because I know Kennedy loves Olivia's coffee the best.

"There you are," Olivia greets me when I step into the café. Pet gets off her perch and walks over to where I lean against the counter. She bumps her head into my shoulder and I lift her into my arms.

"Good evening, Olivia. You good?" I greet the café owner, while I give Pet her deserved scratches. The cat begins to purr so loudly I'm sure everyone in the café can hear her.

"Things here are good. Kennedy feeling better?" I watch as Olivia reaches for a takeaway cup before I can even say anything.

"Yes, she's better. At least enough for some of your coffee." I watch her prepare it expertly. "Oh actually, could I get the girls—" I stop because Olivia points to a carrier on the counter beside her, with two other cups already in there.

"I know you by now, Bennett," she says. This woman carries warmth in everything she does and she loves those girls; I can see it. "Just let me make yours and you'll be off."

She moves back to finish up and I glance down at Pet. She gives me a look like, "what did you expect?" and then gets back to her napping.

Olivia puts the last coffee cup into the carrier and places it in front of me, but when I reach for it, she doesn't let go immediately. I look up to find her watching me with concern in her eyes. "Is everything okay?" she asks.

I open my mouth to say yes automatically but then decide against it. "My thesis project is a bit stressful at the moment. It feels like I keep doing things wrong."

"That professor of yours isn't the kindest man when it comes down to it," Olivia says and that's right. I forgot she used to teach. Kennedy had been amazed by that for days.

"He's fine. Maybe I'm too distracted."

"No such thing," Olivia waves it away immediately. "If anything, I think being in the girls' life is helpful to your project."

"How do you?—"

"I can read it on you, my boy." She reaches over and squeezes my upper arm in such a maternal way I'm suddenly blinking rapidly to keep the emotions at bay, but if the look she gives me is of any indication, I don't fool her. "Tell me, when you started this project, you were curious, correct?" I nod. "And now? Is it curiosity that's driving you or a need to help?"

The question makes me pause. Because she's right. Before it was all knowledge and past locked inside of nearly forgotten books. Now there are living and breathing people who are affected by what I find. It makes history come alive in a way I never would've imagined possible. And there is that need—the need to help, to fix everything for Kennedy so she never has to worry a day in her life. That she's accepted for this part of her being and never has to hide.

"There," Olivia's voice breaks through my thoughts, "that right there tells me that you're good for her, that you're good for all of them. This isn't some passing fancy for you, you care. And deeply at that. Don't be afraid of that."

I look at her sharply, at the way she drove straight to the point. It's true, loving someone scares me. When you're essentially abandoned as a child, those scars stay no matter how much you want to cover them up. I found a family I didn't have with Nicholas and Lana, but even though I see the world shiny and sparkly compared to some, I stick close to the surface, without letting myself dive in too deep.

The moment I met Kennedy though, it was like all of those notions were shattered. Immediately, I wanted to know her. I wanted to strip off the rose-colored glasses and see everything just how it was because around her it is all beautiful. I gave so much more of myself than I thought I did and I want to keep giving.

"Thank you," I say, giving Olivia a warm smile which she returns.

"Don't ever be afraid to come talk to me if you need to, my boy. People like us, we have to stick together."

Suddenly, I wonder about her life. What brought her to Edinburgh, what kind of life she's lived being a witch out in the world. As curious as I am, I am mostly grateful. For her being the safe haven the girls need, for having someone to guide them. It's like we're their own protective services, covering them from all sides.

"I'll be back," I tell Olivia, before carefully placing Pet in her bed and picking up the drink carrier. I'm antsy to see Kennedy.

Chapter Thirty-Four

KENNEDY

It feels like years have passed, waiting for Bennett to show up. Who have I become? Honestly, I don't recognize myself anymore, but I'm definitely not complaining.

The girls helped me clean myself up the best I could. The shower made me very tired, as if I hadn't been sleeping for days. So they made me a little nest on the couch in the main room while Parker stripped my bed and put the sheets in the wash.

"You really don't have to—" I say from my position on the couch, with pillows and blankets surrounding me. While I've been sick the girls also hung up fairy lights around the large windows, one of those kinds that flow down with the curtains. Candles are burning and the lamps are the only lights on in the room. It looks very cozy and is already lulling me back to sleep, but I fight against it.

"We know we don't have to, but we want to," Lily says, walking by with fresh sheets to put on my bed. I would argue more, but I'm too relaxed to bother. I've never been taken care of like this before. It feels nice.

Then I sit up, my eyes on something in the room I haven't seen before. I blink a few times, wondering if I'm picturing it, but no, it's still there. "Umm, guys. When did we get a television?" It's directly under the middle window and it kind of blends into the shadows with the low light of the room so I didn't even notice it until now. Parker comes back into the room, grinning.

"Don't you love it? We can officially have girl movie nights! How do you feel about 90s witchy movies?"

"But where did you get it?" I ask, just as Lily comes back into the room as well.

"Bennett got it for us," she says matter-of-factly.

"What?"

"The TV. Bennett got us the TV." Parker waves in the direction of the object while Lily slaps her lightly on the shoulder.

"Parker asked Bennett if he knew of a good place to get a television," Lily says, coming to perch on the edge of the couch. "And he gave us his. He said he hasn't turned it on in months, so it's just been sitting in his flat."

"He just gave it to us?"

"I think he had ulterior motives," Parker says, plopping herself into one of the chairs.

"Like what?" Lily asks.

"Like movie nights with his girlfriend?" Parker says it like we're dumb for not thinking it first.

"Then he should've kept it upstairs," I mumble and then slap a hand over my mouth. Too late. They both heard me.

"Oh, someone wants to be alone with her man. This is progressing very nicely." Parker drums her fingers against each other like a villain in a cartoon.

"You are awfully invested in my love life."

" And she's calling it a love life!"

I roll my eyes and give her a look, but she's only grinning while Lily tries to contain her giggles.

"You should be worried about your own," I comment, raising an eyebrow at her.

"My own love life is nonexistent, so I will continue to live vicariously through you."

Before I can comment on that, there's a knock on the front door and Parker jumps to her feet. My heart leaps in my chest, my whole body suddenly a few degrees warmer. I rearrange my hair, pulling it behind my ears before changing my mind and pulling it in front of me. It's mostly dry now from the shower I took earlier, a little frizzy and slightly wavy, and maybe I should've done something more with it, but it's too late now. I can feel the moment he steps into the room.

Breathe through it, Kennedy. You can do it.

Turning, I meet his eye over the top of the couch. It hits me all over again just how handsome he is—maybe even more so than when I met him because I know him now. His hair is disheveled in its typical fashion and he didn't even pause to take his long coat off. He's holding a carrier with four coffee cups, and that brings that warmth to my chest again. He's also staring at me like he hasn't seen me in a year, his eyes roaming over me a few times as if to make sure I'm intact. I give him a little wave and his body physically relaxes.

"Well, you kids have fun," Parker says, coming up behind Bennett, wearing her coat. He turns to her just as Lily comes back in as well, carrying her coat.

"You're leaving?" I ask and she nods.

"Yes, we're dying for some cof—" She stops abruptly, glancing at the cups in Bennett's hands, and reaches over to take them quickly. "I mean, we're dying for some of Ben's Cookies and we just can't wait."

I raise an eyebrow at her as she rounds her eyes in my direction and then Lily is linking her arm through Parker's and pulling her away.

"We'll see you later," she says. "Thank you for the coffee."

They're out the door in the next minute and Bennett turns to me, amusement dancing in his eyes. "Should I be offended?"

"I think you should be flattered."

He grins, placing the two leftover coffee cups on the table before he walks over to shed his coat. When he comes back, he's wearing one of his forest green pullovers and dark jeans. He grabs the cups and walks over to the couch. I push some of the cushions aside so he can sit and he hands over the cup before settling beside me. I take a deep inhale, enjoying the aroma, before I take a sip. I swear Olivia's coffee is magic itself because nothing tastes as good.

When I glance up, I find Bennett watching me, a small smile on his face.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Rude."

"Sometimes."

I roll my eyes and he chuckles. I send him a glare and he shrugs. I pout a little over my cup and he groans. "Not fair."

"I don't know what you mean," I grin.

He blinks a few times, as if blinded by the sun, and then relents. "You look beautiful, that's all."

There he goes again, with his matter-of-fact statements. If I was warm before, I'm scorching hot now. I want to hide under the covers all over again, but I doubt that makes me look normal. Instead, I try to pretend I am.

"I heard you gave us your TV." I change the subject, but I can tell Bennett does not miss my incredibly rosy cheeks. He's enjoying every second of this.

"I figured it'll serve you better."

Looking at him, he really feels completely unbothered by just handing over a television. Once again, I'm amazed at how genuinely good-natured he is. Unlike anything my aunt has ever warned me about. Even though she wouldn't admit it, I think she would like him. but I guess that's not a conversation we're going to be having—ever.

"Hey, where did you go just now?" Bennett's soft voice breaks through my thoughts and I turn to find him watching me with concern.

I give him a small shrug, which I'm sure is much sadder than I want it to be. "I was thinking about my aunt," I admit. "She—we haven't talked since I've been here, considering I've been basically banned from her presence till the end of time, but

sometimes, I miss her. I mean, she's the only parent I remember, even if she didn't do so much parenting."

"Your parents?"

"I don't know much about them. Only that they disappeared when I was a baby. My aunt thinks they were in a train accident, but the bodies were never recovered. I don't even have any pictures of them."

"Your aunt doesn't?"

"If she does, she's never shared them."

When I was younger, I thought about this a lot. Not just not having parents, but not even knowing what they looked like. It does a lot to a kid who's already struggling with her identity. My aunt didn't know how to parent; she mostly left me to my own devices. I basically raised myself, but still, she's the only family I have.

"That must be really difficult," Bennett says, his accent a little more pronounced with emotion behind his words, and I immediately want to hug him. He doesn't apologize, like so many people do. He just understands the difficulty and acknowledges it. I glance at his face and then at his chest, and he reads me like an open book. He takes the coffee cup from my hands and places it next to his on the coffee table. Then he sits back and opens his arms for me. I lean into them instantly. His warmth envelops me in a way that seeps into my very soul. There's comfort here, but also a promise that I'm not as alone as I think I am.

"Thank you for staying with me," I say, my voice a little muffled against his chest.

"You don't have to thank me for something that's a given."

I pull back a little to look up into his face and he glances down, giving me a soft look.

"That's how that works?" I ask.

"Absolutely." There's finality in his tone that shouldn't surprise me at this point. "You better get used to it."

"Which part?"

"All of it. I'm not going anywhere."

His words aren't just empty promises; I can feel it like I can feel my magic. I want to offer him all the promises in return, but I don't want him to think I'm only doing it because he has. So for now, I simply squeeze him tighter and settle in closer, letting him know that I want him by my side.

I feel his lips on the top of my head and I kind of hope he never stops doing that. It makes me feel like the most important person on the planet.

