



Practically Witches (Supernaturals in Training #1)

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Description: I'm RJ—Robbie Joe, thanks to my mom's creativity—and I'm a witch.

Well, kind of. I'm still in training.

Magic is like second nature to my sister, Aimee. She's the golden child, excelling at every spell, acing every test, and just generally being perfect. Me? My magic's about as predictable as a coin toss.

I never really cared much about it until now.

Suddenly, our coven is under attack. Witches are losing their powers to an evil we believed to be just legend. Even Aimee falls victim, her magic drained. With so few of us left, it's up to me and my lackluster powers to save our coven from total extinction.

No pressure, right?

As Aimee and I search for a way to restore the coven's magic, shocking truths about my past and my true potential come to light. Maybe I'm not a mediocre witch after all. Maybe I'm something special, but the power within me is proving to be dangerous, reckless, and uncontrollable...just like me.

I need to get ahold of my newfound abilities to stop the looming threat to our kind. If I don't, I won't only lose everyone I care about, but I'll lose myself as well.

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Chapter

One

The house on old Willow Grove Lane is where Aimee and I practice our magic in hopes of passing our final exams to become witches. It's been a part of the coven's circle for a century at least. Probably longer. It's a black house with white shutters, and it was black long before anyone considered that a good color for housing.

It's a modest two story with an attic and nooks and crannies, built in shelves and hiding spaces. I learned long ago that my mother knew them all.

Now, I live in the house with my mom, my sister Aimee, and our fickle feline Auda.

Today, Mom isn't home and Aimee is in the attic waiting for me. We're "crafting" as far as Mom knows. And neither of us is going to tell her any different. If she ever catches a whiff of our real intentions, it's going to be over really quick because strict and iron-fist are her middle names. She'll finish both of us.

Mom isn't a woman who suffers liars or sneaks. And we're not trying to be either, but desperation made us be the first, and the first made us into the second.

Mom has rules. Strict ridiculous rules for dealing with us. I'm nineteen years old for fuck's sake. Aimee is twenty-one. But our mother takes it so personally when I break one of her edicts or when I drag Aimee into breaking one with me. Goodness knows Aimee would never break one on her own. She just doesn't have defiance in her.

I, on the other hand, have never found a rule I won't break, or at least bend to a solid ninety-degree angle. My motto is, and has always been, that it's easier to ask forgiveness than permission.

"RJ, it's about time. I've been waiting an hour for you." She shakes her head like she's exasperated. But she points to the table. "I set up the glue gun over there."

Aimee is standing near the window by the wall panel where we hide all the stuff we have to keep from our mother, but most importantly the grimoire we found.

She waves to a card table we've set up so that if Mom comes in, it'll be the first thing she sees. It'll give us time to hide what we're actually doing before she finds us doing what we're not supposed to at all. Ever.

I pull two rhinestone bedazzled oven mitts from a large brown envelope I told Mom was crafting supplies—which is only half a lie. I ordered the mitts already decorated online so they can sit on the table with the glue gun. It's a shame we have to lie to her, but she isn't the kind of parent who would understand. So now it's all a matter of making the lie believable and hoping if she ventures up here she'll be so wowed by "our" good work that she'll stop to look, might even think we're being productive, and it will give us an extra second to stow whatever it is we're really doing. It's the thought, anyway .

Well, my thought, the one I convinced Aimee to go along with. She's the older sister, the smarter sister, the sister who has all the skills, and I'm the one who makes sure that she's safe and sound, protected and included. She doesn't give anyone any shit and I don't take any.

We each have our roles to play—she's the good girl and I'm...me.

She lives hers, and I play mine, usually out of necessity.

Aimee glances at me as I set the oven mitts on the table and walk back to where she is. “Well?”

She knows what I’m asking. I need to know if it’s the grimoire that’s faulty or if it’s me. I’m not usually afflicted with self-doubts. That’s more her thing, but our lives are on the line. Well, mine. She’ll do fine, I’m sure.

“I don’t know, RJ.” She pulls a lipstick-stained napkin from the cubby in the wall where we keep the grimoire when we aren’t using it. “Try the cleaning spell again.”

I’ve gone over it a thousand times. I know the spell by heart. But there’s a block somewhere. And maybe it’s something with the magic, but I doubt it. It works some of the time. Usually when Aimee is around to give me confidence to do it right. When she’s out of the room, I screw it up. I don’t know what I’m doing differently so I’ve decided it has to be the grimoire. It can’t be that I’m so dependent on my sister I can’t do magic without her. It cannot.

“Look, I’m gonna be right here.” She points at a spot beside the cabinet where we are doing the real work we hide up here from Mom. Then she smiles like it’s going to give me the needed boost of magic.

I take the napkin. I know what she wants me to do with it, and I shouldn’t be scared. I don’t get scared. And we’ve already established that in this room, with her beside me, the magic never fails .

But it’s failed enough without her that I’m worried. I don’t fucking like it, so I wipe those thoughts away and focus.

And refocus.

Focus again.

She huffs out a loud, exasperated sigh, snatches the napkin out of my hand, and spreads it on the cabinet's white marble top. Then she gives me her get with it look. It's a combination of one cocked brow and the tight line of her lips. It means business as much as she does.

I breathe in deep, blow it out slow, find my magic center, and rub my hands together. Magic is about being connected to my body, controlling my thoughts and my power. That's what Aimee says anyway.

So, I give it a go. And the stain lifts. Like magic. Floats through the air then disintegrates with a pop.

"RJ!" She squeals and claps her hands together, even gives a quick jump that shakes the floor in the loft.

"Shh! If Mom hears us, you know she's going to take the book..." I motion to the grimoire we found hidden in a loose panel in the wall. I love Mom, but I might love the book more since I've learned more from the book than I have in five years at the Institute where our mother is an alumna.

She quiets down but comes toward me, squeezing my biceps in her hands. Her nails dig into my skin, and I pull away. "What's wrong, RJ? You did it!"

Yeah, I did it. I did it because she was standing right beside me, her presence, her confidence in me feeding my magic. That's the only explanation I can think of.

"Try it again." This time she pulls a tube of lipstick from her pocket and writes clean me on the napkin.

The stairwell to the loft is in what I call a noise tunnel. The slightest creak of the hinges on the door below is amplified by the close walls and short angled ceiling so

that it sounds like a cannon going off through the tunnel. Then there's a door at the top of the stairs that leads to the loft itself.

The loft is mostly just old junk accumulated by generations of our family living in a house since it was built. Mom calls them heirlooms, but it is mostly junk.

Things like a couple old sewing machines that need refurbished. The mannequin I'm sure was used by the family sewer—whoever he or she was. A baby cradle that may have been mine, or Aimee's, or belonged to a hundred other family kids before us. Some old trunks full of antique clothes and blankets that even the moths didn't care to eat. And photo albums.

Of course, we found the grimoire up here, so the place isn't all useless antiquities. But it gives us a dedicated area to work and practice, and with our final witch exam coming up, it's ever more important that we do so.

How am I in Aimee's classes even though I'm younger? Well, it's not because I'm some spellcasting genius, that's for sure.

It's because of connections, biases, and maybe a bit of nepotism.

Since Mom has history with the Institute, I was allowed to start classes at the same time as Aimee. So I'm younger than everyone else here, my magic lacking in areas, but my sister tries her best to help me stay afloat.

Before Aimee's finished laying the napkin out a second time for me to clean it, the hinges below squeal and Mom's footsteps pound up the stairs.

Aimee panics. She stuffs the napkin down her shirt so it looks like she's grown a third boob, and she slides the grimoire onto the seat of her chair, instead of simply opening the cabinet and stuffing the napkin in the grimoire and the grimoire in the

cabinet. She's making things more complicated than they have to be, but I don't have time to tell her before Mom reaches the top step.

By the time the door swings open, we're holding our bedazzled oven mitts and Mom's eyes widen and her smile spreads across her face. She's one of those women who gushes about her kids, the kind of woman who brags about her girls when she's with her friends. Aimee, as the good one, always makes sure she has something to gush about. Because she's the better of us, she also makes sure that Mom's bragging includes me. Lying to Mom is killing her.

Mom walks in. The trust she has in us built up over years is shining in her eyes. "Those are gorgeous." So the gushing begins. "So much attention to detail!" She turns one over in her hands, inspecting the details. "This is some fine craftsmanship girls."

"Thanks, Mom," I murmur when Aimee doesn't look up. I would roll my eyes at her guilt complex, but it would make her feel worse and I don't know that I'll be able to work her through it if she slips any deeper into it.

"You could sell these on eBay or Etsy." She holds mine up and slides her hand in then holds her arm at a forty-five-degree angle and twists it back and forth, letting the silver rhinestones catch the light. "But won't the rhinestones fall off in the heat of the pans?"

She has a point. And I don't know how to counter that more than to say, "They're for decoration." Obviously.

The smile she flashes isn't the RJ is about to have a tantrum one she sometimes has no choice but to use. It's genuine. A for-Aimee smile.

I don't sigh out loud, but my soul is sighing down deep .

“I’m so proud of you girls.” She hugs Aimee, who is one gush away from cracking under the pressure.

“Thanks, Mom.” I say it loud enough to snap Aimee out of her guilty trance. She wants the grimoire magic as much as I do. She just isn’t as sure about lying to Mom as I am yet. But she will be when she realizes that the grimoire is going to be the thing that takes us to the next level.

“I won’t bother you, then. You girls seem busy.” Mom backs out of the room, eyes trained on us but a smile plastered on her face, and shuts the door.

“That was close,” I say, but I chuckle.

Aimee nods. “Yeah. Let’s get to it before she comes back.”

Our final exam is coming up. We’re fifth-year students at the Institute for the Arts and Sciences of Magic. But if we don’t pass the final exam, there are no do-overs. No second chances.

I’m okay at potions. Mostly. I follow the grimoire, the same as Aimee, but when I practice without her, it never goes well. Once, the potion bubbles ate the swoosh right off my running shoes.

I don’t know why I can’t work spells and potions at will.

“Maybe we should find some of the others to study with, RJ. Maybe they can see something I can’t.” I know that she’s trying to be helpful. She wants me to pass as badly as I want to because Aimee is a person who genuinely cares about others.

But I don’t want anyone to see me struggle, and I sure don’t want to fail in front of anyone who isn’t required to love me.

“Maybe.” I hate this.

She turns to me again. “And maybe we should tell Mom. ”

That’s it. She’s out of her mind.

“Aim, no way. We aren’t supposed to be practicing magic outside of the Institute. You know how she is. And she’ll lose her shit. Probably kill us.” And by us, I mean me.

“She might be able to figure out your magic block.” It’s a reasonable thought. Probably makes sense, but the last person in the world I’m ever going to be able to stand to disappoint is my mother.

“I’ll figure it out on my own.” And nothing is going to stand in the way of that either.

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Chapter

Two

The sun is shining, at least, while I'm waiting out front of the Institute for Aimee. If it was raining I would've already given up, but I have a few minutes more patience left in me thanks to all the vitamin D from the sun.

The Institute is made up of four large brick buildings with ivy crawling up the outsides. They sit in a slight arc with the outer buildings on each end angled and the two center building next to one another. The grass is green and lush and there is a wrought iron gate around the property, which includes a soccer field, a baseball diamond, a swimming pool, and a large wooded section in the back outside of the fence.

Three of the buildings have multiple floors, a hundred or so classrooms, and offices for the administration and department heads.

The fourth building has the cafeteria, library, band and choral rooms, and a lounge. A couple streets over there's a dorm and some cabins buried deep in the woods that are used for specialty magic—whatever that is. I have never taken a class in one of those buildings and I'm kind of glad.

From where I'm standing, leaning against a tree in the common grassy area across the drive from the buildings, I can see the front doors of all the buildings. And Aimee has yet to walk out of any of them.

She's a big joiner at school. She sits on four councils—Students for the Equitable and Responsible use of Potion Sales; Spells and Magic Apprenticeship; Real World Applications of Magic; and Chess Club. It could be that she's busy with one of those, but she usually mentions it ahead of time so I can get a ride home with someone else.

It's Wednesday, and unless something has changed since last period when she went to Philosophy of Magic and I went to Alchemy and Ancestral Magic, she should've been here ten minutes ago.

Finally, she runs out of building four's door, looks around until she spots me—in the same place I wait for her every day—then waves and jogs over. It's not a good sign that she doesn't have her book bag. I know for a fact she has homework in Portal Science.

When she gets to where I am, silvery-blond ponytail swinging, breaths heavy—she bends and puts her hands on her knees. "I'm staying after today to try out for choir."

I'm not annoyed. "You're trying out for choir?" I tut because this is a magic school, not a singing school. Although our first year she played softball and ran track. I guess choir isn't so out there.

She nods. "I'll be home around six."

I shrug. "Okay." Not like I'm her keeper. And maybe I can work on the magic, build my confidence and figure out for myself what I'm doing differently when Aimee is there and when she isn't.