"I heard if you have a TV," I say, "you have movie nights."

Bennett chuckles, his chest shaking under my cheek. "Whoever has been spreading the rumors is correct," he says, and then reaches for the remote, taking me with him. He settles back on the couch, pulling me closer, and turns the television on. When he settles on the movie, I don't even care what it is. Because all I want is to keep him beside me for the duration of it.

And then forever.

Chapter Thirty-Five

KENNEDY

"Are you sure about this?" Bennett asks as we get off the bus. I'm too distracted to answer because he takes my hand in his, locking our fingers together like it's the most natural thing in the world.

It's been three days since our movie night and it's the weekend. I'm feeling like myself again, so of course I insisted we come check on the cemetery with the mysterious thistle headstone. Now I'm more focused on the feel of his skin against mine and maybe I'm not as over my fever as I thought.

"Kennedy?"

"Huh?" I glance up to find him watching me, that soft look back on his face. I swear he doesn't need any magic to be able to read my mind. I force myself to at least appear normal as I straighten my shoulders and clear my throat. "Yes, what?"

"I asked if you're sure about this," he says, smiling. He squeezes my hand once, scrambling my brain all over again, but I fight through it.

"Yes, why wouldn't I be?"

"Because you're just getting over being sick and it's okay if you don't want to do this right now."

"We're already here, Bennett. Let's get on with it."

I appreciate the concern, but we can't keep putting it off. I want to know more about my magic and how it connects to Edinburgh. I need answers, not just a constant flow of questions.

We cross the street and head inside the cemetery, hand in hand. Compared to other cemeteries in the city, this one is on the small side. There's a quaint cottage at the entrance and three pathways spreading out from it.

"Any ideas?"

I shake my head no, because while we tried to see where the tombstone was in the cemetery, we couldn't pinpoint it. There's no name on it, no matter how closely we looked at the picture and nothing in the text around it. It's a wonder Bennett noticed the thistle at all.

"Let's head this way," I say, pulling Bennett to the right.

The trees here are large, but without the leaves, they look extra menacing. It would take us too long to check every tombstone because even though the cemetery is smaller, there are a plethora of tombstones.

I stop abruptly, pulling Bennett beside me.

"What is it?"

"I want to try something."

I have no idea if it'll work or what exactly is possessing me, but the moment the idea enters my mind, I have to follow through. There's so much about my magic that is left

undiscovered, and I hope that with time, we won't be strangers but friends. Every time I get an inkling of my magic, I have decided to follow through. So here goes nothing.

Bennett watches me, a quiet encouragement on his face and I offer him a quick determined nod before I take a deep breath and close my eyes.

According to Olivia, every witch has a connection to the earth. We are part of the intricate balance of the way things work and our magic can be the enrichment it needs. Once I find my affinity, it'll be that much easier to understand where in the balance spectrum I stand, but for now, I can work with the basics.

I let my magic unfurl, and it stretches slowly, as if it doesn't want to pull any muscles after being in one position for too long. As it moves, I don't have a particularly clear idea of what I'm doing, but I give my magic a nudge to look for any kind of energy. It's not exactly the best idea, considering Edinburgh is brimming with magical energy, but it's the only thing I can think of, so I go with it.

My magic continues to move slowly, as if stopping by each tombstone to read the names. Bennett's hand is still holding mine and I use that as an anchor. I don't rush and I don't try anything I'm not comfortable with; I simply walk. Or my magic does. When it suddenly perks up, I know it has found something. I open my eyes to find Bennett watching me. He's wearing that same look in his eyes that always takes my breath away—like he's completely amazed by me.

"Wow," he breathes out.

"What?"

"You're just—incredible."

I'm not sure how he can tell, considering I didn't do any visual magic, but I don't comment, letting his praise soak into me. Tugging on his arm, I pull him along as we head toward the middle of the cemetery. There are a few hills along the pathway and then, along the back wall, there are plaques overgrown with ivy. Bennett and I head past the hill and toward them. I give myself a moment, calling up my magic once more, and then the energy almost slaps me in the face. I turn my head sharply to the left, to the overgrown area of the wall, and pull Bennett toward it.

Ivy grows all over Edinburgh, usually on the trees in cemeteries and the outer walls. It's beautiful and green for most of the year, and right now, it covers a whole panel of tombstones on the wall.

"What are we looking at?"

I see why Bennett is asking because this looks nothing like the picture we saw in the book, but the pull of magic is undeniable.

I drop Bennett's hand and step closer, pushing some of the ivy away. It takes a little rearranging so I don't disturb the plant, but finally, a tombstone etched into the wall peeks through. The name is mostly worn off and there's barely any of the design left on it. I push at the ivy until I reach the top of the tombstone. My heart is beating in anticipation and I don't remember holding my breath, but I am. I pull the ivy back and there it...isn't.

"It's not here," I say, glancing back at Bennett. He steps closer to look over the plaque.

"But your magic called you?"

"It did. I don't understand."

Maybe it's a me problem. I mean, I'm not exactly well acquainted with it, so maybe I messed something up.

"It's okay. We'll figure it out," Bennett says and I don't want to feel discouraged, but if I can't even do this simple type of magic, what good am I to the girls? Even as I think that, I know I felt something. This isn't just me being bad at magic, it's something else. Maybe? I don't actually know.

I take a step closer to the tombstone again and this time, I reach out. I run my fingers lightly over the edges until I reach the top, where the thistle is supposed to be. I'm not sure why, but I feel the urge to trace the thistle there. With my right hand, the one that carries the tattoo, I begin to draw the thistle over the tombstone. Before I even finish, I feel a slight pinch. Almost like I touched some electricity and then the thistle is suddenly there.

"Kennedy—" My name is but a whisper on Bennett's lips and I turn to grin at him. Then I look back at the thistle and this time, I don't hesitate to touch it. That's when everything goes dark.

BENNETT

I can't believe we actually found it. Well, more importantly, Kennedy found it. Watching her do magic brings an immense kind of joy to me. I don't understand it, but whenever she wants to perform magic in front of me, she is more than welcome. I don't think she realizes how much she glows when she's in her element. And magic is definitely her element. It's like she carries this radiance around her; the moment she lets her magic out she becomes even more breathtaking.

The grin she gives me is staggering and then she reaches for the thistle again and I hope this finally brings the answers they've been looking for.

Then something changes.

The moment her fingers touch the thistle, she freezes. Her body goes completely rigid.

"Kennedy?" I call her name but she doesn't turn. She doesn't give any indication that she heard me. Cautiously, I step around to see her face and find her eyes open, looking at something but not seeing. "Kennedy?" I try again because I don't want to disturb her if something is happening, but she doesn't register me at all. I have no idea what to do. If she's performing some magic or seeing something, I don't want to interrupt. But how long do I leave her like this? What if something goes wrong? We should've brought the girls with us.

I watch her for what seems like hours, but it's probably only minutes when she starts crying. I move closer immediately, but she's still frozen, with only tears pouring down her cheeks now.

"Kennedy?"

Still nothing and now, I know I can't just let her be. A magpie flies right over my head, almost jerking me into action. I reach for my phone to dial Parker, but before I can the phone begins to ring. Her name flashes on the screen.

"What's wrong?" Parker asks by way of greeting.

I'm not even surprised she knows before I tell her. These girls are connected.

"Kennedy found the thistle and when she touched it, something happened. I think she's in a trance and she's crying. I can't reach her."

"Where are you?" I can hear Lily's voice in the background as I give Parker the

address. "We'll be right there."

Parker disconnects and I pocket the phone before I step in front of Kennedy again. I could pull her hand away from the thistle, but I have no idea what that would do. I don't know what's happening and I feel absolutely helpless.

The only thing I can think of is being here. So I reach for her hand and take it into mine. Her skin feels hot to the touch, the kind of hot that comes with a fever. Concern beats in time with the rhythm of my heart and I would do anything to be able to understand what's happening. It feels like Kennedy is going through something alone and I want to be there to share the burden. I wipe at her cheeks gently, hoping that whatever it is, I can at least be here for her in the aftermath.

"Bennett!" Parker's voice carries across the cemetery and I have no idea how much time has passed while I've stood here holding Kennedy's hand.

"We're here!" I shout back. "By the back wall."

The girls come through the trees a minute later, both looking flustered. Their eyes are on Kennedy immediately and they crowd in around her.

"She hasn't moved," I say, still holding her hand, "but I think she stopped crying."

"Tell us exactly what happened," Lily says and I do.

When I finish, the girls exchange a look. Lily pulls out her phone and takes a step back.

"Olivia, we need your help," Lily says, walking away.

"What is it?" I ask.

"I think she's seeing the past, but maybe not just seeing it, experiencing it. I felt her despair all the way across town," Parker replies.

"That's why you called," I say and Parker nods. "How do we get her back?"

"We anchor her to the present," Lily replies, coming back with the phone to her ear. "Olivia wants to know how long have you been holding her hand?"

I glance down at Kennedy's hand and then at the girls. "Since I hung up the phone with you?"

"Good," Lily says, nodding, "Olivia said you helped. Now it's our turn. Okay, I will." She says the last part to the phone and then hangs up. "Parker."

Lily steps up beside me and reaches for Kennedy's hand, the one I'm holding.

"I will hold on to her here and Parker will hold on to her there," she points to the hand touching the thistle, "and we pull her back, okay?"

I nod. I let Lily take my place beside Kennedy and it's very difficult to let go of her hand. Lily takes it and Parker moves to stand beside her, placing her left hand over Kennedy's on top of the tombstone. Lily and Parker then join hands with each other, creating a circle.

They close their eyes and a sudden wind rushes through the cemetery, sending everything spinning. I stumble back a few steps, just so I'm in no way hindering whatever is happening here. The wind continues to play with their hair and the leaves spinning around them. They don't speak and they don't move, they simply hold onto each other as the wind twirls. Then, as suddenly as the wind came, it's gone. The girls open their eyes and glance at Kennedy who blinks, shaking her head a little, and I exhale. She looks at the girls and then her knees buckle.

I rush forward, catching her before she can hit the ground.

"My hero," she mumbles, before she passes out completely.

Chapter Thirty-Six

KENNEDY

When I come to, it takes me a moment to figure out where I'm at. The familiar space takes shape and I realize I'm lying on our couch, the large bay windows in front of me. There's a blanket around my shoulders and a pillow below my head. This is the second time within a week that I've been disoriented. I don't like this habit.

"Kennedy." Bennett's voice pulls my attention and I find him at the end of the couch.

Lily and Parker are in the chairs and they sit up immediately.

"Are you with us?"

"Are you okay?"

They fire off questions as I pull myself to a sitting position. Bennett is immediately there, helping me get situated. Before he can move back, I grab his hand and lace our fingers together, pulling him closer. He settles beside me, wrapping the hand that's holding mine over my shoulder, so I'm not flush against him.

Parker hands me a glass of water and I take a few sips before I reply. "I'm okay and I'm in the present. Thank you." I nod at the girls and then look up at Bennett. "I underestimated the magic."

"What do you mean?" Bennett asks.

"You know how we thought that relics hold memories. When we went to The Witches Well, I didn't understand it at the time, but I think I felt the sadness and the injustice almost radiating off the memorial. This time? It was like I was pulled right in. I was in this home, full of plants and all kinds of trinkets and warmth." I take a deep breath, feeling all those emotions again. "There was a family—a family of witches—and they had the thistle over the fireplace. People would come to them for answers; they were the coven that was the leaders of their time. A time of much unrest in Scotland." I snuggle closer to Bennett, needing the reassurance of him beside me. Parker and Lily watch me with rapt attention, and I wish I could show them what I saw, instead of just talking about it. "They were so happy. They worked together to keep the balance of the leylines and guide the other witches in the city."

"Leylines?" Bennett asks.

"Yes, Edinburgh is built on top of some of the most powerful leylines and these witches were tasked with protecting them."

"Is that what our job is as well?" Lily asks.

I shrug. "I don't know. I don't know what our job truly is, but I feel like we need to develop our connection to the city."

"What do you mean by that?" Parker asks.

I sit up a little and Bennett changes our handholding, allowing me to push away from him, so I can face the girls. "Think about it. We received the tattoo after coming to the city and touching the fountain. Ever since then, the city has been trying to get our attention. The search for the relics, it's a connection to this land. When we went to the forest, we opened the door, but it seems we haven't fully walked through it."

"Makes sense," Lily says slowly, "but how are we supposed to connect to the city

more?"

"Do we go around touching every historical building or artifact?" Parker asks.

"I'm not sure, but we've been doing our research separately, only performing magic individually. Maybe we need to do that together."

I glance at Bennett, giving him an apologetic smile, but there's only pride shining in his eyes. I think he understands I'm not trying to exclude him, I'm only trying to figure this out so I can include him in everything.

"What do you suggest?" Lily asks and I turn my attention back to the girls.

"I think that's part of where we need to figure it out together? We can also go to the fountain and ask it for help?" I say the words before I think too much about them, but the moment I do, they make perfect sense. "We've never really done that."

I think back to the images of the witches in my vision. They would ask the earth all kinds of questions as they went about their day. It was like a continuous open conversation. But myself specifically, I have always struggled with having that kind of a relationship with my magic. Simply because I was taught to fear it. I could never be friends with something I was afraid of. But I'm not so afraid anymore.

"When you were in the vision," Bennett begins, and I glance at him, "you were crying."

I remember it, the force of being in the vision, of seeing their relationship—their love for each other. "It was so staggering," I say, holding his gaze. "They weren't blood, but they were family in the purest form. They supported each other, they argued and made up, and no matter what, they loved each other. That in itself is the most beautiful magic I've seen."

The tears are back in my eyes simply because I don't have to hide my emotions anymore. My whole life I've been shamed for being who I am, and here was a visual representation of everything I ever wanted. I feel a slight pressure on my right side as Parker squeezes in beside me and Lily sits on the coffee table, both of them grabbing my free hand.

"We are that family now," Lily says and I glance between the two girls and then at Bennett. Surrounded by them, I feel the same sense of belonging I felt in the vision, but now it's my own. They are my family and it's the best family I could've asked for.

BENNETT

It's been a few days since the cemetery and I've been so busy I haven't had a chance to spend any time with Kennedy. I think it's okay, considering she and the girls have been doing a lot of bonding. If nothing else, the vision solidified Kennedy's knowledge that she has something precious with the girls—the kind of sisterhood people only dream about. Now it's like all three of them are obsessed with getting closer.

The timing is kind of perfect in the sense that Professor Stewart decided to be extra annoying about my project. By annoying I mean he's giving me some money for travel outside of Edinburgh for research. He's mentioned the Witches Stone so much that I know he finds it very important for my research. Before, when I was focusing on more well-known areas of history, he wasn't that interested. Now he's being pushy and not even trying to hide it anymore.

"It has been said that Forres is known for its large magical output," Professor Stewart is saying as I look over the notes he sent. I glance up from my laptop, narrowing my eyes at him.

"Magical output?" He hasn't referenced magic directly before, but I know that I've

made a few mentions in my outline and notes.

"You said you were looking for places that were known for large magical deposits. There's, of course, the better-known historical places in the city, but the small villages around the country can be just as fascinating if given the chance." Professor Stewart speaks slowly, as if I'm not understanding the words. "I have given you multiple entry points according to different lore, but the Witches Stone would be the best option for your concentration. If you want this thesis to be something that has the potential to be published, you would be wise to listen to me."

"Oh."

I guess he has been reading my notes and outline. Because I've been distracted, every time we meet I feel like I'm doing everything wrong, but maybe I just haven't given him enough credit when it comes right down to it.

"I know it feels like I'm being quite overbearing when it comes to this project," he continues and I try to keep my face free of any expression, "but it's only because I know you can do an amazing job on this. Better job than any of my students in the past. You have a passion for this side of Scottish history, something I haven't seen in a long time. Honestly, something I've been looking for. I want to nurture it."

Instantly, I feel terrible about every bad thing I've thought about him or any of my annoyances. There's a reason he's one of the top professors at the university. I felt like he's been looking over my shoulder, but he's only been trying to help. I should be more grateful he has been so supportive. I feel guilty about being so difficult. After all, he's only trying to help.

I glance at the clock. Kennedy and I aren't supposed to see each other until tomorrow night, so if I take the train now, I can spend the night and return in the morning. "I can take a survey trip today if you'd like," I say. It's only nine in the morning, which

leaves me with plenty of time to find a train. I don't want to waste Professor Stewart's kindness.

"I think that is a wonderful idea. I know I have been harping on you for this, and I will try to be more understanding of your personal life. Maybe this could be an opportunity. There's a very nice restaurant near there that would be a good date spot, if you have anyone in mind."

I nod, my mind immediately on Kennedy. I'm sure she'd love to go with me, but I know she's at the university for most of the day and she has plans with the girls tonight. I can't take her away from any of that, even though I'd love her company.

This is my project though; I need to take responsibility for it.

After a quick goodbye to the professor, I find myself on a train to Forres within the hour. It's almost straight north from Edinburgh and takes about four hours to arrive. This would've been an amazing opportunity to spend more time with Kennedy. I'm a bit disappointed I'm going alone and not taking the professor's suggestion on a date spot, but truthfully, I haven't found much information on the Witches Stone that would be useful to the girls, so it feels like it would be a waste of a trip for them. Spending time together to nurture their magic is more important right now.

At least I can play a small part and take some pictures for the girls. I'm not sure how reliable local lore is when it comes to this place having lots of 'magical deposits,' but if it does, then the girls should definitely visit together. If this is something I can do for them, then I'm more than willing to take the long trip, and it wouldn't feel like a waste of time.

I'm heading out of town on a quick errand for the professor. Will be back by tomorrow night for dinner? xx

It takes Kennedy less than thirty seconds to reply.

Oh? Everything good?

Yes, he's been very insistent but helpful. I want to repay his kindness.

Of course you do. Make sure to eat. See you tomorrow xx

I stare at the simple message, no longer surprised by how it fills me with so much joy. Being with Kennedy is the most natural thing in the world. I never want to take it for granted.

Have you fallen into an alternate dimension?

A message comes in before I can stop grinning at my phone and I shake my head at Lana's dramatics.

Yes. It's a dimension where you're less annoying.

I knew it. Even in a different dimension, I'm still there. You can't get away from me. Muah haha.

What do you want, pest?

I shake my head and chuckle. In the last few years, she's really stepped into her personality. I'm proud to say I have for sure been an influence. Being a big brother has been a gift.

When are you bringing your girlfriend to dinner? I miss Kennedy! I need girl time!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

You have plenty of friends. What do you mean girl time?

None of my friends are as cool as Kennedy or have stolen your heart the way she has. I am fascinated.

I groan out loud, but honestly, I'm loving this. Nicholas and Lana are my family, the way Lily and Parker have become Kennedy's. We don't need blood to be a family and I'm always thankful for that fact.

I'll ask Kennedy and get back to you.

See that you do

I shake my head at her use of angry emojis and put my phone away. I have about three hours before I arrive and I can use that time to type out some notes.

When the train announces we've arrived, I didn't even realize that much time had gone by. I pack up my things, grab my bag, and disembark.

The town is on the Moray Coast and I instantly feel the cooler air. I make sure my coat is buttoned as I head into town. According to the research, the Witches Stone is near the police station, so I head that way.

The town is typically Scottish, with its small buildings and old towers. I never get tired of all the history that surrounds me. It doesn't take me long and when I reach the police station, it takes me a few minutes to locate the boulder. The boulder itself isn't much to look at but the plaque above it speaks of the horrors of this place.

"From Cluny Hill, witches were rolled in stout barrels through which spikes were driven. Where the barrels stopped they were burned with their mangled contents. This stone marks the site of one such burning."

My heart hurts as I read the words and I think back to what Kennedy said at The Witches Well. People fear what they don't understand. For some reason, it makes me want to swear right here and right now that I won't fear Kennedy or her magic. I will always try to understand it.

It's important to me that when Kennedy thinks of family, she thinks of me too. I want to be her family, I want to be to her what she is to me—my destiny.

I can't tell if there's anything here, but I take a few pictures and hope that when I return to Kennedy, she'll be able to tell if this place truly is magical. Maybe I'm just having unrealistic expectations when it comes to my role in this magical scavenger hunt. I want to help so desperately, but I don't know how. I'll just keep collecting information and giving it to the girls. That's the best I can do.

I reach over to touch the stone briefly, giving it its due respect when something inside of me breaks, and all I feel is pain.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

KENNEDY

"Y ou sure we shouldn't be going to the fountain with this?" Parker asks as Lily and I sit around the table at The Black Cat. We came here as soon as we were done at the university, and Olivia didn't hesitate to close the café down.

"We don't want to keep having you close the café on our behalf," Lily says.

Olivia waves her away. "Don't be silly, my darlings. This is exactly what I'm here for."

We filled her in on all of our discoveries and realizations and she listened with a small smile on her face. "I'm so proud of all of you and how far you've come."

It doesn't feel like we've come far at all, but maybe we have. Olivia has encouraged us to keep searching for the truth, instead of giving us all the information upfront because according to her, what we find on our own will be far more useful to us.

"Now, for this connecting to the city thing, how do we do it?" Parker asks. "I had this image of us jumping into the fountain, but I don't think people would react to that favorably."

Olivia chuckles, shaking her head. "No, I don't think that's the best way. Let's start with connecting to each other first. Take each other's hands."

Pet gets off her perch and walks over to sit behind Olivia on the counter, her eyes on us as if she's here to observe as well. Lily, Parker, and I clasp hands, a slight buzz rushing over my skin at the contact. I glance at the girls and know they feel it too.