By the time I get home, I've gone over the spell twenty times in my head. "How was class today?" Mom is home, fresh from the garden and hasn't even taken her gardening gloves off yet. She is a green witch, which means that she draws her power and the tools she uses in her magic from the earth. She's also a hereditary witch so

her power was passed down the same way the color of her hair—silvery like Aimee’s—is also passed down.

“It was fine. Aimee is trying out for choir.” She’s washing the vegetables she’s picked from the plot she planted in the backyard so she doesn’t see my eyeroll. It’s our last year at the Institute, why Aimee wants to be in choir is beyond me. We could use that time to work on spells and potions. Things will make us money in the future.

“I told Madeline Hughes about your oven mitts and she wants to order a pair to hang in her kitchen.” Mom’s smiling and so proud, I feel moderately bad for deceiving her.

“Oh, okay. Well, she can have the pair we already made.” Simple solution.

“But I wanted to keep those.” Mom tilts her head, and I don’t know if she knows or if she’s really put out because I was going to give the mitts to her friend.

“Oh, okay.” I nod like I understand. But I don’t have a plan. I can order more. Or I can muddle through making her a pair myself. “We can always make more.”

Mom smiles. “Good.”

She even winks at me, and I head for the upstairs. “I’m going to drop my stuff off in my room and get to work.” I’m a liar and I hate it, but it’s not because I want to lie. I have to. She doesn’t understand that the world isn’t black-and-white .

But it is what it is. I can’t be the only student at the Institute who flunks out because I can’t get my spells right. I won’t be.

By the time I get upstairs, I can hear her playing the radio. She loves the oldies—the songs from the seventies and eighties—and is probably dancing around the kitchen singing into her broom. And I like thinking of her that way. It’s a simple vision in my

head, but so clear, so happy.

I don't think about it as I shut the door to the attic loft. Mom's innocent, trusting us, and I'm the one taking that away from her. It skews my perception of her. She's never been the enemy but she's a master at her magic. She won't understand why I can't do it. Why I have to go behind her back.

And because I'm not thinking about getting caught, I'm not as careful. I don't hush the sound of the cabinet door as I open it to retrieve the napkin. And I almost don't bother with the grimoire, but after so many missteps, I don't trust myself, so I open the panel not half as quietly as I should and pull the ancient book—it looks ancient, anyway—from its hiding place.

The leather cover is scarred and the pages are brittle and yellow. But it's handwritten with drawn pictures and pressed leaves, flower petals and parts crossed through. We haven't made it all the way to the end, but we're trying different parts because my final in my practical applications class has to be something useful to the home. Aimee and I chose the cleaning spell we found in the book, partly for its simplicity and partly for its real world uses. And I've already submitted it to our professor for trial.

After I lay out the napkin, I flip to our page. It's marked by a long slim blue ribbon. The words aren't English. I suspect they're Romani, and when Aimee pronounced them as written, they worked, so I close my eyes, finding my focus, then imitate the way she said them.

After I speak the last syllable, for a second, nothing happens. But then the cabinet starts to shake and the book slides to the floor with a loud thud. And then, while I'm being very still, looking left and right—and unless she's gone deaf, there's no way she missed the sound of the book falling—the napkin spontaneously bursts into flame. “Shit!”

I try to grab it, but a sudden and mysterious breeze in the attic carries it away and with it, the flames. There are old things in this place. Old, brittle, and probably flammable things. I can't let the house burn down.

But magic is unpredictable. At least, it is when I do it. So I have to dive to catch the still flaming napkin, and I thud onto the floor beside the book, miss the napkin completely and the fucking thing is floating, undisturbed, still burning.

Then, because Mom is a conscientious homeowner and has two smoke detectors on every floor, both the alarms in the loft sound.

I plug my ears and look at the still burning napkin. This has got to be some kind of trick. It should be nothing more than ash by now, but it's some sort of poly/flame retardant blend and flames are dancing on the surface, burning the poly off but the retardant part lives on.

As the alarm continues blaring, Mom bursts into the room, and I don't know what exactly she sees, but the napkin is floating like it's on wires that cross from one side of the loft to the other. The book pages are flipping open and closed as it rumbles on the floor as though we're in the middle of an earthquake, and I'm flopping across the splintery hardwood, chasing the grimoire like I actually have a chance to catch it, like it isn't hopped up on magic .

Mom waves her hand in the air and the fire dies, the book stops, the alarms silence, and I look up at her. "Thanks?"

"Stand up, Robbie Joe." Sometimes, usually when she's pissed, she calls me by the name she'd given me when I was born. Robbie after my dad and Joe because she thought if she put two boy names together, it wouldn't sound so masculine on her girl. Her "two negatives equals a positive" logic didn't translate to baby naming so she'd shortened my name to initials. Except when she's pissed off.

Like now.

I come up off the ground with the grimoire in my hand. In my defense, when I realize it, I move my arms to hide it behind my back.

“Seriously?” She holds out her hand, flexing her fingers. “Hand it over, Robbie Joe.”

Twice. She’s bypassed the initials twice now. That she’s so in control of her magic is impressive, though. Once, when we were young—I was maybe ten and Aimee was twelve—Aimee got spitfire mad at me. Literally. Her natural magic welled inside of her. She said it felt like a tornado, and she didn’t mean to let it out, but she did, in fact, spit fire and a wall of magic knocked me flat on my back. It held me there until Mom saved me.

Mom’s control is tighter than Aimee’s, but her voice is burning with anger. She’s holding the book in one hand with far less reverence than Aimee and I have for the book. “Do you have any idea how dangerous it is to dabble in magic you don’t understand?” She shakes her head. “And unsanctioned magic will get you kicked out of the Institute.”

This isn’t headline news. I’m well aware of the rules at the Institute .

“We understand it, Mom. And we aren’t dabbling.” Technically, we aren’t doing anything. Somehow, I don’t think she’ll appreciate that observation, and any other day I would tell her that Aimee is innocent, but today I’m not saying anything to defend Aimee. If she was here, I would’ve never been caught.

“So you meant to set the house on fire?” Her tone cracks and the real anger is simmering close to the skin, ready to boil over.

“No! Of course not.” What kind of question is that?

“You’re reckless, Robbie Joe. And you don’t think before you act. It’s not just me you’re hurting, you know. It’s your sister, too. Do you see that?” She’s not only angry. She’s disappointed. After the last nineteen years, it’s one of her tones that I’m more than familiar with so I recognize it right away.

“I would never hurt Aimee.” And I don’t care for the implication, so my tone is icy, hard even.

If she notices, Mom ignores it. “But you do. Every time you drag her into one of your schemes.”

One of my schemes? Aimee found the book. She’d found the cleaning spell. She wrote the card for me to give to Professor Alex. But aside from my mother never believing it if I deigned to say it, I’m not the kind of sister who would snitch.

Although, I would say I’m sorry if I thought it would do any good. But I’ve tried it before. She always says it’s just lip service. Instead, I sigh, and it’s as petulant as I dare get when she’s this keyed up.

“You know you’re not supposed to practice magic—any magic—outside of the Institute, too, RJ. Agreements were signed. Promises were made. Does your word mean nothing?” These are rhetorical. I want to tell her that I’m doing this for a reason and that my word means everything to me. But I have to pass. Being a witch is all I know. I can’t fail now.

I want to explain it all to her, but I can’t. I don’t think I can bear more of her disappointment. As a daughter it’s one thing. Maybe the shame is even a choice I make by what I do. But as a witch without skill? That’s a whole other level of humiliation that my mother will never understand.

“It’s bad enough you’re jeopardizing your own future, but now you’re also

jeopardizing Aimee's. It's selfish is what it is." She stamps her foot. I have to give her the anger, or at least the right to it. I almost burned the house down, and I broke the rules of the Institute.

"I'm sorry." It's the absolute least I can say. I could explain, but it won't make a difference, and I really don't want to tell her the troubles I've been having. She's angry. I've done wrong. Nothing else matters.

"You're grounded."

"What? Grounded? Are you kidding me right now?" I'm old enough to move out. Old enough to vote. Don't have the money to move out. Don't have the knowledge to vote. But definitely too old to be grounded.

"You live in my house." Of course, it always comes back to this. Her house. Her rules.

"And I'm grounded?" It sounds ridiculous to say. Twelve-year-olds get grounded. She nods and crosses her arms. "So I can buy a lottery ticket, play a slot machine, get into a—" I almost say club, "R-rated movie, but I'm grounded?"

"That's right." She nods as if she's proud, and she's still holding the grimoire when she turns and marches down the stairs.

Grounded. It's such a ridiculous concept. And she took the fucking book. Aimee is going to be pissed.

But there are things my mother said that make sense. Maybe I am holding Aimee back. Not that Mom said that but it's the gist. Or maybe that's just my personal feelings on the subject.

Certainly, I'm a liability to my sister. Obviously. She has magic I don't have. Or at least she's better at magic than I am. And that means...something. And it isn't good. Also obviously.

If we don't talk about the past and only concentrate on today, I've almost set the house on fire and now Mom has the grimoire so I'm a liability to myself, too.

It's a lot to think about. Fortunately, since I'm grounded—at nineteen—I'll have plenty of time to do just that.

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Chapter

Three

When Aimee comes home, Mom is fixing dinner and I'm in my room, lying on my bed, staring up at the ceiling. I hear them chatting but can't make out the words and I don't care what they're talking about. Although I have guesses.

Mom's probably telling Aimee that I almost set the house on fire, that I was hiding the super-secret magic book, and that I'm grounded, although we didn't really discuss for how long, so for all I know I'm free right now. And Aimee's probably being the sympathetic suck-up I know she is with Mom. I don't care about that either.

For all I know, she could've meant grounded until she cooled off. Until she stopped slamming pots and pans. Until she stopped speaking in hushed tones into her cell. Which could still be a while, but who knows? She's acting ridiculous.

I know because this isn't my first go-round with my mother, that she didn't mean it any of the ways other than grounded until she tells me otherwise, but she wasn't specific. And she's probably going to use a binding spell to keep me in the house. I sigh. It doesn't matter. I don't really have anywhere to go.

It's not long until Aimee knocks on my bedroom door. It's open so I don't bother telling her to come in. She already is.

"Bad day, huh?"

“On so many levels,” I say with a shrug. “I must’ve said the spell wrong. Started a fire.”

Aimee nods. “Yeah. Mom said.”

“And she took the grimoire.”

Aimee doesn’t need it. She’s in Advanced Spell Creation, a class that requires you not only write your own spells, but prove they work by casting them. They’re training her so that she could create a grimoire of her own, so she has the training to form a coven and lead. There are only a few students in that class. I didn’t make the cut.

“We can work around it.” She’s always so confident about magic. I’m not.

Although, this is the part where I shine. I do for self-proclaimed martyrdom what music does for silence. I make it louder and all about me. “No. Mom’s right. I’m dragging you down, Aims.”

She rolls her purple eyes and pretends she’s choking. “Shut up. We’ll figure out how to get you practice.” She sighs. There’s a perfectly legit way for me to get practice and we both know it, but I’m prideful. Too prideful. I can’t stand the idea of anyone knowing I’m inadequate, that my skills shame the well-respected family name.

Aimee has a future. She’s at the top of our class and the magic she commands is twice as powerful as anyone else in school. She needs the space to grow. I’m holding her back. She can’t grow if she’s always being forced to cover for me, to worry about me to the detriment of her own studies .

“So, you and Mom had it out, huh?” She sits on my bed and I sit up and nod. “She’ll get over it. She probably just saw the flames and freaked out.” She pauses. “Did the stain come out?”

I shake my head. “Don’t wear that lipstick around an open flame.”

She fakes a laugh. “It’s your lipstick.”

Of course, it is. She doesn’t need makeup. She’s naturally pretty. I have to work to be passable. Her hair is the color of moon rays, and her eyes are the kind of violet that makes boys want to love her—even though she’s horrible around them.

I am mousier. Brown hair. Brown eyes. I’m a tomboy. She’s a cover girl. I’m not jealous, it’s just who we are. I’m the one who’s confident. She’s...not.

“Well, then it’s always near an open flame because I’m on fire.” I do the shoulder head-swirl combo, and she laughs.

When she stops, she looks at me and asks, “What are you going to do about Mom?”

That is the question, isn’t it? I shrug. “I don’t know. Wait until she cools off. Try to talk to her.” It isn’t like she can hate me forever. She’s my mother. “Right now, I’m going to go for a walk.”

“RJ, grounded means you stare at the four walls. It means you don’t go anywhere or do anything.” As if I am unaware of the situation. I spent most of the years from fourteen to eighteen—nineteen now—grounded. I’m aware of the concept.

“Oh, that’s how it is?” I give her the head-shake sniff combo that is one my personal favorite moves. “How would you know?” She’s never been grounded a day in her life.

Her smirk is of the all-knowing kind and I would roll my eyes at her if I thought she would understand why I was doing it. Instead, I don’t bother, and she keeps talking. “I’ve heard Mom say it before.”

I smile. “What Mom doesn’t know won’t extend the period of time I’m grounded.” I put my finger to my lips and shush her. “Just tell her I’ve gone to bed. She won’t check.”