"Good, you're becoming more attuned to each other and your magic," Olivia says, and I feel it too. It's there, our connection and our magic. It's like my magic is spending quality time with the other's magic. It's a strange sensation and not something I've ever thought would happen to me.

"Now, Lily and Parker have found their affinity—water and mind. Kennedy, can you feel it?"

I automatically want to say no, but I stop. There's something there...I feel it. It's like an extra flavor on top of a standard cupcake frosting. The magic tastes sweet and even slightly sweeter, in different ways, coming from Parker and Lily.

"Expand on that. Reach out like you would reach out to a friend. Let it come forward in all of you."

I know the girls are listening to her instructions the same way I am—almost instinctually. I don't have to think about it as her words register and I do what she says. I feel the happiness in my magic and I realize it's in me too. A quiet comfort, a sense of belonging.

Focusing on Parker, I find her just as pleased as I am. Next is Lily, and she's radiating it. My mind flies to Bennett, and I wonder if I can show this to him, this sense of magical happiness. I think he'd love?—

A sudden pain pierces me straight through my middle and I double over, gasping.

"Kennedy?" I hear my name called, but I can't tell who says it as I try to work

through the agony.

An image of Bennett, on the ground, in pain flashes behind my eyelids and I focus my whole attention on what I'm seeing. I can tell it's an image and not my imagination. This is real. He's somewhere and he's hurt. It's his pain I'm feeling. I pry my eyes open and stare at the girls. I'm gripping their hands so tightly, I'm cutting off circulation, but I don't have to explain, because they know. They felt it too.

"Kennedy, what did you see?" Olivia asks and I'm not sure why I'm seeing anything. I'm not the one with the mind affinity. "You're connected to Parker and you're channeling her power because your heart is involved. What did you see?"

"Bennett. In pain, in trouble. I don't know where he is." I push words past my lips, as more waves of pain come. The girls squeeze my hands as if they're pushing their own power into me, but even as I try to see where he's at, I can't.

I drop their hands and reach for my phone. He was running an errand for the professor. I dial Bennett's number, but it goes straight to voicemail.

"He was going somewhere for Professor Stewart, but I don't know where."

"For Stewart?" Olivia's voice carries an extra sense of something as she says his name. I know she told us to be cautious of him, but what can he really do?

"I have to find him. I have to find him right now."

My whole body is vibrating with intense magic and the chairs, tables, and various items on the bar begin to follow suit. There's a noise outside and I glance in time to see a magpie flapping her wings right outside.

"Kennedy, you need to breathe through it. Think, what can you do..."

"What can we do?" Lily asks, but I'm shaking my head. I have no idea. I just need to find him; he needs me. If I'm this powerful magical being then the least I should be able to do is find him.

He's on the ground, near some rocks and grass and?—

A thought grips me, something wild and something I've never pictured before, but I can't stop it the moment it arrives. "Outside. I need to be outside."

I don't even stop to grab my coat as I race for the door. I feel the girls following me but I don't stop. The magpie flies out in front of me, and I follow her immediately because it feels right, like she's always been leading me.

My thoughts are on Bennett and I let my magic and the magpie guide me. I can't let anything happen to him. Not when I found my other half in him—my perfect partner. The one thing that my aunt always said I could never have because I'm a witch. The reality of the truth hits me like a ton of bricks.

Bennett is mine—he's my destiny. I know it, I feel it, I believe it.

Nearly tripping over my feet, I race for the top of the hill. The castle looms above me but surprisingly I don't head for the entrance.

Follow .

I can't tell if the voice inside my head is my own but I follow automatically. The magpie veers toward the side opposite The Witches Well, toward the green space on the side of the hill. I'm sure I look wild to people as I run past, but I don't even care. The moment I'm near the stairs leading down, I duck under the railing and drop to my hands and knees next to the bird. My hands plunge directly into the dirt and I push my magic out.

"Help me find him. Please. Help me find him."

My magic freezes for a second, as if surprised, and then it unfurls with incredible speed. I can feel it moving through the earth, searching. My skin feels hot, but it's not an unpleasant sensation—more like a welcomed heat. Instead of separating from magic, I'm starting to follow along, almost like she's taking me on a journey.

She—and I—we are one but I am also feeling every part of her race through the ground and the ground itself. The plants, the trees, the earth itself— this is my affinity. I'm an earth witch. I'm not sure why I didn't realize it sooner, but now that I do, the pieces fall into place. My wrist burns near the tattoo, but I don't pull my attention from Bennett. And then, I see him. He's on the side of the road, near a boulder with a plaque. I ask for direction and then I know.

"He's in Forres," I say. I stand, turning to the girls who are behind me, Parker is holding my coat out to me. I take it as I step back over to the stairs. "How do we get to Forres?"

Olivia drives. She was waiting down the stairs from us in her car. I don't see the bird again, but I can feel she's near. The girls lead me to the car and nearly stuff me in the back because I am in shock. I can't tell if it's from using so much magic or from the realization of just how much Bennett means to me.

"I called the police station," Lily's words reach out to me and I refocus on her. "They found him and took him to the hospital. He's...not awake."

I nod because that's all I'm capable of doing and Parker reaches over to take my hand, squeezing it tightly. I hold on to her like an anchor, keeping myself from floating off into hysteria. All I keep thinking about are the words I haven't said and the things I haven't done. What if something is terribly wrong with Bennett? Do normal people just experience excruciating pain and pass out on the side of the road?

"Kennedy, we're here." Parker tugs on my hand and I realize the car has stopped.

"Already?"

"I may have called in a favor," Olivia says and I have a lot of questions, but none of them are important right now because we're here. I get out of the car in front of an old building and then I'm running before I can think too much about it.

Bursting inside, I startle two men standing at the front desk, both dressed in police uniforms.

"I—"

"We're here to see Bennett MacKay," Lily announces, her voice much calmer than whatever noise I just made. The men's faces light up with understanding and they lead us to a room down the hall.

"They're not sure what's wrong with him," one of the men says, "There doesn't seem to be any external factors, and the scan came back normal. He's just not responding."

The door opens then and there he is.

I rush inside, my eyes roaming every inch of him and he looks so tired. Even with his eyes closed, it's like there's an air of exhaustion around him. I reach for his hand, and then immediately pull back as something shocks me. It feels like static electricity but that's not it. It's almost like it's...magic.

Vaguely I hear Olivia say something to the officers and lead them out of the room as Parker and Lily come to stand by the bed.

"You feel it, right?" I ask, glancing up at them from my position beside Bennett. They

both nod, as confused as I am. Bennett isn't magical, he shouldn't be omitting any kind of magical energy or signature, but it's here, I can feel it.

I reach behind my neck and pull the necklace Parker gave me over my head. The amethyst is known to repel evil and put a barrier of protection and that's the first thing I want—to protect Bennett. I place the necklace on his chest, holding it there for a moment, the feel of magic becoming stronger.

"Stop!" I jerk my hand back at Olivia's voice and turn to see her coming back into the room. "You have to sever the connection first."

"What? I don't understand."

Olivia stops near the girls, her eyes doing the exact perusal I did over Bennett, but it seems like she's looking deeper. She holds out her hand and the amethyst flies off his chest and into her open palm.

"Take a step back, my darlings," she says, doing so as well.

I don't want to move an inch from Bennett, but I can't deny the way Olivia is looking right now. There's a seriousness about her that I've never seen before. She looks like she's ready to go to battle.

"Olivia, what is it?" Parker asks, as she and Lily reach for me, each taking one of my hands, as if they too need to feel the connection.

"A spell," Olivia replies, walking around the bed, as she continues to look at something we can't see. She doesn't move any closer, as if whatever spell this is might reach her as well. We watch as she lifts Bennett's arms, one at a time, with her magic, looking for something. I know the moment she finds it because I'm watching her like my life depends on it.

"Olivia?"

"Here," she points to a spot on the inside of Bennett's right elbow, right near the vein. At first I don't see anything, but then the longer I look, the clearer it becomes. It's a mark—but not quite. It's as if it's been tattooed in very light white ink, only visible if you truly look for it.

"It looks like a branch?" Lily asks, narrowing her eyes. She's right. It's a branch, at the end of which looks like a collection of spikes and then berries.

"A Yew Tree," Olivia says and her tone is of someone who understands the meaning of it.

"A tree?"

"Trees, like flowers, have a long standing history when it comes to our powers," Olivia says, placing Bennett's arm back down on the bed. "And just like with every part of magic, it always depends on who wields it."

"I don't understand."

"There is a...coven—although I use that term very loosely—there's a collection of people who want power for themselves. They wear the mark of the yew tree."

"But trees offer protection and knowledge," Parker says, confusion on her face. "The Rowan tree is viewed as one of the integral parts of Scottish magic. I don't?—"

"It's all about how one uses it," Olivia says, looking up to meet each of our eyes in turn. I'm not sure what I expected to see in her gaze, but it's not the anger. "They take what is beautiful and twist it for their own gain. This spell is draining Bennett's energy."

"But he's only a human."

"It wasn't meant for him." She meets my eye, holding it steadily.

Then it hits me; it was meant for me. I was supposed to be here. He's been my go-to partner in all things magical research and it put him in the direct crosshairs. Someone knows about me and my power, and they've tried to use it against me.

"It's not your fault," Parker and Lily say automatically, as if they can read my mind, but I still feel responsible. If I didn't decide to work with him, if I kept him away—magic, used for evil is the one thing my aunt has warned me about my whole life and now it's happening and I'm directly involved in it. There is no way I don't feel responsible.

"They're right. He would've been in trouble anyway. Maybe not now, but eventually." Olivia's calm voice tugs something at the back of my mind, momentarily staving off the internal dread and allowing me to focus on her.

"You know who's behind the spell," I say and the girls look at Olivia.

She nods, the anger still present, but it softens a little when she looks at Bennett.

"Stewart."

"Bennett's supervisor?" Parker asks, and of course, I remember how Olivia reacted when she found out he was working with Bennett.

"Why didn't you say anything about his magic?" I ask, feeling slightly betrayed.

"He's not a true witch. As you know, male witches are incredibly rare. What he is, is someone who has been given a little bit of power by this coven because of his

ancestors and has been actively trying to find more. He was stripped of what little powers he had a long time ago." Olivia looks at me now, apology shining in her gaze. "I've been watching him closely and seen no sign of him getting it back, but I failed in my duty because he found a way. I can read his signature all over this. I'm sorry."

I realize she's carrying much more blame for this than she should. I can't hold it against her for not telling us, not when she's been doing so much more than we thought.

"How do we stop this? If he's draining him of energy—" I can't even finish that sentence.

"You'll have to find the connection and cut it."

"Why can't you do it?" Parker asks and Olivia gives her a soft smile.

"Because the three of you are much more powerful than I am." Olivia steps around the bed and heads for the door. "Stay with him, I'll be right back."

Chapter Thirty-Eight

KENNEDY

While Olivia is gone, all I want to do is hold Bennett's hand and tell him a million things I've never said out loud. How can someone care about another person so much and keep it all to themselves? When I was younger I thought that's what you did, considering my aunt never said anything affectionate to me. I always assumed she cared, and in her own strange way, I think she did. Now, I actually see what caring about someone looks like and it's terrifying and exhilarating at the same time.

I should've taken every opportunity to tell him how amazing he's been, how much he has helped me be more comfortable with who I am. I have to do whatever it takes to make sure I can tell him.

"Kennedy, he's going to be okay." Parker tugs on my hand and I'm sure she doesn't have to be an empath to see how much turmoil I'm in.

"I—my aunt has always said that my magic will lead to nothing but pain and agony in my life, and now here it is. I found someone who cares for me, sees me for who I am, and I've put him in danger."

"You know that's not true," Lily says, her voice so much firmer than I've ever heard it. "If anything, you are here to protect him."

I open my mouth at that, and then close it. The reality of all of it hits me at once. Parker and Lily watch me, their steady presence the encouragement I need to deal

with all of my emotions.

"I've just—I've been so stupid," I say, the words pouring out of me now. "I've been so afraid of letting him in that I wasted so much time. My whole life, I thought I would never have anyone care about me, and the moment someone did, I questioned it to a point where I kept building walls instead of tearing them down."

"But you have torn them down," Lily says, her voice soft as she tugs on my hand to make sure I know she's there. "We've seen you with him. You're not the same person you were months ago. You're cautious, sure, but you've opened yourself up to him. You've opened yourself up to us."

I glance at her and then at Parker, who's nodding her head.

"I can't lose him," I say and mean it with every part of me, my magic included. I can feel it so close to me now, pulsing right under my skin, reminding me it's there. I expected to be exhausted after using so much magic at once, but I feel rejuvenated somehow. And that right there is the crux of it all—I am powerful and I'm not alone. Maybe my aunt's biggest fear wasn't being a witch, but it was being alone. Because as I look at the girls and then at Bennett, I'm not afraid anymore. They are my people; they are here to support me for being exactly who I am.

The worst case scenario did happen and I feel it in my very bones that I can handle it—we can handle it. Together.

"What is this?" Parker asks, reaching for my arm. I push up the sleeve of my sweater to look at the thistle tattoo. Except it's no longer simply a thistle. Now, another flower has been entwined with the thistle—just as delicate and beautiful—creating a tiny bouquet on my wrist.

The girls crowd in, staring at my skin in wonder. Parker takes my wrist and pulls it

right to her face as if she can see it better at that distance.

"When did you get this?" she asks and drops her hand to pull at her sweater, but as I watch her and Lily check, they don't have any additional flowers.

"I have no idea," I say, staring at the flower. It looks so familiar, but I can't—and then it hits me. "It's a hellebore."

My words are barely a whisper and I can feel the happiness radiating off my magic like steam. The flower is a little bigger than the thistle, the stem of it twisting around the other, but then they become one. There's a little bud on the side as well and the whole thing looks perfect.

"I have no idea what this means," Parker says, still studying my wrist, "but I love it and when do I get one?"

"When it's your time." We turn as one as Olivia comes through the door. Her eyes zero in on my wrist and she walks over to give it a quick study. "You've accepted your power and used your affinity. I can feel the magic flowing through you freely now. Can't you feel it?" The last part is directed at Parker and she opens her mouth and then shuts it quickly, giving me another look. I see the moment she feels it, as her eyes grow round.

"Oh my goodness, I can! Wow, Kennedy, you're carrying a serious punch! It's very potent. Is potent the right word here?"

Olivia nods and then motions us to follow her. She walks over to the window on the other side of Bennett's bed and flings it open. Immediately, a cold wind seeps in and I hurry over to Bennett, reaching for the extra blanket on the chair beside him.

"Don't touch him yet, Kennedy. Not with that much power flowing through you."

I hug the blanket to me, staring down at Bennett. I would fling myself all over him if I could, but I need to listen to Olivia. So I stay still and wait for instructions.

"Much like in the cemetery when you pulled Kennedy out of the vision, we need to sever the connection to the spell." She pulls a few things from her pockets. "A selenite for you and black tourmaline for you," she hands Lily the light crystal and Parker the dark one. Then she turns to me.

"Your job is to ground both of them and use your connection to magnify."

"I don't understand."

She guides us around Bennett's bed. Lily and Olivia are across from me and Parker is beside me. Olivia motions for us to take hands. I place my left hand over Lily's which is holding the crystal, cocooning it between our palms. I do the same with Parker, with the black tourmaline between us. Olivia takes the girls' free hands and meets my eye.

"Your power lies in your connection to the earth. You are the tether that holds your powers together, the foundation. Focus on your magic, let it guide you, with no fear, but simple trust that it won't make you stray and that you have each other."

I nod and glance down at Bennett. His complexion has become even more pale and the tears are in my eyes before I can blink them away.

This has to work.

Blinking a few times, I look up at the girls, meeting their gaze individually. I hear a noise behind me and watch as the magpie flies into the room, landing on my shoulder.

"We're all seeing that, right?" Parker whispers.

Olivia smiles. "Someone has found her familiar," the older woman says, just as the magpie butts her head against the side of mine gently.

Finally. Waiting. Tired.

I freeze immediately, my eyes growing round.

"Guys, the bird talks," I whisper, while I don't dare move. The magpie walks down my shoulder and down my arm, and I move it up as a perch for her automatically, so she can look at me more easily.

"Talks?" Lily asks as I continue staring at the bird.

Not bird. Stella. She huffs like I've offended her and I should be finding this incredibly weird except that it feels incredibly right.

"Nice to meet you, Stella," I say. Even though I'm worried about Bennett, I still feel a thrill of joy course through me. I can also feel the bond to the bird, the warmth radiating off her and toward me. I glance at the girls again—who are staring at me like I've lost my mind—and then at Olivia, who looks incredibly proud. "I'm ready," I say.

Stella walks back up to perch on my shoulder and Parker and Lily recover long enough to grin, before they look over at Olivia. She nods and closes her eyes, and I do the same. My magic is right there, right under the surface, ready to aide in whichever way I deem. I focus on the way it feels, on the way it makes me feel, and I let it unfurl.

The wind brushes against my cheek and I grab onto it like it's a physical item, letting

it pull my magic through the room and then out the window. I can feel it soaring and I focus on channeling all that power.

The girls grip my hands and I can feel their magic as well. I've never been able to distinguish the feel of magic before, but I can feel it on them. Maybe it's Parker's power, or maybe I'm just more attuned to the differences now that I know my own.

"Hear, hear, the words we speak,

Listen, listen, to the answer we seek,

Break the bond,

Restore the soul,

Ignite the fire, burn the cord.

In the wind, I send these words,

In the earth do they take root,

Bring the power,

Save the lad,

Cleanse the aura,

Destroy the spell.

Restore, restore, restore."

The four of us say the last two words together, almost like we're incapable of doing anything but. The impulse comes instinctually and I don't hide from it. I feel the magic sweep over us like a tidal wave and when I open my eyes I expect the room to be in shambles, but nothing has changed. Except...I felt it. The way my magic rushed through the space, more free and happy than it has ever been. It changed something within me.

But when I glance down at Bennett and I think I failed. My heart starts beating fast and I think I messed something up when Olivia speaks up. "The spell is broken."

Before the words fully register, I drop down to the bed, my hands on his face. The magpie makes a little noise and lands on his stomach. He feels cold to touch and is still so pale, but I can feel his breathing even out, and exhale.

"He'll be okay now," Olivia says, "but it might take him a little bit to wake up."

"Where did you go earlier?" Parker asks.

I continue to stare at Bennett as if I can will him to wake up with my gaze.

"I needed a little help from the coven. A certain professor is going to think twice before pulling something like this again." Without looking at Olivia, I know she's pleased, and I make a mental note to ask questions later. Right now, I just want Bennett to open his eyes.

BENNETT

When I come to, I'm completely disoriented. The room is dark, and I don't even remember making it home. Then again, the place doesn't smell like mine, and as my eyes adjust to the darkness I realize I'm not at my flat. A small pressure on my hand pulls my attention, and I find Kennedy, her hand gripping mine tightly, as she lays on

her other arm across the bed. That's when it hits me that I'm in a hospital. I try to remember what happened, but my last memory is touching the Witches Stone and then nothing.

I reach over to place my hand over the top of Kennedy's head and she opens her eyes immediately. There's a moment of confusion and then her eyes find mine.

"You're awake!" She jumps to her feet, sending the chair backwards as she hugs me. I'm so shocked I don't move. She pulls back to look at me, then waves her hand in the air and the lamp near the bed turns on as well as the one behind her. I open my mouth to comment when she places her hands on my cheeks, moving my head left and right, her eyes roaming over me.

"How are you feeling? Any lightheadedness? Are you thirsty? Hungry?"

She continues her inspection and I grab her wrist, freezing her in place.

"Kennedy," I start, clearing my throat and she pulls back immediately to grab a glass of water from the nightstand. She places it in front of me, holding the straw still and I suppress a chuckle as I lean over to take a drink. She hands me the glass, so she can raise the bed and rearrange the pillows at my back. She's looking at me like she's afraid I'm going to disappear at any moment. When I'm done drinking, she puts the glass back and stands, but I pull her down beside me. Before I can ask what I want to ask, nature calls.

"Is there a bathroom here?"

Kennedy jumps up immediately and pulls the covers back, helping me stand. I feel weak, like I haven't been using my limbs for days, but I make it to the bathroom just fine. Kennedy follows me in and I raise my eyebrows at her.

"I think I can handle this part myself," I say and her face goes red.

"I'll be outside." She retreats so fast she nearly trips over her own feet. I handle my business and then wash my hands and face. I look like I've lost some weight, which is strange. There's also a lot more beard on my face than I've seen in a long time.

"Are you okay?" Kennedy knocks on the door.

"Yes, give me a minute." There's a little pouch on the counter and when I look through it I see it has all the essentials. A razor, shaving cream, toothbrush, and toothpaste. I make use of all the things quickly and when I look at myself in the mirror, I feel more grounded.

When I step out, Kennedy does a quick study of me, as if making sure I'm all in one piece, and when her eyes land on my face, she studies me carefully. I take my place on the bed once more, and she sits beside me carefully, as if afraid she'll hurt me in some way.

"What happened?" I ask.

Her eyes flash in anger for a moment, but I know for a fact that it isn't aimed at me.

"You touched the Witches Stone, which was apparently a trap for me and you ended up getting hexed in my place. You've been out of commission for days."

"Wait, what?" Of all the things she was going to say, this was definitely not it.

She sighs and I have the urge to reach over and smooth out the little worried crease between her eyebrows.