I slide the window up and climb out onto the roof of the porch. I close the window because I don’t need the responsibility of Aimee tonight. I need to clear my head, and for hell’s sake, I need to figure out what I’m going to do if I can’t pass that exam. There’s no way I can do either locked up like a prisoner.

In this town there aren’t a thousand places I can go. The beach, the mall, the football field to sit under the bleachers at the regular high school. But the beach is the other direction, and I’m a year too old and at the wrong school to be the homecoming queen.

Instead, I head into town, past the barber shop and the corner market, around the random stairwell that ends at almost the middle of the sidewalk and leads to the rooftop bar that isn’t really on a rooftop. I stop in front of Books & Brews. It’s one of those vintage bookstores, hip and fashionable with a coffee shop inside. It’s crowded, and I can lose myself inside in the stacks of books and overstuffed couches. Although, I have no idea why everyone is here on a weeknight. Kind of strange in a town that’s usually wrapped in bed by eight.

I stop at the coffee counter for a caramel latte. “Midnight madness sale?” It’s only seven fifteen but who knows? In this town they even roll back midnight for things like sales, Christmas church services, and all forms of bewitching. Or so I’ve heard.

She shakes her head. “Some big-name author is here, giving a reading of her new best seller.” Her tone along with the eye roll says she doesn’t think much of big-name authors or the clientele that comes out of the woodwork to be close to them.

Funny. I thought once they were best sellers, they didn’t have to do things like seven

p.m. readings in tiny bookstores populated by young adults and old ladies. But what do I know?

I take my drink, remove the lid for a big sip of whipped goodness, then head to the other side of the store, away from the crowd but still in watching distance.

They've moved entire racks of books to make room for their author, a reading podium, and an audience, and I sidestep many a pile of classics.

I'm probably three steps into the Victorian romance section when I see him. Zane Bradbury. My entire body tightens. He's been dreamy since we were kids. But now...fuck. It's not fair for a man to be so...delicious and so out of reach.

And because he's the kind of guy a girl could see herself getting cozy with, me being the girl, I stop watching where I'm walking. Who can blame me, really, when watching him is so much more entertaining. He has a way of standing that makes me want to see what he's like lying down.

He is grade-A, top of the line, fantasy file material.

Unfortunately for me, he's more Aimee's type. All-star smart. Master of magic, and apparently of wearing really well-fitted pants. We're both legacy students. Both fifth year. Both immersed in the life we hope to lead. But he's hot.

Everybody, not just in school but in this town, knows who he is. Maybe because he's gorgeous, which I know is the same as hot, but it deserves a second mention because it's that true. He's the definition of eye candy, and I wouldn't mind a nice big bite. He's also rich. Like his parents own a bank, a car lot, and a furniture store kind of rich.

He's got brown hair that's shot through with auburn streaks. It's a little bit too long,

like he doesn't care enough to get a haircut but cares too much to let it get out of hand, and it looks like satin.

His eyes are the color of melted chocolate, and he has a lean athletic body, plus a voice that could rival warmed butter for its smoothness. Zane Bradbury is the total package. And I've been crushing on him since we met in middle school.

And when he lifts his hand to wave, I look behind me because I've never had a conversation with him before in my life.

Except for that time when we were both in our third year that I borrowed a pen. Not because I didn't have one but because I was wearing a blue miniskirt with my Institute blazer. I'd thought I was Gossip Girl fashionable and he would have no choice but to talk to me because I looked so good.

Plus, I wanted him to see the mile of leg Cosmo said would turn him on. It didn't. Turned out, Cosmo was wrong, and he didn't care whether I had a mile of leg or a half inch and a stump. He didn't have to talk to me at all. Just handed me a pen and grunted when I said thanks. I retired the mini, canceled my subscription to Cosmo , and went back to wearing jeans and rock band T-shirts.

Other than that one very brief and mostly one-sided almost conversation, I have no reason to even think he knows who I am. But when I twist to look, there's no one and nothing behind me but a wall. And for five seconds, maybe ten, I'm one of those girls I hate. Bubbly, gushing, blushing. Over a boy. Where's the feminism? The independent woman? I'm pathetic.

But he's still gorgeous so I don't care.

Not until he's on his way over. Then I care a lot, and I want to be worldly. I want to be the one who crosses to him like I know how to work a pair of legs, who at least

meets him in the middle. And I could be worldly. With someone else's feet, someone else's body, maybe.

But alas, I'm me, and so karma and fate and the deities whoever step in and I trip, flailing forward, coffee flying out of my cup in a stream of brown wetness, aimed directly for Zane.

He doesn't have time to duck, or to make any other evasive move which would get him out of the path. And so my latte becomes a hot caramel weapon and the new pattern on his shirt. Because I can't stop time—haven't learned the spell for that one yet—there's not a damn thing I can do about it.

When I land, with my face at crotch level, he looks down at his shirt then at me. I don't have anything to rub the stain out. And even if I did, I wouldn't dream of it. But I know a spell. Backward and forward. I can say it in my sleep.

"Hang on. I can fix this." I hear the spell in my head. It's a cleaning spell. How can this go wrong? It's a question I should've asked myself before I started speaking. But I don't. Instead, I flex my fingers and say the words slow. And I'm almost a hundred percent certain they're in the right order.

When I finish, I glance up, feeling the power that means the magic is working. But as I stand in front of him, staring at the stain, it doesn't lift or fade. As a matter of fact, the stain isn't removed at all. Instead, his shirt rips off, shreds itself, then falls on the ground in a pile of white fabric strips.

"What the fuck?" I look at the floor, not daring to lift my gaze to his chest.

His voice is soft, warm against my cheek because he's leaned in but before I look up into his eyes, those pools of dark chocolate goodness that I want to drown in, I can hear the smile I don't have to see. "You did a heart's desire spell."

Sweet sweaty fuck! I couldn't have heard that correctly. "I did a-a-a what ?" My skin is so hot I could bake cookies on it. A heart's desire spell takes the speaker's desire and makes it happen even without said desire being spoken.

His grin is everything. And it's pointed at me, even as he crosses his arms over his gloriously defined pectoral muscles. "It's a heart's desire spell. When you put the words desiderium cordis in any spell..." He shrugs. "The magic searches your heart for what you truly desire."

Oh. My. Ever-loving mother of fucking pearl.

If the world could just open and swallow me right now I would be oh so grateful. This is worse than the walking into class naked dream. This is the walking into a bookstore and stripping my crush half-naked reality.

I look at the floor and then my shoes and then anywhere but at him and the five-acre chest in front of me.

"Hey." He curls his finger under my chin and tilts my head up so I have to look at him. "Hey. It's okay. The shirt was tight anyway and I think I might like being your heart's desire." Oh, the smile. It's everything.

Not quite enough to drown out the taste of my own stupidity, which is very similar to the flavor of caramel latte but a bit more bitter. I don't have enough good sense to be ashamed. Or to keep my hands to myself .

Instead, because I am my own comedy of errors, I run my fingertip down his chest, over his rippling abs then to his belly button. It's an innie that I swirl said fingertip into. If I knew the spell to make myself burst into flames and disappear, I would say it. Right now. Instead, I go with "Damn," because I can't stop humiliating myself until I've gone to the deepest depths of embarrassment.

But his skin is like silk. Smooth and soft over a batch of hard muscles. Lickable.

And because there's one rung on the mortification ladder I haven't touched quite yet, I turn, run out of the store and all the way home, into the house through the front door.

It's in that moment, when I see my Mom's face, that I remember I'm grounded. And the rest of my night implodes.

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Chapter

Four

If there's one thing I don't want to do, it's go to school and face Zane Bradbury. So, I fuck around at home. Make myself pancakes for breakfast. Tell Aimee I'll walk without her today and she can take the car we share. Maybe a walk will clear my head.

Mom's already gone, so I could probably get by with ditching school today, but without the grimoire to practice with and see where I went wrong last night, my only choice—because I need the training—is to go to school.

I also have a lab today where I can work on my spellcasting for the final and I can't really afford to miss it. Besides, I've gone five years without running into Zane in the hallway, without embarrassing myself in front of him. One faux pas at the bookstore won't make him come looking for me.

I pep talk myself all the way through washing the dishes I used to make the pancakes then on the walk to the Institute. I can do this. And unless Zane has told someone—and why would he—no one knows about what happened at the bookstore. He doesn't really seem like the kind of guy who would revel in my total humiliation. Although, it's sometimes hard to tell.

He did say, in his Brad Pitt voice, that maybe he would like being my heart's desire. And he'd waved to me first. That's something. Although I don't really know what that particular something might be.

I rush down the hallway. If I skip going to my locker—which means I won't have my textbook—I might be able to slide into my seat before class starts.

In my rush, I do a crazy two-step kind of dance with the janitor who has chosen this specific moment to pick invisible pieces of lint from the floor in front of my locker.

When I finally spring the door open, I toss in an empty water bottle I'd brought from home and it slides back out as I grab the books for my first two classes. We both reach for it, but the janitor picks it up and hands it back to me.

“We recycle here, Miss Baum.”

Of course we do. Forty percent of the students here are green witches and the earth's inner power is very important to magic. “Thanks.” I take the bottle and shove it back into my locker.

I pull my book from the dark inner depths and slam the door shut then book it down the hallway because infractions for unprepared and late earn the same kind of admonishment and I don't need it. Although, I can feel the janitor's judgment as I dash away, but when I look back, he's gone.

Just before Professor Beckett walks into the classroom and sets his book down, I dart through the door in front of him and slide into an empty spot. “Nice of you to join us, Miss Baum.”

I grin. “You, too.” But I'm here, with a pen and a book and class hasn't started yet .

The random murmurs that usually die when he walks into class continue today. I catch bits and pieces. Rowen Foster, 5th year, legacy student. I know Rowen in a more abstract way than in a friendship way, but I'm interested now, and I'm trying to wade through the white noise to figure out why they're talking about her.

Her powers were stolen.

I heard it was a syphoner.

She's in a coma, and they don't know if she's going to wake up.

“All right, people. Settle down.” Beckett walks around to sit on the front of his desk. He's one of those new breeds of teacher. Hip. Wears jeans and button downs with those long skinny ties that look like an arrow pointed down at his crotch.

He has black hair that is combed forward on top and pushed up in the front. He has facial hair that looks more like he needs a shave than a beard but he probably thinks is fashionable because all the guys on TV wear their faces that way. But he teaches good magic and he's the student adviser for fifth years with the last names A through F.

But I'm more interested in what the other students are saying today. I've heard of syphoners before. Supposedly, there haven't been any around—if they're real and ever existed at all—in the last hundred or so years. So, the excitement makes sense.

We come from long magical lines and if no one in any of our families has ever met a syphoner, and they have been relegated to myth and legend, then probably this is just another tall tale told by someone who wants their five minutes of fame.

I raise my hand. There's no reason not to get the information from someone who claims to know. And it beats another day in Magical History class of reading about the witch trials and comparing the real information to that which has been out in the world for the last two hundred years.

“Yes, Miss Baum?”

“Did a syphoner take Rowen Foster’s power?” The sound in the classroom dies and now Professor Beckett has the attention of every person in his room. We all want to know, but no one else was going to ask, so I did.

“That is unknown at this time.” There’s a lot in what he isn’t saying.

“So syphoners are real?” I want it spelled out in black-and-white. And despite the shifting because this subject is uncomfortable, everyone else wants to hear what he has to say too.

He looks at me. Tilts his head. Probably wishes I would shut my pie hole and let him teach, but if so, he doesn’t say it. He smiles instead. “Syphoners aren’t known to be around this part of the country in this current era.”

I can see his loopholes. Aren’t known to be, in this era. These are cop out words. He doesn’t want to confirm or deny anything.

“There’s going to be announcements made later today, and as information is collected regarding Rowen and how to handle yourselves in the wake of this...incident, the Institute will keep you informed.” He doesn’t seem altogether confident in his own statements, but I imagine he’s in a hard position if he knows the truth but has been asked not to tell us for whatever reason. Or maybe, and this is likely, he just doesn’t want to believe it himself.

“Incident? That’s the word we’re using for when a witch has been drained of her powers?” This time someone in the back shouts out, and I’m glad it’s someone else, even though I would’ve done it. I just didn’t want to sound antagonistic. Not yet, anyway. I like Professor Beckett.

By the time class is over and we’re released into the hallway, no one knows anything more certain than they did when they walked into class. Although we did discuss

syphoners as a real part of our history rather than a myth or someone's tall tale. So there's that. A confirmation in history that syphoners are real.

Syphoners, according to the professor, are a type of witch who can only reach their full potential by leeching off or stealing another's power. They can also completely drain the powers of another, which leads me to believe that if, as I've heard, Rowen's power was drained, it may have been a syphoner. That and the fact that the professor wouldn't rule it out.

He cautioned us that a syphoner who steals the total power of another witch becomes corrupted and must be killed. They spread dangerous magic. Faulty magic. And only a syphoner can defeat another of its kind. But once a syphoner is killed, the powers revert to the witch from whom they were stolen.

I think about it. A lot. So much that when someone approaches my locker, I don't notice until he touches my shoulder.

I suck in a gasp.