"Your professor has been playing with magic. I'm not sure how, but he figured out

we've been working together and set a trap for me. This is what Olivia figured out by the way. Apparently, there's some secret coven in Edinburgh that wants to steal all the magic from witches like me. We're like walking batteries."

"And Professor Stewart is in on it?"

"According to Olivia, he has been a nuisance for years. They have previously limited his reach when it comes to the magical, but he found a way around it. Olivia thinks it's why he had to set such an obscure trap, way out of the city. He's not powerful enough to use more well-known relics, as they already have magical signatures attached to them. This is all guesswork, but I kind of trust Olivia's assessments."

As Kennedy talks, so many things fall into place. All the meetings he's been having, all the pushes he's been giving me toward certain magical relics. He was using me. My mind goes to our last meeting and his mentioning a date stop. He wanted me to bring Kennedy here. My anger is hot and fast.

"Are you okay? Nothing happened?" I ask and Kennedy rolls her eyes.

"Of course I'm okay; don't change the subject. Why did you come here on your own?"

"I didn't see any reason I couldn't?"

"You should've at least told me where you were going! When I saw the vision of you in pain, I nearly—" She stops and I hold my breath. There is an array of emotions in her eyes and it feels incredibly important that I let her process it. "I didn't think I could get to you in time and it nearly broke me." She looks up at me then, the anger gone, replaced by tears.

I reach over, catching one of the tears on her cheek, cradling her face in the process.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you where I was going. I was going to bring you here if it panned out to be anything." I don't remove my hand, stroking her cheek gently with my thumb.

She leans into it, her gaze on mine. "Not good enough. In fact, I demand to use my IOU now."

"What?"

"Do you remember the carnival coupon you drew for me?"

"I try not to." I kind of want to forget I did that because it was extra cringy.

"Well, you did, and it's legally binding. So from now on, take me with you. I demand it." She moves closer, our breaths coming a little more rapidly, as we both spin with anticipation.

"So, you're just going to follow me around?" I lean a little more forward on the bed, bringing her closer.

"I mean, you've been doing it to me all this time. Let's see how you like it," she replies, reaching up to run her finger over my hand which is resting on her cheek. The sensation of her soft touch goes straight through me, my heartbeat racing.

I grin as I study her face, the little gleam in her eyes and the soft smile on her lips.

"Is this a romantic enough place for us to share our first kiss?" I ask, my breath ruffling her hair. She grins, blinding me for a moment, and places her right hand on the bed as she leans right up to my face.

"The most romantic," she says, and then I kiss her.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

KENNEDY

The moment his lips touch mine, it feels like I've spent my whole life waiting for this one moment. His lips are soft, and I can't fight the impulse to demand more as I pull him closer. Bennett wraps his arms around me, lifting me swiftly off the bed and onto his lap, as my hands plunge into his hair.

It's like we can't seem to get close enough, even as his body presses against mine. I pour my whole heart into this kiss and he meets me on my level. My skin comes alive under his touch, as he runs his hands down my back, creating a burning pathway in its wake. One of his arms wraps around my lower back, as he holds me flush against him, while the other comes up to cradle the back of my neck.

Never in my life would I have imagined a kiss so passionate and yet so gentle. My hands are on his face, before they're back in his hair, our lips dancing to a song that feels like our own. He makes me forget every worry, every bad memory with the way his lips worship mine. He's holding me like I'm the most important person on the planet, and he makes me feel as such.

When we pull back, we're both out of breath. I'm draped over his lap, hands on his face, as Bennett leans his forehead against mine.

"Are you making the furniture float?" Bennett asks, not taking his eyes off me.

I turn quickly to scan the room, and yes, some of the things are in the air. A lamp, a

plant, and a chair. There's a buzz in my magic, as if it's just as happy and feels just as cherished as I'm feeling. Instead of the fear I typically feel at showing this much power, it makes me giddy. I laugh—surprising both Bennett and myself—before I place the items gently on the floor.

"Apparently, I'm a very powerful witch who is led by her emotions," I say, turning back to Bennett who's grinning at me.

"Not even surprised."

I feel like there are a million things that could be said here, and for the first time in my life, I want to say them all. My lips are tender from his kiss and I run my fingers carefully over them. His body jerks with a sharp inhale and my eyes fly up to his. He's watching me with a fire in his gaze and I think he'll kiss me again. When he doesn't move, I lean forward, dropping a quick kiss to his lips. I pull back, smirking, but he doesn't let me go far as he pulls me back to him.

This kiss is much less hurried as he takes his time. It's almost like he's memorizing every moment of it, and I answer him in kind. My heart soars, beating in time with his, and it feels like I can live off his kisses for the rest of my time.

When we separate again, it's almost as if something important passes between us. For a long, tense moment, we just stay like that, watching each other as our heartbeats return to a more normal rate. Then, with a quick flash of teeth, he shifts me to the side, off his lap, and into the space right beside him. His arms wrap around me and I place my head on his shoulder, my hand over his heart.

"I'm keeping you forever. I hope you're okay with that." The words are out before I can overthink them. They feel natural, in a way nothing else ever has before. The fears instilled in me by my aunt, my own worries, all dissipate at the truth behind those words. In such a small amount of time, I've come to a place where I believe I

can be loved and I want to love in return.

Bennett hugs me tighter against him. "Promise?"

I look up at him, at the way his eyes are shining and it makes me think this means just as much to him as it does to me. I nod, holding his gaze and he studies me for a moment before dropping a kiss to my forehead.

"Good. Because you're mine and I really don't like sharing," he says, sealing my heart as his forever.

I snuggle closer, never wanting to part from him again, and I think that this right here is our own magic, and it's incredibly powerful.

I don't remember us falling asleep, but when the door bangs open I sit up immediately. Bennett and I snuggled and talked until sleep took him, and I didn't feel like moving. I've been by his side for four days. That's how long it took for his body to restore the energy the magic took. I would've loved to drive straight to Professor Stewart's and give him a piece of my mind—and my magic—but Olivia said she'd take care of it and I'm trusting her to do just that.

Blinking through the confusion of being abruptly awakened, I only have a moment before Lana is in the room.

"Bennett! Are you alive? You better be alive you big jerk! How dare—" She freezes when she sees me on the bed with him and then her face transforms from angry concern to absolutely delighted.

"Kennedy! How are you?" She rushes to my side of the bed, grabbing my hand. "Did I wake you up? I'm sorry. You look so good after waking up. What's your secret?"

"Hi, Lana. I'm okay," Bennett says from behind me, but Lana waves him off.

"Yeah, yeah, you're fine. Let me talk to your girlfriend."

"Sorry, mate, I couldn't keep her away." I turn to watch Nicholas walk in, followed by a very annoyed-looking Parker and an amused-looking Lily. I raise an eyebrow at the girls and Parker rolls her eyes while Lily beams.

"He wouldn't stop asking, so I had to tell him," Parker says. I glance at Bennett and he and I share a quick look, wondering how much Parker actually told him. "I told him you fainted from malnutrition and ended up being admitted here."

I give Parker a quick smile, pleased with her way of spinning things. She also looks pleased with herself for a moment before she throws a glare Nicholas' way.

"You really should take better care of your health," Nicholas says, coming to stand beside the bed. "You're not a youngster anymore."

"What does that make you? Grandpa?" Bennett asks and Parker laughs the loudest. Nicholas doesn't seem fazed and I'm curious as to what exactly is going on between those two.

"Yeah, take care of your health. You probably worried Kennedy, and you shouldn't do that," Lana says, reaching over me to poke Bennett in the shoulder.

"I can't tell if you're actually concerned for me or just my girlfriend," Bennett comments, and I feel a warm glow spread through me at the use of the official term.

"Girlfriend, obviously, but are you ready to be discharged now because we need to head back to Edinburgh. I've been here for five minutes and this town is not it." Lana makes her eyes so big I'm afraid they'll pop right out. I kind of adore this girl and her

dramatics.

"We did come to spring you," Nicholas says.

"Good. Because I'm ready to go."

"Let me go find a doctor to discharge you," I say and move to stand because I'm feeling a bit self-conscious with all of them standing around while I'm in bed beside Bennett, but Nicholas waves me off.

"I'll take care of it. Here," Nicholas places a backpack on the bed. "Get changed."

It takes us no time at all to check out and get on the road. Nicholas has a vehicle, so we pile into the SUV. Parker and Lily sit all the way in the back and Parker goes to sleep immediately. I can't tell if she's actually sleeping or just pretending, but if there's one thing I know about her is how stubborn she is. Lily simply pulls out her laptop and proceeds to work on something. I sit beside Bennett, my hand in his, as Lana keeps up a running commentary the whole way back. I think the guys are used to it, so it doesn't affect them at all, but I'm mostly just amazed.

"Do you need help getting in?" Nicholas asks when we finally pull up in front of our building.

"I'm sure Kennedy can help him," Lana says, and I chuckle.

"If he needs me to carry him up the stairs, he's out of luck though," I say and she laughs.

"I'm good, really," Bennett says.

We all get out and Parker is inside the building before the door to the car even shuts. I

watch Nicholas look after her and then glance at Lily who simply gives me a nod and then thanks him for the ride before heading inside.

Lana hugs me tightly before Nicholas pulls her back toward the car.

"We'll see you later, yes?" he says.

He and Bennett clasp hands briefly and then they're off.

"He's going to have more questions," I say, as we watch them drive away.

"I will only tell him what you're comfortable telling him," Bennett replies and I turn to him raising my eyebrows.

"Because I'm your girlfriend?" I tease and he pulls me against him.

"Yes, because you're my girlfriend." He kisses my temple and leads us to the front door. "Are you okay with that term? I didn't exactly ask you."

"An official question would've been nice," I pretend to think about it, "but I also like the natural way it came about."

We make our way upstairs, past my own apartment, to his. I feel slightly self-conscious all of a sudden, because I've never been in his place before. It feels almost as monumental as us becoming official. He unlocks the door and looks over at me as if he can read my anticipation, then takes my hand again and leads me inside.

A soft scent of vanilla greets me, mixed with Bennett's unique fragrance and I grin immediately. This feels right somehow, like everything is exactly where it should be.

"I'm going to take a shower if that's alright. Do you want to order some takeaway?"

He's handing me his phone, with the app already open, and I take it. "Make yourself at home."

His apartment is much like my own, with a small hallway and separate bathroom and toilet rooms. Instead of three bedrooms, he has only two. I settle on the couch that's almost in the same spot as our own and scroll through the app. I order from the chicken place we've eaten at before and then settle to wait.

When Bennett comes back out, he carries with him the scent of the shower and I realize I should've done the same. I jump to my feet, surprising him.

"I should go clean up. I'm probably gross. I?—"

Bennett grabs my hand and pulls me down on the couch beside him. He's wearing sweatpants and a hoodie that are both incredibly soft, and his hair is still damp and in disarray. He smells amazing and I want to curl right into him.