Zane Bradbury is standing at my locker. I'm not some first-year little witch who has a crush on the big fifth-year magic god. I'm a fifth year. A legacy in my own right. A witch in training, at the end of her training to be exact. I can hold my head up and not make a fool of myself in front of Zane Bradbury. Presumably.

Maybe. Once I tamp down the excitement. And once I stop seeing his naked chest in front of me .

I take a second to breathe through the excitement and then I smile up at him. As people walk down the hall, they stare. Who can blame them. He's standing beside me . Smiling. Probably they're thinking that one of these things doesn't belong. It's me. I'm the thing that doesn't belong.

But I'm not going to point it out to Zane. And I'll kick the ass of the person who does. My plan is to wait until he figures it out for himself, and then I'll survive it. Probably.

"Hey."

"Hey." I'm cool. Calm. Don't have anything to spill on him, so I'm not wholly worried. "Aren't you in the wrong hallway?" His locker is in the B hall. Mine is in the C hall.

He shakes his head with his gaze locked onto mine, and it's probably one of the sexiest moves I've ever seen before in my life. My heart thumps a little harder. "Nope. I'm where I want to be."

A burst of heat shoots to my belly, and I smile. "Oh." All that heat makes me eloquent.

"I wanted to see you." It's the gaze. I can't break it. "You left in a big hurry last night."

Well, it was bound to come up. "Yeah. Well, I was finished with my coffee."

He laughs like I'm doing standup. He cocks an eyebrow, and I was wrong about the head shake being the sexiest thing I've ever seen. Very. Very. wrong. "I was finished with my shirt, too."

"Good thing." I can laugh about it now. Kind of. It's more of a chuckle. And it hurts my belly, but it's more for show.

"Right?" He grins as I shut my locker. "Come on. I'll walk with you to your next class."

“Okay.” I should probably pinch myself to make sure this is really happening and isn’t a part of some crazy dream I’m having, but I don’t because if it is indeed some sort of dream I don’t want it to end.

We walk the hall and people get out of the way. It’s like he’s school royalty or something. They certainly don’t part like the Red Sea when I walk down the hall. I get jostled and bumped all the time. Such things apparently don’t happen to Zane.

“Have you ever been in here?” He points to the Great Hall of Practitioners. It’s not really a great hall. It’s more like a large classroom, but it’s been emptied except for the statues that are lit from the floor and the portraits of the professors and standout witches from the Institute before us.

“I want my picture hanging on that wall someday.” And even if I didn’t mean to say it aloud, to be one of the great ones is one of my goals, as farfetched and unlikely as it is at this point. But the truth is, I don’t want money or power. I want to cast a spell and have it do exactly what I intend. And a Saturday night date with Zane so I get the full Zane Bradbury experience.

For either of those things to happen, I need to get to class, buckle down, do the work, and figure out why my magic is so faulty. But I still don’t want this minute to end. I’m alone with him. With Zane Bradbury.

Before I can finish the thought, I see my mother’s official Institute photo. Holy shit. It’s sobering to see her this way, as more than my mother, as a woman with her own story and her own past in the school where she’s sent us.

Not only was she a standout student, she spent years as a professor here, imparting her wisdom. She looks so elegant in her long black robes, holding her official Institute folio with her hair streaming out from beneath her professor’s cap .

I wonder why she gave it up, why she is happy doing whatever it is she does these days. I know she's told me before, but I can't ever remember where she goes every morning or what she does that keeps her out most days until after we're home from school.

I stare at the photo for a few more seconds until Zane touches my back, letting his hand rest just above where the hem of my shirt meets the waistband of my jeans. The touch is electric and sensual at the same time. I could melt.

"Hey, you."

I turn to look at him and it's the smile that gets me. Again.

"Sorry. I was just..." I point to the picture of my mom like I don't know how to say she's my mom. Her name's under the picture, engraved on a gold plate that is attached to the wall. Not that he needs me to say her name. Not that it's what he's paying attention to.

"And I was just saying you owe me a shirt."

"I do?" But then the fog over my brain clears and the mortification that I thought this was something more than him calling me on having ruined his clothing last night sets in. "Right, I do." I shake my head. "I could Venmo you."

"Or..." He grins and moves to stand in front of me and tilts my chin up again. "You could get that I'm teasing and we could go for coffee instead. My treat."

"You want to risk another shirt on coffee and a klutz?" He can either laugh at me or with me, and I don't really care which one. I really like the sound either way.

He grins. "So our date has a theme. I like it."

“Date?” My pulse is running its version of the Kentucky Derby in my ears because Zane Bradbury has just asked me on a date.

I’ve been on dates before. I’m nineteen, not ten. I’ve gone out. Done...things. But not with anyone who made my heart behave with such abandon.

The bell rings and now we’re both going to be late. “Think about it, okay? I’ll find you after class. I have to get to Advanced Spellcasting.” In the movies, this is the place where an upbeat tune would play and the girl would clutch her books to her chest as she spun around the room dancing with the statues.

I think I just had the best dream in the history of dreamers, and I’m halfway through a waltz with the statue of Wallace Whitmore, a wizard from the 1920s, when Aimee comes jogging into the room. “Oh my God. Were you just talking to Zane Bradbury? I saw him come out of here.”

I nod. I’m wearing khaki overalls and a button down with my blazer so I look like a weird cross between preppy Bob the Builder and that chick from Clueless , and I was talking to Zane Bradbury. “Come on. We have to get to herbology.”

We do. And I know it. What I don’t know is how I’m ever going to wipe this smile off my face.

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Chapter

Five

Being Aimee's sister is easy on a normal day. She's pretty. Popular, even though she's shy. And we usually dissect her life and leave mine alone because she's generally thoughtful. Over-thoughtful on most occasions. We analyze her life to death.

But today she's peppering me with questions when all I'm trying to do is discover which herb root is best to use in a potion that will make the drinker forget their own name. And how much to grind into the potion if I want the result to be temporary as opposed to permanent.

I don't know when I'll ever have the occasion to use this particular potion, but should the need arise, I want to be prepared. Aimee isn't having it though.

"What did he say?"

"That I owe him a new shirt." I flip the page in my notes looking for the appropriate ratio of distilled bittercress to qilin honey which is the honey gathered by a qilin dragon. I don't know if they're real or if it's a marketing gimmick by some potion maker, but I don't care. I just need to know the fucking ratio and I can't find it .

"What happened to his shirt?" Her brow pinches and I try to wave her off, but she takes my notebook and sits on it. "Why do you owe Zane Bradbury a new shirt?" Her voice is shrill because she's excited, but the classroom is mostly quiet so she sounds

like she's using a bullhorn.

Professor Stag shoots me an evil eye—which is bad from any teacher but worse from one who's a witch—and I jerk my notebook out from under her behind, smooth the pages, and resume my work.

Aimee, on the other hand, and quite contrary to her usual behavior, has gone rogue and is ignoring the formulations we are supposed to be figuring out.

“Why do you owe Zane a new shirt?” she asks again and this time, Professor Stag slams her pen on the table.

“Yes, Miss Baum. Please tell all of us why you owe Zane Bradbury a new shirt. We're dying to know.” Her sarcasm is noted.

“I spilled coffee on it.” I look at Aimee. There's going to come a time, probably in the near future, when I remind her that I don't pry into her business unless she's dragged me into it or if I think she's going to get hurt. Then I'll maim on her behalf.

“How? Where? When?” Aimee isn't finished and when I look at Professor Stag, she waves her hand.

“Spit it out. We aren't going to get anything done until you do.” When it comes time at the end of our fifth year before graduation but after finals, Professor Stag is not going to get a sparkling student review out of me.

“I went to the Books & Brews last night and he was there. I spilled coffee, shredded his shirt, and ran out.” I look around at the smirks and hear the snickers.

But before Aimee can think to pepper more questions at me, the classroom door opens and Willow Thornbridge walks in. She's tall and regal, and I recognize her

from her picture hanging in the Hall of Greatness.

She speaks for a minute to Professor Stag who stands when they finish. “Ladies and Gentlemen, please put your work down for a moment. This is Willow Thornbridge. She’s a detective with the police department and a former student at the Institute.” She says it as if she personally had something to do with it.

I look up. Her attire screams of professionalism—a pantsuit my mom would call “smart” with a pair of low-heeled boots—and I wonder what kind of grades she got in herbology and if she remembers the ratios.

But I push the thoughts out of my head because they’re ridiculous. She obviously is here to talk to us about Rowen.

“Thank you, Professor. My name is Willow Thornbridge and I’m investigating the attack on one of your fellow students.” She speaks with a solemnity I wonder if she learned here or if she picked up at her police training. “Rowen Foster was attacked a few miles from here last night. As far as we can tell, she was alone, and it happened in the dark of night.”

I gulp. That’s never a good combination and I wonder what Rowen was doing out alone in the dark. Also, I was out alone last night. The fact that it could’ve been me hits home.

“We have talked to Rowen’s friends and anyone who could possibly have seen her last night. We know that she went to a book reading at Books & Brews, but we don’t know how she ended up outside of town. So, if you have any information, saw her last night or spoke to her about her plans for last night, or have any information, any information at all, please give the police department a call. You can do it anonymously.” She looks down the rows of tables where we’re all tuned in and listening.

A voice from the back asks, “Is Rowen going to be okay?”

“She’s at the hospital, getting treatment from the doctors there.” The detective nods. “What we want you all to know is that we don’t know who did this. So every person, especially those who attend the Institute”—she means witches—“needs to be vigilant. Don’t go anywhere alone. Travel in groups. And if you see something, anything, say something. The faculty and the police need to know even the smallest details that seems suspicious.”

“Are we in danger?” Aimee gives my hand a squeeze under the table because we don’t generally deal with danger. We’re not those kind of witches. We deal with earth and crystals, stars and spirituality. Danger and crime require a whole other breed of magic.

I want to ask if the detective thinks it’s a syphoner, and if I was still in history class when she came in I would, but I don’t want to alarm Aimee. She’s freaked enough.

On the other hand, at least she’s laid off me and the Zane incident.

“I heard Rowen was into black magic.” The same voice from the back of the room calls out and I turn to look. Isador Murick is watching the detective intently, like she didn’t just associate one of us with the dark arts.

I know Rowen and she is a rebel, but nothing so dark as Isador is suggesting. Rowen simply refused to focus on a single kind of magic as a specialty—earth or crystal or cosmic. She was keeping her options open. But of course, right away the rumor mill starts churning out its specialty claims that she was playing with the dark arts and even summoning demons .

Sometimes, the rumor mill is a real bitch.

It's hardly fair that everyone is talking about Rowen when she can't defend herself. I want to go see her, but I don't know her well. Certainly not well enough to show up at her hospital bedside claiming friendship. She's in a coma. Maybe when she's further along in her recovery—if she gets further along—then I'll talk Aimee into coming along.

Until then, I'll take the warning seriously and not go anywhere alone. I don't want to end up without magic. Not before I've really learned to use it, anyway.

When Aimee and I walk out of class, she heads to her locker, also in the C hall, and I head to mine. When I get close, my heart speeds up again. Zane is waiting at my locker when I get there. I smile, thinking if I don't figure out a way to stop reacting so viscerally to him, I'm going to keel over and die before I ever get to our first date.

“Hey.”

“Hi.” I open my locker and he leans against the one beside it. I need a second to calm myself, so I pretend I'm searching for something inside. “Did a detective come to your class?” I poke my head out of the locker to ask, then immediately stuff it back inside because he is so right here .

“Yeah. Inspector Dryden.” Apparently there are detectives all over the school.

“We had Willow Thornbridge.” I say the name as if he should know it. But until we went into the Hall of Greats, I had no idea who she was, and he wasn't focused on the statues and photos while we were in there.

“They emptied Rowen's locker.” That's news. I look at Zane and chew my lower lip.

“Are you scared, RJ?”

I have a feeling he's going to offer to protect me like I'm some sort of frail damsel in

distress, and I want him to know I can protect myself. And should the situation call for it, I can make sure nothing happens to him, either. “No. I’ve been taking self-defense class since fifth grade when that group of witch hunters came passing through town.”

He nods like he approves, then bats his eyes at me like he’s the damsel. “Could you protect me then? Because I’m a little worried.”

Now I’m convinced that his flirting is real and not some figment of my overblown imagination and I giggle.

And hate myself for it.

“I’ll protect you.” I chew my lower lip. “You don’t have to worry.”

He smiles. “I feel so much safer now.” And the way he says it sends little shivers over my skin.

We have class to get to, but I wouldn’t mind standing in the hallway staring at him for the rest of the day. Talking to him. Flirting. Being flirted with.

I have to be in building two in less than five minutes, and it’s a three-minute jog to my class. “Have you thought about going with me for coffee later?”

To be honest, I haven’t thought of much other than concentrating on my herbology class and then of Rowen. But I would have to be the dumbest chick in school to turn down a coffee “date” with Zane.

But before I can answer, Dean Ryman approaches. He’s older than anyone I’ve ever met and has white hair and a beard. I’ve never actually spoken to him, and even now, he doesn’t spare a look at me.

“Zane, I’m glad I caught you.” The dean isn’t the kind of man one ignores to continue his conversation with a girl, although a part of me wishes Zane would ask him to give us a minute so I can answer the question. But I don’t interrupt and the dean looks at me then back at Zane. “Can we chat for a minute?”

“Sure.” Zane gives me a look—I think it’s an apology but I don’t know him well enough to know for certain—and walks away with the dean. And now I have three minutes to get to class.

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Chapter

Six

I don't see Zane for the rest of the day. We don't have classes together and he doesn't appear at my locker. It's a letdown but the worldly part of me that can see danger when it pertains to Aimee should've known it was way too good to be true. Boys like Zane don't look at girls like me—history has proven it true.

As disappointed as I am, it was nice to feel special for a day. Fortunately, I didn't have time to get used to it, so I can go back to being myself with minimal issue. Except maybe wondering what the hell happened; what I did to ruin it.

Zane had come to me. Waited outside my class, walked me to another. Found me and asked me for coffee. Maybe I hesitated too long. Certainly long enough for the dean to show up and take Zane away.

I sigh. It doesn't matter now. No way is he going to ask me again. Why would he? Instead of lingering, I hitch my backpack onto my shoulder and head toward the front door to wait for Aimee.

As I walk down the hallway, it's oddly quiet. There aren't any other people right now. Granted, some classes haven't ended so there are still rooms with students inside, but it's the end of the day, so they should be ending soon.

In any case, it's odd for this place to be so quiet. This is the time of day when everyone is anxious to get home. There's talking and laughing, commiserating about

the day. But right now, it's so quiet in the hallway I can hear the teachers from inside the classrooms.

I quicken my pace because the hairs on the back of my neck are standing at attention, like they know something I don't.

As I pass Professor Beckett's classroom, a bulb above me blows and sparks rain down around me.

I give a yelp that's part scream, part squeal, and a quick jump-step. "What the fuck?"

I look around and find the janitor, who seems to have materialized from the nothingness of the hallway. "No worries, Miss Baum. Just a light bulb."

I don't remember having a conversation with this guy in all the years I've been here until today, so I haven't the vaguest idea how he knows my name, but this is the second time today that he's used it. I don't ask how he knows me because he gives me the creeps and I just want to get away.

"Right." I hurry toward the door. The guy seems friendly enough, looks like every average guy I've ever seen. There's nothing about how he looks that should give me the creeps. It's the way he keeps showing up. And that he knows my name.

The silence and emptiness are unnerving. When I step outside, the sun hits my face and I wish the day hadn't been shot by my ridiculous expectations to somehow climb the social ladder, that Zane was more than being nice—hell maybe he lost a bet and that's why he walked me to class.

The fronts of the four buildings take up almost two city blocks and are located across the street from the parking lot. I try not to look for Zane's Jeep, but he always parks in front, and it's hard to miss the bright blue paint job and the oversized off-road tires.

No one else drives one like it here.

His crowd—Aurora Deville, Finnick Strain, Circe Dupree, Dylan Tempest, Isador Murick, and Piper Steros—are all standing around a coffee cart that always sits near the statue of Marlena Steros and is manned by a guy named Noah.

Marlena Steros was the first witch to ever graduate from the Institute when it was only one building and a single teacher who taught all the subjects and aspects of magic to the students.

This space on the lawn at almost the center between the buildings is a hangout between classes and after school. Not for me, but sometimes Aimee is out here with her friends when I come out at the end of the day.

I try not to look at Zane's crowd because I have some pride, but I can't help it. And there he is. Zane is standing between Piper and Dylan. He takes a sip of his coffee and like he knows I'm watching him, looks up. But he smiles and waves me over.

Again, I look behind me because I won't survive walking over if he means to wave to someone else. But there's no one behind me and I smile. He means me. I smile to myself and begin the walk across the lawn.

Before I make it halfway, he jogs over to me. "Hey."

"Hey." And now my stomach tumbles again. I don't know if it's the smile or the man responsible for the effect, but it happens just the same. "Can you hang out for a while? I can buy you that coffee now."

Oh. So there won't be a date. I cover my disappointment with a smile. "Sure. "

"That way we don't have to waste a good first date at the coffee shop." The grin

widens, and it's powerful, makes mine genuine.

Of course, mine is genuine. He's mentioned a real date and what's not to like about that? Stopping the grin would be a whole hell of a lot more than I could manage. "Okay."

He takes my backpack off my arm and slings it onto his then guides me toward the vendor with a light hand at the small of my back. The heat against my skin is intoxicating and I want to lean into him, want to explore the fantasy that's in my head right now, but I don't have that kind of confidence. Instead, I'm rigid. Awkward.

"Caramel latte, right?" Without waiting for me to answer he tells the coffee cart guy. Then he turns and I turn with him. His friends are silent, looking at us. "Everybody, this is RJ Baum. RJ, these are my friends."

He takes a few seconds to introduce them one by one as if we haven't all been in school together for the last five years. I wave like I'm some kind of adolescent dork who hasn't yet learned to use her words. I hate myself for it. This isn't me. I'm brazen. I say what I think and do what I want. I don't know this version of me.

"Did you hear about Rowen?" Piper presses her shoulder against the tree beside me and leans her head in to ask me like it's the most natural thing in the world for her to be talking to me. But she's never been so inclined before, and I weigh whether or not I want to bring that up. I don't. Not now anyway.

Instead, I nod. "Yeah. A detective came to one of my classes today." I pause and tell the story, along with all the things the detective said, and add, "It was a witch who went to school here."

Apparently, that isn't all that interesting since there are a lot of witches in the area that went to school here, and they all start talking about what they know over top of

one another so it's hard to focus on any one of them.

Circe, who is talking to Dylan, turns to join the conversation Piper and I are having. "I heard she got a red warning." She means Rowen.

At the Institute when we act outside our agreements and the Institute discovers, we're given warning. I personally have never had one, although I've done my share of acting outside our agreements. But certainly not outside enough for a red warning. I'm more of a blue warning kind of girl. Red is the most severe we can get.

I don't even know anyone who's gotten a red warning, so I don't know how to respond. It's better to sit back and listen to them discuss.

Piper nods at Circe. "I saw the warning. It was for attempting to summon." Piper lowers her voice as if simply saying the kind of offense makes her equally guilty.

Summon, in our world, only has one connotation, and it isn't a good one. It references demons or the dead which means that Rowen was into something dark. Dangerous. A red-warning offense.

"I heard she was trying a reactivation spell in one of the transport rooms and her power was already waning." Special rooms inside the Institute have walls infused by magic. Only fifth-year students are allowed to use the rooms. "And that's when she got the red warning."

Dylan looks at us and shakes his head. "She just lost her little brother."

Oh shit. Well, if ever there was a time to try a reactivation spell, that's it. I don't care how much of my power it took to cast a reactivation spell. I would die without Aimee, I would break every rule in the book, throw every spell I could to bring her back. I would never judge Rowen for what she was trying to do, so I sip my

coffee—the one Zane handed me—as they talk.

“Do they know if she’s going to be okay?” The story the cops are giving us might not be the entire story. I’m curious.

“If she’s been drained by a syphoner, the only way she gets her power back is if the syphoner is killed.” Zane’s voice is soft, as if he’s trying to break the news gently. But there’s no gentle way to say this kind of thing. Not to a bunch of vulnerable witches. “If she expended the magic on her own to summon outside the safety of the Institute, her magic’s gone.” He shrugs like it doesn’t matter, but the change in his voice means something. It might mean he’s closer to Rowen than I thought.

Before I can ask him how well he knows her, Aimee walks up, wide-eyed but smiling. Usually, there isn’t anyone around me when she comes to find me, but she knows all of these people. They’re her crowd, her friends.

She cocks an eyebrow. “Making friends, I see.”

“You know me. I’m a joiner.” Nothing could be further from the truth. The last thing I joined voluntarily was Girl Scouts in second grade.

She laughs. “We should probably get home, RJ.”

I give a slight head shake, still smiling at her so if anyone happens to look over, they won’t know we’re arguing. “I’m not ready yet.”

“Mom—”

I don’t want to have this conversation right now. It’s humiliating to be as old as I am and have my mommy grounding me. No one has ever paid attention to me at this school. And now that they are, I don’t want to go back to being anonymous and

invisible. Turns out, I like being seen .

No one needs to think of me as a baby whose Mom sends me to my room and grounds me. Especially people who have just now noticed that I'm alive.

I don't want to risk it evaporating by leaving. Anonymous had served me well up until now, but I am ready to step out of my shell.

"Mom will be fine, Aims." My tone is smooth. Practiced, even. I've used it on her so many times in the past, I would think she would have developed an immunity, but it still works. And as far as I'm concerned, this conversation is over. I'm an adult. Capable of deciding for myself.

Zane glances at me and smiles. "We're going to go to the beach. Do you guys want to go?"

I look at Aimee. She shakes her head at the same time I nod. But I throw in a pleading smile then mouth the word, "please."

She shakes her head again, and it pisses me off. I shouldn't have to beg her. I always go with her when she wants me to go. "I'll just go alone."

She sighs, and I know I've won, but I don't dare gloat at her because I want her to go along. I want her with me. She's my best friend, and I always want her with me.

When she gives a small nod, I clap my hands together before I turn to Zane. "We would love to."

He grins. "You can ride with me and Dylan."

I can hear my mother's voice in my head. She's been telling me since I was a kid not

to accept rides from people I hardly know, and we might not all be best friends, but I know these people.

And she's not here.

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Chapter

Seven

Zane walks beside me to his Jeep and guides me to the passenger side. “You can sit up here.” He shoots Dylan a look as Dylan opens the door for Aimee.

She’s not wholly comfortable with them but no way is she going home. She would never leave me alone with people we hardly know. When Dylan climbs in back with her and Zane starts the Jeep, I look back at her. She’s not smiling but she would never complain out loud, whereas I would be shouting it out the windows and doors and the open top.

He pulls into a parking lot at a part of the beach that’s closer to our home—walking distance actually—so we can stay for a little while longer than we would if we had gone to one of the other coves nearby.

I hold the seat up for Aimee, and she smiles but she’s angry, simmering with it just below her skin. I sling my arm through hers and walk to stand in front of the front bumper and look at the water rolling onto the sand.

There’s a light wind blowing off the beach and the smell of the sea and suntan oil is strong here. Maybe it’s my imagination, but this is the kind of day that begs suntan lotion.

“Dylan’s cooler is in the back of the Jeep. You guys can help yourselves while we get wood for the fire.” It’s like he’s talking only to me, like the words are meant for my

ears only. He's just a guy, for fuck's sake, but I can't stop smiling.

"It's not dark or cold," Aimee grumbles. "We don't need a fire."

I've never seen her in such a mood, and I ignore it for now. I've let her drag me along to poetry readings and musicals and places that I would rather people not know I went, and I've always tried to keep my complaining to a minimum, so I'm going to let her have this.

Piper and Circe walk over from the other car—they rode in Finnick's SUV—and they head to the back of Zane's Jeep and pull the gate open. There's a cooler back there and the girls pass out beers.

Aimee holds up her hand and doesn't take one. "No thanks."

I look at Circe and shake my head. "I prefer vodka."

Circe smiles. "A party girl." And high fives me like we're frat boys.

"Vodka makes me gassy." Finnick smiles and slings his arm around Isador. "You don't mind, do you, babe?"

Babe? Ugh.

But then I imagine Zane looking at me the way Finnick is looking at her, smiling, calling me babe, and I like it. Too much.

It all hits me quick. I'm at the beach with Zane and, at nineteen, I've never been on a real date. My breath comes in a short, sharp huff. Holy shit. I'm on a date. It counts even though there are other people here. He specifically asked me to come. That makes it a date.

Zane and Dylan return, arms loaded with sticks and small logs. They arrange them in a spot where the sand is dark and mixed with ash, and there are the skeletons of old logs in the space.

When the fire is lit—they use lighter fluid and an old Bic—Zane sits a few feet from the fire on a blanket in the sand and smiles as he gazes at me then pats the spot next to him. I look at Aimee and see she's shifting from one foot to the other. She's uncomfortable, and as a result, acting awkward. Not talking. Not smiling. Quiet with jerky movements.

I slide my arm through hers and pull her with me to the blanket. I sit beside Zane and she sits beside me. She's not talking to anyone or enjoying any part of this. The thing about Aimee is that she probably can't enjoy herself right now. She's too worried about Mom finding out and punishing her.

It would be the sisterly thing to go home with her, but just as I think that, Zane smiles at me and he shifts and leans on his palm behind me.

"Do you want a drink? There might be sodas in the cooler." When I shake my head, I get a big whiff of his cologne. It has a hint of citrus, maybe sandalwood, too. I want to breathe deeper, but I'm afraid someone will notice. But then he leans in closer. "Do you surf, RJ?"

Dammit. Now I'm picturing Zane in a wetsuit. "I'm more of a swimmer."

"I could teach you." His voice is husky and I want nothing more than to surf with him. Now that he's mentioned it, my mind plays the idea over and over in my head. Us together on a single board with his hands on my hips, my skin tan, hair kissed by the sun, golden where it's usually brown.