"You're not gross and you're not going anywhere," he says, curling his arm around me.

"No fair. You got to clean up. I'll only be like thirty minutes. I'll be back before the food arrives!"

Bennett chuckles before kissing the top of my head and I'm hit all over with the horror that I haven't washed my hair in two days. I push against him, but he won't let go.

"I'm disgusting!"

"I like you just the way you are."

"You'll like me better when I smell like flowers and soap."

"Hmm, maybe, maybe not."

"Bennett!" I squeal as he picks me up and places me on his lap in one move. I wrap my arms around his neck immediately and he bends down to give me a quick kiss.

"Every part of you, every which way, I like it all." He's so serious when he says it, like he needs me to know he means every word, and I nod.

"I know."

Then I'm the one who leans over and brings my lips to his, catching him in a soul-searing kiss, but the moment he's distracted I jump off his lap and run for the door.

"I'll be right back!"

Chapter Forty

BENNETT

Even though Kennedy insisted on going with me, I don't want her anywhere near Professor Stewart. I stand outside his door, the letter in my hands, and take a deep breath. It's been three days since I've returned home after being at the hospital and thankfully, I feel like myself again.

Well, I'm feeling better than myself because I have Kennedy now.

I still have this unpleasant conversation in front of me though, so I waited until I was clearer-minded. I knock on the door and hear his voice from inside telling me to come in. I'm not sure what I expect to see, but he looks just like he always looks. His suit and shirt are pressed, an air of cockiness around him. I always thought it was because he earned his position at the university, but now I see it's probably because of magic. Magic he's stolen from others.

Olivia told me I'm not allowed to let on too much information. That I simply want to transfer advisors, but it feels like after one look at me he knows. He knows that I know. I can't imagine him not knowing, considering his plans went up in flames.

"Mr. MacKay, it has been a few days. You cannot fall behind on your deadlines."

"You're right, I can't, which is why I'm switching supervisors."

There's a moment of surprise on his face before he masks it. He glances at the paper

in my hand and I can't quite read him as he leans back in his chair. "I see. They want you away from me, don't they?"

I don't show an ounce of emotion as I look at him because no matter how much I would like to punch him in his smug face, I'm not about to give anything away.

"I already submitted the documents to the school. This is a courtesy withdrawal." I walk over and place the paper on his desk. He glances at it briefly before he looks up at me.

"I'm going to take that as a retreat," he says, and somehow I know he's talking about the witches, but I can't even allow myself to gloat where he's concerned. He doesn't even know that they've already put up a barrier to keep him from pulling something like this again.

According to Olivia, they can't rid him of his powers entirely because of the blood that flows through him. Something to do with the heritage of Scotland. He has a sort of an open flow, like electricity flowing through a socket, but what he doesn't realize, is that they can diminish that flow by turning off the switch. Olivia's coven thought turning it off once would be enough, but now, he needs to be constantly watched as he keeps turning it on. He might not realize it yet, since he had a power-up from me, but he'll know it soon.

"Thank you for the time you have spent with me on this project," I say and then turn to go.

"They will turn on you; they always do." I freeze at his words and I can hear him stand. "Witches and humans simply don't mix. They'll use you and then they'll throw you away. Don't think you're anything special."

I truly did not expect him to be this open with me, but maybe the frustration has

worked its way past his carefully crafted exterior. I turn slowly, giving myself a moment to collect myself. He's lucky I don't possess any magic, or he'd be flying through a window by now. I've never felt this feral with the need to protect someone before, but I would do anything for Kennedy.

"I'm not sure who hurt you, but I hope you learn how to heal from that, instead of it ruling you for the rest of your life."

I don't wait for a response, but turn and walk out the door. At the end of it all, he really is just a sad man who's grasping for power that isn't his.

For the duration of my project, I'll be working with Professor Campbell. She came fully recommended by Olivia and I think I'll be able to nurture some of my curiosity in a very helpful way under her advisement. I kind of wish Olivia still taught because she would've been an amazing person to learn from.

When I step inside The Black Cat, I realize I have that opportunity either way. After the way my parents abandoned me, I never thought I'd open myself up enough to be in any kind of a long-lasting relationship. Not when my biggest fear has always been that every woman I meet would turn into my mother. Now, looking at Kennedy, I can't imagine my life without her, and I trust she will not abandon me.

The girls are seated at their usual table, just as the last few customers stand to leave. Olivia greets me with a wave and I see she's preparing a cup of something already. Pet jumps on the counter and watches me expectantly as I walk over close enough so she can jump into my arms.

Then I freeze in my tracks.

"Umm, why is there a magpie in here?" I ask, staring at the bird. It's sitting on the windowsill, surrounded by all the plants at the end of the table the girls occupy. As

the bird stares at me, I swear it looks familiar. Which is wild, considering the number of magpies that reside in the city.

Kennedy grins at me as she stands and takes me by the hand, leading me to the table.

"Bennett, meet my familiar, Stella."

I glance between the bird and my girlfriend, a little at a loss for words. "Your familiar?"

"Mhmm, isn't she beautiful?" She grins at me, then turns to the bird. "No, don't let it go to your head. We accept compliments with grace, not pride."

"I'm sorry, you're communicating with a bird?"

Kennedy leads me to a seat next to her as the bird continues to eye me. I swear she's judging everything I do, but it's not like I can prove it.

"Apparently, when you accept your powers, and realize you're quite powerful, you get a familiar and you can communicate with them. Stella has been watching over me since I got here, but I couldn't communicate with her until now. Yes, I know, it was very frustrating." The last part is directed at the bird, and I think this will definitely take some getting used to.

A tiny tug moves my attention to the fur ball in my arms and Pet gives me a loaded look. I give her a little scratch before it hits me.

"Wait, is Pet your familiar?" I ask as Olivia places a cup of coffee in front of me and takes a seat at the head of the table.

"She is, but she has a very strong attachment to you."

"Incredible," I say, glancing at the cat and Olivia chuckles.

"She agrees."

I can't even be weirded out about it. Not when Kennedy is leaning against me, her head on my shoulder, gazing up at me like she physically cannot stop looking.

"Do you think his head is about to explode?" Parker asks, but I don't look away from Kennedy.

"No, I think he's just fine," Lily says, and Kennedy grins before she leans forward and steals a quick kiss.

"Eww, my eyes!" Parker shouts and we pull away with a laugh.

"You sound like Lana," I tell her and she shrugs.

"I hope you mean as an awesome fifteen-year-old girl and not someone related to him ."

"What is your?—"

"Don't get her started!" Lily talks over me and I glance at Kennedy who's nodding. I put those questions away for now.

"How did it go with your supervisor?" Olivia asks and I sober up immediately.

"He said something about you turning on me, but I don't think he knows anything about whatever spell you counteracting his with when you pulled me out."

The older witch nods and it's Lily who asks the question. "What did he mean about

turning on him?"

Olivia sighs and suddenly looks older than her years. "It's a tale as old as time," she says. "The witch he was in love with broke his heart and he became part of the Order of the Yew Tree. His magic has always been minuscule, which is why he's searching for a way to enhance it, and just like everyone else in that order, they do it by stealing from others."

"That's sad," Lily says, but Olivia shakes her head.

"Don't feel sorry for him, my darling. He has made plenty of mistakes to lead him where he is. It has always been his fault, he just doesn't see it."

There seems to be a lot of history here, but I don't ask. It's not my place anyway. I'm just grateful they allow me to be a participant in this part of their lives. I want to be here for Kennedy in any way I can.

"So what do we do now?" Parker asks. "About him and this." She points to the tattoo. Kennedy is the only one with a second flower woven into her tattoo and it suits her.

"We continue to move forward," Olivia replies. "After everything that's happened, I think we know one thing. You three are meant to be the protectors of this place, the leylines that hold the power, and the land it is flowing through. Your connection to the earth is unlike anything I've ever seen. It's spoken of in the books of old."

Olivia turns to Lily and Parker.

"You have yet to discover the full level of your power, but when you do, the three of you will be unstoppable. The land and the magic has chosen you; that's what those marks mean." The girls glance down at the tattoos, questions so evidently on the tips of their tongues.

"With Bennett's help, you have discovered so many energy points around the city." Olivia reaches over and squeezes my upper arm before continuing. "It was only after everything happened that I realized what you've been doing."

"I don't understand," Kennedy says, because Olivia is looking at her.

"You were creating a thread of your magic through the city. Every place you visited, every relic you found, it was magic, knocking on the door of your heart. Tell me, do you feel connected to the city?"

Kennedy opens her mouth to reply and then shuts it. She thinks about it for a moment before she slowly nods.

"See, everything is as it should be."

The girls exchange a look and there's a calm in the room that transcends this moment somehow. Watching them come together is beautiful and I can see the excitement on their faces.

Kennedy drops my hand and reaches over to Parker and Lily, taking their hands in hers. She told me Olivia called her the tether, and I see it, even with my untrained human eye. She is the glue that holds them together and she is beautiful.

KENNEDY

"We're sure about this, right?"

"You're the brave one, you really should stop asking that question," Parker calls over her shoulder as we're once again tramping through the woods. It's been a few weeks since the whole Bennett ordeal. We're in Dalkeith Park, a bit outside of the city, and Parker is leading us like a woman on a mission. Which can only mean one thing. Lily

and I exchange a look.

"Parker, honey, have you seen Nicholas lately?" Lily asks, which earns her a quick glare and a puff.

"How is that relevant? I do not know."

So, that's a yes. The two of them have fought at every dinner so far. It's become a tradition. Once a week, Olivia, the girls, and I get together for family dinner. She sort of adopted Bennett and then Nicholas and Lana as well, and now our dinner of four has become a dinner of eight. I love every moment of it, considering I've never been part of a family that shows love readily, but it's been amusing to watch the dynamic between Parker and Nicholas. We have gotten many baked goods in the aftermath.

"What exactly are we trying to do here?" I ask and Parker huffs again.

"Get one with Mother Nature, duh. You're the queen of earth magic, but Lily and I still need to level up our affinity. We haven't done many proper sister bonding activities, so think of it as one. It would've been cool to do this at the fountain, but you know, there are people there."

"She's really bossy when she's all worked up," Lily whispers.

"I can hear you," Parker throws over her shoulder.

"Good, then you know how we feel," I say.

Even though I'd rather not be in the woods after dark, I can't deny the feeling of rightness when I'm surrounded by nature. Bennett is helping Olivia at the café tonight, and I can't wait to see him later for our date, but right now I know this is important, so I focus.

We reach a clearing among the trees in the next minute and Parker stops. She gives the space a thorough study, just as Stella lands on one of the branches overlooking the space.

Mad again is she , the bird says straight in my head and I suppress a chuckle.

She is .

Must be that boy .

You are very smart .

The bird looks pleased with my compliment and then settles to watch over us. It's quite strange, having this power to communicate with another living creature. We're not always speaking, as if the energy isn't always flowing, like we have to turn the switch on, but I love having this extra connection to my magic.

"Let's do it here," Parker announces and then produces a blanket from her backpack. She always seems to be prepared. She spreads it out and then pulls out a candle and some matches. "Don't just stand there, take a seat."

Lily and I hurry to sit down, crossing our legs and watching as Parker lights the candle. She also takes out some crystals and places them around the candle. I give our surroundings a little magic scan, keeping the wind to a minimum so the candle burns.

"Now, I know that we're all about to get a lot busier," Parker begins, "with Kennedy taking some teaching internships and Lily getting a job at the library, but I think we have to make sure to keep our together time on the calendar and grow our powers so we can stand up against anyone else who tries to steal it!"

I still can't believe I'm following my long-forgotten dream when it comes to teaching.

Olivia has been encouraging me and has given me a lot of information on how to go about things. The girls are so excited for me too, because to them, it simply makes sense.

I can't deny the fact that I've thought about my aunt a time or two. I even picked up my phone to call her, but I don't think I'm ready. Not yet. Maybe one day she'll forgive me and maybe one day I'll be able to have a conversation with her again. Maybe one day I'll be able to ask her about my parents. So much of my history is unknown, but for now, I'm going to work hard at going after every dream I was ever denied, with the people who I love beside me—creating my own history.

"Don't forget your art internship," Lily comments and Parker grins.

"We have so many good things going for us, but the best thing is us ." I grin at Parker's enthusiasm because I agree completely. Even though we're not blood, they're my sisters through and through.

We join hands and immediately I feel the energy flowing through us. We're not advanced for spoken spells yet but we're practicing. So much of magic is hands-on, and I want to learn it all.

I know what Parker is going to say before she says it. "Shall we make it shine?"

Lily laughs. It's our favorite spell and something that brings all of us immense joy.

I close my eyes, focusing on the magic flowing through me and to the girls and back through. We picture what we want in our minds' eyes and then we push it out. When we open our eyes, I beam. Tiny sparkles fill the space around us, like stars but close enough to touch. Our magic manifests in unique ways, but when we discovered this one, we all fell in love with it. It makes us feel connected on a special level and we keep hold of each other as we watch the sparkles dance overhead.

"I just want you to know, I really love you dorks," Parker announces and I glance at her to find tears in her eyes. Immediately, my own well up, and when I look at Lily, she's already crying.

"I love you too," she says and I echo the words.

We stay like that for a long moment, enjoying each other and our magic—a bond that's become an integral part of who we are. I am so excited to see what happens next or where our magic will take us.

Through it all, we found a home and a family in each other and that's more powerful than any magic.

Page 41

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A MONTH LATER

KENNEDY

I hear shouting before I'm through the doors. Lily and I exchange a quick look as I shoulder the door to let her pass. We're both carrying dishes with food on them for our weekly dinner. Olivia's place is in the same building as her café but on the top floor. There are, of course, no elevators around these old tenement buildings. So Lily and I had to huff it up the stairs and then stand at the top of the stairs for a minute to catch our breaths. Then the yelling pulled us.

"I swear if you touch it one more time I will force-feed it down your?—"

"Parker!"

My friend is in the middle of the room near the big table, standing toe to toe with none other than Nicholas. Bennett comes out of the kitchen just as we walk in and walks over to me.

"I thought I told you to keep those two apart," I say, as he drops a kiss on the top of my head, reaching for the dish.

"I stepped away for thirty seconds to grab an extra spoon from the kitchen. I thought nothing could happen in that short of time."

"You underestimate Parker," I mumble.

Lily deposits her dish on Bennett as well and then we rush over to our friend.

"Hi, honey," Lily says, taking Parker by the shoulders. "Let's get you away from this side of the table, what do you say?"

"I say that arrogant jerks shouldn't be allowed—" I slap a hand over her mouth pushing her backward, as I glance at Nicholas.

"Maybe don't antagonize her before she's eaten."

"I only said chocolate chip is the superior cookie. Oatmeal and whatever that other name you called the cookie—snickerdoodle—I've heard of it. They're typically dry?—"

"What's dry are your taste buds," Parker snaps and then we're in the kitchen.

Olivia is at the counter and Bennett passes by to leave the room to give us some privacy.

"Parker, do you think you may be a little harsh on him? Isn't it okay to like other cookies?" I ask, keeping my voice low and as soothing as possible. She throws a glare my way as Lily pats her shoulder.

"He can like whatever he wants. Why should I care?"

"It seems like you care," Lily says, her words careful.

"I do not! He just seems to have a vendetta against me personally. It's like he can't fight the urge but to disagree with everything I say. Who does that? I am almost never wrong."

She walks over to the sink and begins feverishly washing her hands. I turn to Olivia,

who has finished transferring potatoes from the baking pan to the serving platter.

"Let me take that," I say, stepping forward.

Olivia gives me a quick smile and reaches for the other plate, full of bread. I don't move right away. There's something that's been nagging me for the last month and last night I had a dream that was basically all my fears realized.

"What is it, Kennedy?" Olivia asks, her eyes on me. The girls immediately catch onto her tone and turn to watch me as well. I haven't even talked to them about it because they were both gone by the time I woke up this morning.

"It's just—are you sure we don't have to worry about Professor Stewart doing anything?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper so no one in the other room can hear it. "It's making me nervous that he hasn't made any kind of moves."

"I agree," Lily says, stepping closer. "It seems strange that he would go through all this trouble and then nothing. I know you said your coven has messed with his spell in a way that doesn't make it seem like we had anything to do with it, but he's been watching us?—"

"I understand your concern, my darlings." Olivia meets our eyes one at a time and I feel reassurance in the fact that she's not concerned. "He's being watched by those around him and we're doing our best to monitor the magic throughout Scotland. It's the best we can do right now."

"So we should be on the lookout?" Parker asks, and Olivia nods.

"Yes, always. It's part of who you are and part of what your bond means to the magic community, but someone like Stewart doesn't require the magnitude of your powers. He can be watched by others." She takes a step forward and places her hands on Lily's and my arms while she looks at Parker who's standing between us.

"Grow your magic, grow your bond; that is your only job right now. To discover just how powerful you are. When struggles come, you'll be prepared to handle them."

Nicholas takes that moment to pop his head into the room. "Do you need?—"

"Nothing from you," Parker interrupts, before taking the dish from me and marching into the main room.

Nicholas looks at me and asks, "Is it really about the cookies?"

He looks like he genuinely wants to know and while I want to have pity on him, I think Parker would hex me if I gave him any kind of information. So instead, I just shrug and walk past him into the room.

Bennett is immediately behind me, wrapping his arms around me and pulling me into his chest. He started these back hugs two weeks ago and I'm obsessed with how right they feel. I want him to keep hugging me like this always. Except when he hugs me any other way.

Basically, I'm a big hug enthusiast.

"Can I steal you away for a moment?" he whispers in my ear.

"We won't be ready for a few more," Olivia says, as if he broadcast the question across the room. "Lana is still on her way from after-school club."

Bennett takes my hand, throwing a little wave in the direction of the others, and pulls me behind him. He stops long enough to grab my coat and helps me into my boots.

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

He holds the coat open and I step in before he pulls his own on and leads me out the front door. Instead of heading down the stairs, he turns to the door at the end of the landing. Producing a set of keys I've never seen before from his pocket, he drops my hand long enough to unlock the door and push it open. He then laces his fingers with mine once more.

The door opens to a set of narrow stairs and in Bennett's other hand is his phone, the flashlight blazing. We take the stairs up in silence, and then we're at another door. Once again, Bennett unlocks it and when he pushes it open I realize we're on the roof of the building.

"Wow, I didn't know you could come up here," I say as I gaze over the city from here. I can see down to New Town and over the tops of the buildings leading toward the water. The night is clear, just after sunset, so there is still enough light to have the perfect view.

"This is where Olivia grows some of her herbs," Bennett says and I turn to see him standing behind me and a structure at his back.

"Is that a greenhouse?" I ask.

"Yes. I asked Olivia if I could show it to you."

"How did you know it was here?"

"She mentioned it."

Just then, Stella lands on the ledge giving me and then Bennett a quick look.

Nervous.

Is he? I didn't think so.

Stella gives Bennett another long look and I watch as my boyfriend shifts foot to foot under the scrutiny.

"Why is Stella looking at me with murder in her eyes?" he whispers and Stella lets out a squeak, making him jump.

"She likes to pretend she's tough, but she's a total softy." I make a face at Stella and she flaps her wings.

Tough. Amazing. Beautiful. Me.

She gives Bennett another look.

Smells nervous. And then she takes off.

I chuckle. I turn to Bennett and he watches her fly away. I expect him to come to me then but he doesn't move. He turns his attention to me and just stares.

"What?"

He shakes his head. "Nothing, I just feel like the luckiest guy on the planet."

I grin at the corny way he delivers that, but the feeling is mutual. I move toward him, just as he does the same and then his lips are on mine. Every single time we kiss, there's a touch of magic in it. He makes me feel cherished and secure in the way I've never thought possible. We pull apart, breathless, but I don't go far. I plunge my arms inside his open coat, snuggling close as he holds me to him.

"You really aren't scared of this—of me?" I ask, because today has been a day full of overthinking.

Bennett pulls back just far enough so he can look at my face. "Never." There isn't a

hint of hesitation as he delivers that one word. "I am here to stand beside you, always. Not afraid of your power but amazed by it."

"You're not afraid that I'll turn dark and put a hex on you?" I tease, but there's a serious look in his eyes as if he knows I need the answer to that question.

"No, you know how not to hex someone. Your heart is too big and too kind to be anything but a witch that helps people. It's one of the things I love about you."

My breath catches at that word and I know he feels the change in me. There's a big grin on his face as he gazes down to meet my eyes and he drops a quick kiss to my forehead. "I love you, Kennedy Hellebore, a powerful witch, a brilliant woman, and someday an amazing teacher. I hope you're prepared to be loved and cherished for the rest of your life."

There are tears in my eyes that I don't even bother blinking away.

"Only if you're prepared to be loved and cherished right back," I whisper, and Bennett's arms tighten around me, almost like I shocked him. I pull one of my arms out of the coat and cradle his cheek.

"I love you, Bennett MacKay."

When I pull him toward me for a lingering kiss all the fears from today dissipate. I know this is only the beginning for us and my magical journey, but as Bennett cradles me in his arms, pulling me up on my tiptoes and kisses me with his whole being, I am not afraid.

"Hey, lovebirds!" Parker's shout reaches us from down the stairs and through the open door, and we pull apart reluctantly. "Stop making out on the roof and come eat!"

"Coming!" Bennett calls back before he leans down and places a quick kiss on my

forehead. I slide my hand into his and we head back down the stairs.

I found my people—I found my family—and now I can't wait to see what the future will bring.

Thanks for reading Kennedy and Bennett's story!