"Okay." It's not a definitive plan, not a see you on Tuesday after classes kind of

thing. But the idea of it is enough to make my body sing.

Beside me, Aimee chuffs and even though I'm thinking about him while I'm looking at the fire in front of me and I can't see her face, I can feel her eyeroll. I have to ignore her.

She's ready to go. I'm ready to give in after the second exasperated sigh, but then Dylan sits beside Aimee and starts talking to her. I don't listen to more than the first couple sentences. They're talking about one of the classes they have together and she doesn't sound so exasperated now.

"I'm glad you came with us."

The words are warm and rich and make my stomach flutter. "Me, too."

"I've wanted to get to know you for a while." He doesn't touch me more than to nudge me with his shoulder, and I giggle. I'm not normally a giggler, not someone who even likes people who giggle, but it's the sound of happiness.

"Yeah?" It's not an eloquent response, or one that's calculated. It's genuine, though. Probably more curious than is cool to be. Mostly because I have no idea how to respond. The situation doesn't require sarcasm, my go-to conversational skill, and heaven forbid I giggle again, so this is all I have in the moment.

"I've seen you around. You're always confident."

If he means it looks like I don't mind walking the hall alone, he's right. I don't like having to force conversation, and small talk isn't my forte. I don't want to answer in such a way that he figures out I'm an actress, so susceptible to insecurity that I choose not to have friends outside of Aimee.

“I like my own company.” I smile. It’s not a lie. I like spending time with myself more than I like spending time with most anyone else. Present company excluded.

“So do I.” When he grins, it’s everything.

Heat flushes my skin and I stare at him, willing him to lean in. He doesn’t. Instead he looks back to the fire.

I am dying to be witty and sparkling, to have something intriguing to say, but I can’t think of anything. I’m literally—and this kind of thing never happens to me—speechless. But Aimee and Dylan are chatting it up. She laughs. He chuckles.

I’m not trying to listen, but I just need something to talk about. “Do you know her?” Aimee asks him softly.

“Not very well. She’s more Zane’s friend.” And now I’m tuned in. “They went out a couple times.”

“I think she knew a lot of people.” Who? Who knew a lot of people and dated Zane? I need names.

“Yeah. Rowen’s been at school for five years. She pretty much knows everyone. And she dated Finnick right before Zane. Bunch of other guys after, too.” He makes Rowen sound like she gets around, or maybe he’s trying to make it sound that way.

The point is none of it is evidence. I’ve been at the Institute for five years, too. I know hardly anyone. She’s social. Probably dates a lot because aside from being social, she’s pretty and magical. Rowen belongs in this crowd. I don’t.

“RJ?” Zane’s voice breaks my focus and I turn to look at him.

“Sorry. I got...distracted.”

He nods and smiles. “You distract me.” I don’t really need the cheesy lines but I like how hard he’s trying. And the part of my brain that never shuts up wonders if he tried this hard with Rowen, if this is his MO, his game plan, the way he flirts with all the women he might be attracted to.

We’re close enough there isn’t much space between us, but we’re not touching. Dylan is still talking to Aimee, but I don’t have the kind of experience with men—boys, dudes, guys—to know how to get him to put his arm around me or touch my face. Instead, I sit and think about it.

“What’s wrong?” Now he sounds concerned and his face falls. He’s staring hard like I have mustard dripping down my chin.

There isn’t anything I can think of to save the moment. I can’t exactly tell him that I was waiting, hoping, trying to figure out how to get him to kiss me or touch me. Can’t tell him that I was wondering if he’s upset about Rowen because he dated her. I can’t tell him that I’m jealous of Rowen.

I’m just glad he isn’t of the mind-reading portion of the Institute’s student body, the freak-shows who can’t stop themselves from digging around in the thoughts of others.

“Nothing. Aimee’s just ready to go.” I’m not lying. There isn’t anywhere she wants to be less than here, although she’s stopped huffing and puffing like the little engine from the kid story, and she seems to be friendly enough with Dylan.

Her displeasure at being dragged along and being stuck here is all I can think of to explain why I’m awkward, though. If I’m honest, I’m too nervous and need to get myself under control. I need to go home, watch some movies, research how to

interact with a man like Zane, figure out how to make what I want to happen actually happen.

I nudge my sister with a sharp elbow, and she jerks to attention, turns away from Dylan and jumps into my conversation. “Right. Um, Mom’s late shift is going to be over soon.”

“Late shift?” He chuckles and the sound is smooth and pleasing. My stomach-flutters continue. Not because six-thirty is early in terms of “late” shifts, but because his laugh is rich and deep and smooth, and it does things to a woman. It makes me rethink leaving.

Somehow, even in the face of all his deliciousness, I manage a nod. “She works late a lot, but she’s always home by dinnertime, and she worries because when I was fifteen, I stayed out until bedtime.” Oh God. Someone stop me before I tell him my life story in one long, run-on sentence. But I continue undaunted. “And if we aren’t home, she’ll...”

I’m about to say come looking for us , but Aimee talks over me to finish my sentence with, “Be worried.”

And then I nod like I’m a bobblehead doll. “Yeah. She’ll be worried.” Inside, I’m seething because I want this. I want these friends. I want that guy. In my mind, the anger is reasonable.

I’m not mad at Aimee. She came up with the right thing to say at just the moment I needed her to say it. I’m pissed off at our mom because I’m grounded . At nineteen. Instead of making a scene, I stand and brush imaginary sand off my pants.

Zane stands, too, falls into step beside me as I walk to the edge where concrete meets sand. “I’ll call you tomorrow,” he says, his gaze pointed directly into mine. He isn’t

asking me to call me. He's telling me, and I like a man who takes charge. The thought makes my stomach flutter again.

He's not paying attention to anyone else, he's looking at me, as if he's legitimately sorry I'm leaving. I can't help but read into it. It's not like I get a lot of looks like this one and I want a minute to savor it, to etch it into my memory.

My heart thumps a little harder, and I'm trying to rein it all in so I don't embarrass myself, but the grin is staying put. Nothing short of a paint scraper and some industrial grade solvent is going to get rid of this thing.

"I'll be home." Until he calls at least. I'm not going anywhere until that phone rings and he asks me on a date.

Plus, it'll give me time to suck up to Mom, convince her that I'm either too old or too well-behaved to remain grounded.

Instead of walking beside me as we leave the beach on the concrete path that slices the beach into two halves, he goes back to the blanket, and this time takes a beer out of the cooler Finnick and Dylan brought nearer the fire at some point.

And one way or another, I'm going to find out if all that beautifully dark hair is as soft as it looks. It just won't be tonight.

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Chapter

Eight

As Aimee and I walk along the path that provides the border between the parking lot and the beach leading back to town, I can't stop thinking about Zane and what would've happened if I'd been able to stay. He might've leaned in, kissed me.

I can't even be pissed at Aimee. I was the one who panicked, who used her as an excuse.

The sidewalk leads us toward the park through the center of town. The park's divided into sections. There's a part geared toward little kids and has all the plastic playground equipment, shredded tires on the ground and lights overhead to ward off the vandals.

Then there is the old section of the park the city chose not to upgrade with the metal slide and monkey bars, the climbing dome, and a sandbox long ago taken over by cat shit. That is where I used to play when I was a kid and Mom brought us to the park. Aimee always sat under the tree and read. She has a collection of Brontë and Austen books that she's read a thousand times since she was ten.

The lights here are blown now so we walk through the dark and Aimee tugs my arm. "Come on, RJ. This place gives me the creeps."

There's an energy here that crackles in the air. It's not like lightning. But the crackle isn't in my imagination. Neither is the light. I walk off the path toward it. What the

fuck is happening? Every step I take brings me closer to the sound, and it's louder now, less of a crackle, more of a continuous popping sound. One pop slides into another.

I head toward it even as Aimee calls me back. "Don't leave me here, RJ. The dark is closing in."

"Come with me," I hiss back in a stage whisper.

"RJ!" She cries out, and whatever is happening stops for a second then starts again, and this time the sound is thunder and ahead of us. I approach slowly, one small step then another and another. Each one is tentative, leaves from this neglected area crunch under my feet, but I'm focused. I'm walking through the dark to find out the meaning behind the sound and light.

The light wavers as I get closer. Aimee is behind me, but she gasps as she sees what's happening in front of us. There are ropes of light, waving up and down from the body of Margery Faulkner—I recognize her from the Institute—to a person whose back is to me.

I should run out there and stop this, break that tether, but I can't. I'm rooted to the spot. This isn't a cat in a tree. I know what this is. A fucking syphoner. A syphoner stealing the power from Margery.

My mind gives a quick rundown of the things I know. First, Margery is a third-year witch. I don't know how our power is measured as witches, sorcerers, etc., but I've seen her around. She's got skills. It begs the question of whether a syphoner takes the power of another witch by opportunity only or if maybe Margery was stalked to this place, or worse, lured.

She is writhing in pain, her body spasming, though her feet are a few inches off the

ground. Her back bows and her head is closer to her feet than is normal or should even be possible.

“Stop!” It’s not my voice, but Aimee’s that rings out. I pull her shoulder back.

“Aimee, no!”

She jerks away, even though the crackles in the air now are danger not magic. Sometimes I can see things. I don’t even know if Aimee can see the ropes of magic leading from Margery to the syphoner.

Syphoner. Aimee is vulnerable. Margery’s body falls in a heap to the ground near the tree where Aimee used to read. The syphoner turns and charges toward Aimee, who tries a shield spell, but it isn’t strong enough and the syphoner charges through. She’s running at full speed, hard toward Aimee.

Aimee stands her ground, confident she can fend off the syphoner. “RJ, help Margery!”

She plants her feet as I try to run around the syphoner. But there is a force around her—the syphoner—and it bounces me off. I skitter to the side and then rebound back in a line to get to Margery, but then Aimee screams. Her body is connected to the syphoner by the ropes, one from her chest and one from her shoulder.

“Aimee!” I scream and run toward her. She’s my priority right now. I linebacker my way between them and Aimee falls to the ground. The syphoner looks at me as I break the hold.

She’s familiar. Someone I’ve seen before who is dressed all in black, from her leggings to her sweatshirt and shoes. She’s blonde and tall with a long face, thin mouth, and a short nose. I can’t tell how old she is, but she’s somewhere between my

age and my mom's. Her hair is pulled back but it isn't long enough that I can grab hold of it to swing her around. But I reach for her, and she bats my hands away then chants low and in a language I can't understand.

After repeating her words a few times, she frowns like what she's expecting to happen isn't. She pulls in a full breath then repeats her chant twice more, and frowns again when nothing happens.

I lunge for her and she says, "Stop!" and I'm motionless, held in place, frozen. I can't move. And then an excruciating pain rips through my belly. She's trying to take my power, to suck it out of my body. The pull is strong, but she's failing, trying to control my body the way she did Aimee's and Margery's.

I cry out. The pain eases and then spikes again. I pause my fight, wait until it once again ebbs, and I'm trying to thrash my body, call on every muscle and bone, trying to break free of the spell so I can move, so I can help Aimee or attack this thing that's trying to kill us.

I'm using all of my strength, making no headway against the force pushing me back, and then all the magic disappears and I fall forward, smack my face on the ground and pain explodes inside my head. The last thing I hear is a voice ask, "Why are you not like the others?" And then the world fades to black.

When I open my eyes, it all comes back to me in degrees, I still can't move. I can't speak. I can't get to Aimee who is laying on the ground beside me.

But I can see. And I can hear. In my head, I'm screaming for my sister, to move, to let me know she's alive. Her eyes are closed and she has a gash on her head.

I try to reach for her, but my finger only twitches. Then, of what might be its own volition, my body flips over and I'm looking at the night sky, the stars between the

trees, a streetlight in the distance.

“RJ!” I know the voice and it gives me chills—but the good kind this time. “Help me get them to the Jeep, Dylan!”

Zane lifts me so that I’m against his chest. I try to say his name, but my mouth won’t move. It’s a magic spell and I need someone to break it. But right now, I can’t ask. Right now, I’m drifting between consciousness and sleep. My eyelids close again and I don’t know how long they stay that way, but when they open, we’re driving and I’m lying across Zane’s lap. I can’t see Aimee, and my stomach aches. Where is she?

Shadows slide by in the dark open air of the Jeep. Every few seconds, a light flashes and speeds past. Or maybe we’re speeding past the light. I can’t tell. And then, when the car squeals around a corner, Zane’s arms tighten around me. “Just hang on, RJ. We’re going to get you home.”

In the front seat, I can see Finnick is driving, Piper in the seat beside him, and in the back Zane is holding me while Dylan holds Aimee.

“We’re almost there, Zane,” Finnick says in a shout over the wind and the bees in my head. Then, the familiar steeple top of the church at the end of the street I live on flashes by.

I manage a nod, or I think so as I look up at him and he glances down at me. “I’m not going to let this happen to you, too.”

I want to ask what he means, but I can’t form the words. I can only think them. I also want to tell him about the syphoner. What I saw and how it all happened because I’m afraid if I close my eyes again, I’m going to forget.

Cords of light that moved in waves up and down, back and forth between Margery

and the syphoner then Aimee and the syphoner. It didn't happen to me.

I close my eyes and my fingers flex into his shirt. "It's okay, RJ. I promise you're safe now."

He thinks I'm frightened, but really, I'm only trying to move, trying to make my body respond to what I'm telling it to do. I try to reach for Aimee, but for all the flexing my fingers can do, my arms are still immobile.

And that's exactly how I am when Zane carries me up the sidewalk to the house.

His shirt smells like cologne and chest is hard beneath my cheek, but I can't enjoy it. I don't know how Aimee is and I don't know how I am. I only know that I don't like being helpless. I don't like it one fucking bit.

He shifts my weight as the door opens and I hear my mother's voice. It's a comfort. She'll know what to do. She has to. I want to reach for her, but I can see her face as Zane walks me past her.

"RJ!" And a second later, she gasps harder, louder. "Aimee!" She tells Zane, "Put her in the chair." And to Dylan, she says, "Put Aimee on the sofa." There's a frantic undertone to her voice, but she would never show any kind of emotion in front of strangers. The chair is soft under my ass, and Zane arranges a pillow under my cheek as my head weaves and bobs into the arm of the chair .

He crouches in front of me, looks at me. "Do you know what happened?"

I can't nod, so I lower my eyes and hold them closed for a minute.

"Is that a yes, RJ?"

I blink again, same way.

“You boys can go.” My mother’s voice is firm and angry. If I was grounded before, I’m going to be under lock and key now. But so long as Aimee’s all right, they can put me in a dungeon where I can’t drag her into anymore of my schemes for as long as I live. I’m certain my mother will consider it. “I can handle this now.”

Zane stands so that I only have a view of his legs. But then the door opens and closes and my mother comes around to stand in front of me, but she’s facing the sofa. She’s helping Aimee.

And then she’s in front of me. “RJ, what happened?”

I try to lift my head, pull it up not more than an inch and then it falls. I can’t answer anything yet. I whimper and she brushes my hair back. “My poor girls. I’m going to fix you, sweetheart. Don’t you worry.”

She pushes to her feet and walks into the kitchen.

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Chapter

Nine

When she comes back, Mom's dress swishes at her calves and her bare feet curl into the carpet. She comes to me first.

"Can you sit up?" I try but am unable, so she stands at the opposite side of the chair and slides her arm around my shoulders. She pulls me up, holds me with one arm and tips a metal cup to my lips with the other hand.

The liquid tastes terrible, but I can't move enough to spit it out, plus, she would only make me drink more. I know that from a childhood experience with cough suppressant syrup that tasted like acid.

The liquid slips down my throat and a warmth starts in my belly then branches out into the rest of my body. Feeling returns and I clear my throat, move my ankles up and down, then my legs, and finally the rest of me.

Mom wipes the dribble of her potion off my chin and cheek. "Can you tell me what happened, RJ?" She moves toward Aimee, whose eyes are open now and she's sitting up .

Before I can speak, Aimee shouts, or maybe it's better described as a scream. Loud. Shrii. Sharp.

Mom startles, and I look at Aimee. She's sitting up, holding her hands in the air with

her palms facing her then she turns them away and back again. “Mom!”

Our mother rushes to Aimee’s side, takes her hands and holds them, trying to calm a panicked Aimee. Her face is taut with what is either horror or terror; I don’t watch enough scary movies to know the difference. But the screams that follow are definitely of the same genre.

Mom pulls Aimee into a hug as my stomach clenches and I stand, try to take a step then fall to my knees and pull myself to the couch where Mom is hugging Aimee. “What happened, Aimee?”

“It was a syphoner,” I say.

“A syphoner?” My mother heard me, but she doesn’t believe me. She’s heard my brand of bullshit before. So, she turns to Aimee. “A syphoner?” And this time, her brows lift.

Aimee nods, solemnly. “A syphoner. And she took my magic!” Aimee shakes her hands out like they’ve gone to sleep and she’s trying to wake them. “I used to feel it inside of me. But it’s gone!” She shakes her hands harder, like she can bring the magic back if only can shake her hands hard enough. “It’s gone!”

Her voice is a wail, high-pitched and desperate.

“Calm down, Aimee.” But telling her to calm down is like telling a wind not to blow or a bird not to sing.

“It’s gone, Mom! It’s gone!” Every sound is a pinch in my stomach. Every note of desperation is another kick to my side.

She holds Aimee to her. “Where were you? Where did you go?”

She doesn't mention the grounding, but then she doesn't have to. I'm already racked with guilt. The shame is almost bigger than I am. I'm ready to bargain with whoever if they can only make Aimee right again.

I should tell her everything. But bearing my soul to her isn't going to happen. She doesn't need to know about Zane or the jealousy or his connection to Rowen or the fire at the beach.

"We were walking through the park."

"Why were you at the park?" She isn't stern right now. Her voice is soft instead.

I sigh because while I want to tell her everything, I don't want to tell her anything.

"It was a syphoner, Mom." Aimee's voice is still shrill, but it's a couple decibels softer now. "She took my magic. I don't have anything anymore." She pulls away and looks at me. "Wasn't it a syphoner, RJ?"

I nod as Aimee looks at me. "It was."

She breathes in deep and nods at Mom. "A syphoner. She had Margery Faulkner." Her gaze flips back to me again. "Where's Margery?"

"I don't know. I got knocked out and when I came to, Zane was there."

"Zane Bradbury?" She cocks a brow at me like she knows this is my fault, like as soon as a boy's name was mentioned, the blame for this entire mess shifted from the syphoner to me.

"He asked us to go to the beach, Mom. I begged RJ to go along." She's lying for me. I should stop her, but I can't. Not because I want her to take the fall but because I

know that there won't be a fall if she takes the blame.

"He didn't mention another girl," Mom says and looks at me. "What was her name?"

"Margery Faulkner. She's a third-year at the Institute. "

"And you're sure it's a syphoner?" There's something she isn't telling us, but she's giving off hiding vibes. They're almost visible, like another entity in the room.

"Of course, I'm sure." I nod because I know exactly what that girl was. "I know what I saw."

Instead of speaking again, she stands and walks to her bedroom, coming back a second later with the grimoire.

Like she knows the exact page she needs, she opens the book and starts reading. "A syphoner is a magic practitioner who cannot practice without the aid of another. They can also absorb the magic of a witch." She reads another passage but doesn't say it aloud. "Did the syphoner touch you, Aimee?"

Aimee nods then frowns. "Kind of. She had these ropes. They looked like electricity and had knots where it sparked when she attached them to me." She shakes her head. "I can't remember anything else. Did she take my magic?"

Mom nods. "Probably."

I let that sink in. Aimee isn't in the hospital like Rowen. She isn't in the ICU fighting for her life and I'm grateful, but her magic being gone is serious. "Can we get it back?"

Mom breathes in deep and I think back to Mr. Beckett's class. We'd asked questions

about syphoners, but I can't remember the information. Where the memory of that class was is now only a black hole.

Aimee looks at me. "Do you have your magic?"

I look at a candle on the table. Inside of me there's a spark, a tiny burst of electricity and I try to light the candle but nothing happens. I try again because the spark is there, but I can't make the candle work.

"I don't know." My magic has always been hit and miss. One minute I have it, and the next I don't. This feels like that .

Mom sighs and she's found her anger. "This all started with the grimoire, didn't it? When was Rowen hurt?"

We'd found the grimoire a few weeks ago and had started using it a couple days after. It was a few days after that when I'd picked a spell to turn in. It was another week before Rowen's magic was taken by the syphoner.

It couldn't have been the grimoire that activated the syphoner's magic or need for it.

I shake my head because I convinced myself it couldn't be true. "No. We found the grimoire way before. A couple weeks."

"This book was never yours." She sighs. "Show me the spells that you've used."

"A cleaning spell, the fire spell, which was by accident..." I clear my throat and look away then back at Mom. "I accidentally did a heart's desire spell because I transposed a couple words."

"A heart's desire spell." She nods like it's the answer. "Whose heart?"

“Mine, I guess. I ripped a shirt off of Zane.”

She looks away, then back at me as if my words have only just registered. “What?”

“I tried to do the cleaning spell from memory and I transposed part of the phrasing and his shirt ripped off.” Her face pinches and I continue. “It was the other night when I came into the house and you thought I was lying about being in the yard and I swore to you I wasn’t.” Now my lips purse. “Turns out, I was lying about being in the yard. I went to the bookstore and Zane was there.” I tell her the rest of it.

“Do you know what you’ve done, RJ? Do you have any idea?” Her voice is little more than a whisper but there’s enough anger in it that it could be a scream .

Obviously, she’s found a way to make all of this my fault.

“Syphoners haven’t been seen in this area in centuries. Something you did...” She shakes her head and shoves the grimoire to the floor, away from her. “Obviously what you did, with this goddamned thing, brought them back. You’re reckless. Deceitful. Where did you learn such things?”

I pull a pen and her notepad from the drawer in the table beside the sofa. “Did you want to list my faults alphabetically or in order of importance? I imagine someday you’ll get dementia and forget. You’re going to want to have them all written down.”

She breathes in deeply enough that her nostrils flare as she stares at me. She’s trying not to kill me. I imagine it’s quite a testament to her parenting skills that I have survived this long, from what she says anyway. What she’s always said.

I’m still holding the pen and paper out like an offering, and I lower them because she gives me that look—the narrow eyed, mouth pinched, brow furrowed glare of anger. I’ve seen it before and I’m unphased by it now, but I’m also not going to push her

much further. She's at her limit and I don't want to test those parenting skills.

She looks at me, wary in a way I haven't seen from her in years, since I first became a teenager and started testing limits and boundaries. "I need to think this through."

As do I. I drop the paper and pen onto the table and walk to my room. I, too, have things to work out before I can make sense of any of this.

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Chapter

Ten

Being in my room is my choice, and there's a reason I want to be in here. Normally, I would go to Aimee's room, which is always cleaner and more comfortable, but I cleaned my room the day Mom grounded me. And I don't want Aimee to see what I'm doing. Don't want Mom to bitch about us ignoring the rest she thinks we need. I want to write down the details of everything that happened, everything I can remember.

Auda rubs his side against my leg and purrs as I sit at my desk. I reach down to give him a rub but I continue filling the pages of my Advanced Potion notebook with everything I remember about the syphoner.

I also write that I think that the syphoner was familiar in a way I can't explain, like I've seen her face before somewhere, but I can't figure where no matter how hard I try.

But I keep writing about all of it, the ropes of light, the popping and crackling sounds, the way Aimee had writhed and moaned and cried out in pain. I write about the sky and only now recall the swirling clouds, the flicker of the lights further into the park, and the rein of sparks when one blew .

Margery Faulkner. She'd fallen when the syphoner saw Aimee and me, and the syphoner had gone straight for Aimee. It makes me wonder if she could sense that Aimee was stronger than I would ever be. I don't know if she chose Aimee because

of her proximity and dumb luck, or if she saw something in Aimee that she didn't see in me.

How's that for fucked up? I'm concerned because a syphoner wanted Aimee more than she wanted me. Although she did come for me when she finished with Aimee.

I don't dare write that thought down. Not taking that kind of chance. What is written, even if it's erased or shredded to pieces, can be discovered.

I've got seven pages written when Aimee walks in and sits on my bed. She doesn't try to peek over my shoulder, but stares down at her fingernails. She usually keeps them manicured, sharpened to a hard point, but now they're bitten down and without a sliver of paint.

I close the notebook and put the cap on my pen. It's not the order I would usually do it, not that it matters, but I don't want her to see how I described what happened to her.

But she doesn't even try. She sits motionless, no foot tapping, no slow, semi-loud sigh, no fidgeting. Aimee is still.

I should wait her out, not push her because pushing her makes her withdraw. "What's up?" But I can't sit still. It isn't who I am.

"I've been thinking." She's started about a thousand conversations a month this way, but there is something different. Aimee is sure of herself. Every minute. Every day. Every conversation. She doesn't speak unless she's sure of what she's about to say .

She hands me a page. It's a drawing in the blacks and grays of pencil. She is a talented artist. Every picture of hers conveys all the emotions, ideas, and thoughts she had while creating it. This is no different. I can feel her fear. Every stroke of her

pencil is guided by it.

She's drawn the syphoner who took her power and she's drawn herself in a heap. Even Margery is in the drawing, also in a crumpled heap on the ground. In the background there is a light pole with sparks showering the air. The picture is vivid enough I am there again, in the park.

"It was like she knew how I would react. What defenses I would try to throw at her." She shakes her head. "I tried a protection spell."

Maybe that was why the syphoner hadn't been able to get to me. Because the spell had shrouded me and not Aimee. "A protection spell?"

She nods. "Yeah." I don't want to tell her that the syphoner hadn't been able to take my power but had gotten hers, and it's probably her spell that saved me and not her. But at least my theory about the syphoner knowing my powers were weaker is wrong. It's a relief I don't particularly want to examine.

"When I threw the spell, she blocked it."

Maybe I should've paid better attention in Spell-Defense class which taught us how to defend ourselves against rogues who throw evil spells, and also against inadvertent spells. I'd thought the class was useless. I know better now. "Blocked it?"

Aimee nods and the exhaustion on her face is obvious. She looks a decade older than her twenty-one years. "Batted it away. When I threw the deflection spell, same thing." Of course, Aimee would think to throw spells. So, the syphoner expected it. "It's like she was connected to my thoughts, leeching off them. I felt so violated." She looks down. "I still do."

I want to console her, protect her, find the asshat who did this and make her fucking

pay for what she's done to Aimee. My confident, beautiful sister looks haggard, sounds beaten.

"Did you recognize the syphoner?" We're without a doubt now that syphoners exist. One certainly has Aimee's power. And where there is one, there may be more.

"Maybe. I thought so, but then I couldn't do more than watch her take my power. I thought maybe feeling like I'd seen her before was because we were so connected and she was inside my mind." She stares at me and it makes sense, especially since I can't come up with a place I might've seen her before.

"Do you think we did this with the grimoire? Summoned her?" I don't want this to be our fault, but somehow, I can't shake the feeling that Mom's right. We did this. Or more specifically, I did this.

Aimee shrugs. "It doesn't really matter now. We can't undo it. So we have to figure out how to fight it. How to get my power back."

She's right. Thoughtful, logical Aimee is usually right.

"So, what do you want to do?" Aside from getting her powers back.

She sits for a moment, crosses her legs, and pulls them up so she can hug her knees. "Do you have a plan?"

Now I know why she's here. I think for a minute. "I think we have to track the syphoner. Figure out where and why she strikes." I watch crime TV. Not the made-up shows with actors, but the real stories of real-life crime. And I listen to detectives and podcasters who investigate. And maybe I see danger everywhere. And maybe she's going to think I'm imagining the conspiracy, but this time it's real. "She went for you first."

Guilt drags the words out of me, or maybe I'm trying to be the analytical one, to think before I act.

"So?" Aimee stares at me with her brow pinched and her eyes narrowed. "What does that mean?"

"It means I was a step closer, but she went for you instead." It's a detail I hadn't thought of and I want to write it down before I forget it again, but I need to think about it for a second or two. Figure out if it matters.

I look down at Aimee's drawing. Maybe the syphoner didn't see the angle, that I was the closer of the two of us because Aimee was in her sightline and I was in her periphery. But Aimee saw it. Had drawn it. My body was between hers on the ground and the syphoner. "See?"

She'd drawn the scene exactly as it had happened, as if she'd seen it from some other view point than her own. She had all the same details I'd seen, things she wouldn't have been able to see from her place during this...event. The light pole was behind her, she'd had her back to it. But she had the sparks, had somehow conveyed the flicker of the streetlamp.

And she had drawn one half of my face and one half of the syphoner's, as if she'd been standing behind all of us, watching as it all unfolded. So it isn't my viewpoint either. It's someone else's.

It's not something we can use as a clue, but it's intriguing, nonetheless.

"We need to do some research." My voice is confident because I'm confident we can figure this out. At least, for Aimee's sake, I hope we can.

I will my tense muscles to unclench as I breathe in slow and deep. I'm going to need

a clear head to figure this out, to center myself, to feel nothing but confidence and power. Fortunately, I can usually turn my emotions off when I need to. Although this is a taller order. There are a mess of emotions connected to this. Sadness. Guilt. Shame. And even if I don't understand why they exist, they do.

Aimee weeps silently. "What if I don't get it back, RJ? What if my magic's gone forever?" My door pushes open as Mom rushes in.

She looks at me almost as if she's going to blame me, but then she glances at Aimee. "Sweetheart..." She rubs her hand down Aimee's back, smooths her silvery hair.

"Mom, we can't tell anyone. They'll kick me out of the Institute if I don't have magic. I can fake it. RJ can help until I get my magic back. Right, RJ?" Her voice is frantic, desperate, as if she thinks I won't help her, as if she believes I wouldn't do whatever it takes to get her power back.

I would walk through fire for her, as clichéd as it sounds.

I nod because she's my sister and she needs me, but we both know that my magic is nothing compared to hers. "Of course."

She goes back to crying against Mom's shoulder, but quieter now, as if she's losing steam. And then she lifts her head and looks at me instead of Mom. "I feel empty. The space inside of me where the magic lived is gone."

She swipes at her cheeks before she hugs Mom again and cries harder. It's painful to watch and I walk out my room. They can have it. I'll make tea because right now, I don't know how else to help. It's going to take a minute to come up with a plan and I can't do it while Aimee is breaking down.

When I walk out of the bedroom and to the kitchen, I have to pass by the living room

where the grimoire is lying open on the table. It draws me. Or maybe the temptation pushes me. I can't be sure, I only know that tea is the farthest thing from my mind by the time I get to the book.

Most of the grimoire is written in another language. I can read some of it because I've been taught Latin, Romani, and the mother language, although most spells are written in English. Certainly, the modern spells are. But this grimoire is a mixture.

I close my eyes and concentrate on the book, will it to show me its power. There is no mention of syphoners, no pages that flip open, and when I try to flip through, the book leads me back to the same page—once when I try to turn to a new one, once when I close the book and then let it fall open, and once when I close my eyes again and ask the book to fan.

I can see enough, decipher enough to know that this is a seeing spell. The book wants me to see something. We've already used the book, so if the syphoner is connected to the book and somehow to us, it's already started.

After I've weighed the danger and decided I have no other choice, I read the spell, then because a spell has to be spoken, I say it aloud. Power shoots into my body, connecting me and the book.

"Show me," I tell the book because nowhere is it written—even witches recognize that power like this is dangerous—a seeing spell must finish with a command to act. But to make a seeing spell function, it has to be said.

My eyelids flutter shut. My head lolls and I need to look to the side so my neck twists. Immediately, I know where I am. I'm in the Institute in the corridor outside the open door to the Hall of Greats.

This is the worst game of show-and-tell I've ever played. It has shown me the same

things I see every day. But a force pushes me forward, and I'm led inside to stand among the statues and the photos.

I don't see faces. I see names. Foster. Faulkner. Hadley. Chadwick. Dupree.

Rowen Foster. Margery Faulkner. I don't know a Chadwick. But I know Circe Dupree. That means Aimee doesn't fit.

I don't understand, but I refocus on the spell. "Show me."

This time when my eyes open, I'm on the sidewalk. On a sidewalk in front of a club. Club Mera , according to the sign. A smaller sign on a door says, Open 1 p.m. for deliveries. Hours: F, S 10 p.m.-3 a.m.

As if it's finished and no longer interested in our little game of show-and-tell, the book slams closed and I sit up. I should call to check on Circe, but I don't know her number and my phone is upstairs in my room. I also don't know if there's a connection or if I'm living some weird side-effect from the syphoner.

Instead, I run to my room and look at my mother. She's still soothing Aimee. "Mom." I'm about to tell her, but she had the book for hours and it had shown her nothing. Maybe she isn't meant to know. I keep it to myself and stare at the two of them.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" I ask because I have to say something.

"No."

Aimee is calmer now, and I wonder if it's because she's gone to sleep. As soon as I have the thought, Mom lays Aimee on one of my pillows.

"Why don't you go into Aimee's room and rest. I'm going to call Dean Ryman and

“speak to him about tomorrow.” She nods at me as she goes to the door. “Or stay with Aimee in here. She might need you.”

My mom has always lobbied for Aimee and I to stick together, to strengthen our relationship by leaning on each other. It’s why she worked so hard for me to get into the Institute with Aimee instead of waiting two years and following her.

I nod and crawl onto the bed beside my sister.

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Chapter

Eleven

N ear the middle of the night, when the darkness is so deep in my room I can't see a hand in front of my face, Aimee sits up on the bed, shaking, and cries out, "RJ! RJ, run!"

She's mid-nightmare, and she wakes as soon as I lay my hand on her shoulder. "It's okay, Aimee. We're safe."

She falls back against the pillow. "It seems so real."

I don't tell her that it's because it's a memory. Information won't help her. She needs consolation, probably distraction, too. Those things I can give her. "I have to tell you something."

"Tell me...?" She's wary, as if she doesn't quite know if she wants to hear what I have to say, but she doesn't want to tell me.

I can't let her apprehension bother me. I don't know how I would act if I couldn't do the one thing I'd been born to do—although with me, we don't really know exactly what that is.

"The grimoire showed me something."

She tucks her hands under her face and smiles at me. "The grimoire?"

“Mom left it on the table. It was open to a certain page, and when I tried, it wouldn’t let me turn it.” The book itself is infused with magic, so everything and anything is possible, although it hadn’t seemed so before.

“RJ.” She sounds disappointed, as if she doesn’t believe me. I can’t blame her. I wouldn’t believe me either. Although I would have believed her if she’d said it.

“It doesn’t matter if you think I’m making this up.” It’s hurtful, but doesn’t really matter. “We have things we can check out.” If for nothing else than because I won’t be one of those women who life happens to. That isn’t the life I want. I tell her about the club and the names and the great hall.

She shakes her head at me. “They’re the great families.”

The great families? “What?” I have no idea what she’s talking about.

“RJ, do you ever pay attention in history class? The nine great families are the ones who started the Institute. Even Mom told us about it when she worked there.” She shakes her head, and now I know why Dean Ryman didn’t deny Mom’s request for me to be able to start the Institute early. Aimee clicks the names off on her fingers. “Steros, Chadwick, Foster, Bradbury, Faulkner, Tempest, Strain, Dupree and...” She pauses. “Hadley. They’re the nine most magically powerful families in all the world.”

I played enough games of Battles of War on the computer to know that it is bad strategy to have the nine most powerful families—magical or not—in one place. The target is too big, too easy to hit.

“So, the syphoner wants the power of the nine families? Why?” I say it aloud, though I doubt she has an answer anymore than I do.

“Maybe we should ask your new friend.” And she smiles because she has a mood

recovery time that borders on bipolar. “Your book.”

“Ha ha, laugh all you want, but that book gave us information we didn’t have. And it told me to go to Club Mera.” I cock a brow at her, haughty because this time I’m the one with the information. Even though I have no idea what the information means or why I need to know it.

“Club Mera?” She shakes her head. “Isn’t that the club in Andover?”

Two towns over. A forty-minute drive with traffic. There isn’t much we can do tonight, while the house is dark and the creatures that steal magic in the dark of night are still prowling. But tomorrow, classes or not, we’re going. “Yeah. They don’t open until late, but someone is there after 1 p.m.” They have to be to accept deliveries. “We can go after lunch?”

She nods and yawns. “Okay.”

When Aimee falls to sleep again next to me, I go to the desk and retrieve the notebook so I can read what I’ve written using the light of my cell. My account is as complete as I can remember. When I finish reading, I drop the notebook onto my chest and check my inbox for new messages.

There are none, so I do what girls who are crushing on a hot guy do. I Google him, check his socials, wonder about things that I’m far too mature to wonder about, like what a girl has to do to change the social media relationship status of a guy like Zane Bradbury.

Such are the problems I encounter when I stay up late and let my mind have its way. Of course, it’s not all bad .

His socials are a treasure trove of pictures of him. At the beach with his friends. In his

suit, obviously posed for the awards night gala the Institute holds once a year that I didn't go to because who wants to go to that thing without a date? Aimee went, and is in the background of one of his pics. There are pictures of him with his mom. With his younger brother. With his sister. None with a girlfriend. Not even a past one.

Maybe because it's almost daylight and I haven't slept much, or maybe because there is a force working against me in this world, I accidentally like one of his photos from two years ago. As soon as I realize what happened, I toss the phone like somehow that will erase what I've done, like he won't know I did it if I'm not holding my phone.

When my phone tings a message a second later, I don't want to look. I don't want to see his name or the name of whoever he might be with right now who saw what I did.

But the masochist in me has to look. If it's bad, she'll delight and I'll cringe, but what the hell. I don't have much to lose at this point, and no matter what this message says I'll have the memory of his chest under my cheek when he carried me inside. I'll have the way his arms felt around me.

I pick up the phone and take a deep breath.

Z_MAGIC_MAN0105

Hey.

Of course, it's him. I would know that handle anywhere, and just seeing it makes my heart throb a little harder.

WishIHadAGirlName7

Hey.

I don't know if I should acknowledge my picture blunder or not. For now, I decide not because I need a minute to think of an excuse. I don't think it's going to work to deny I did it. Plus, I don't want to lie.

Z_MAGIC_MAN

How are you feeling? I was worried about you.

My stomach flutters. He was worried.

WishIHadAGirlName7

I'm good.

And he sends a smiley emoji. I want the conversation to go on and on and on, but I have no idea how to answer a smiling emoji. I have no past online communications I can refer to, either.

And by the time I'm finished over thinking whether to send him an emoji, ask how he's doing, or send a sweet dreams GIF—I decided on the GIF—it's taken too long.

Z_MAGIC_MAN

Did you fall asleep?

The relief is strong. So strong I send the GIF I had cued up. It's a teddy bear blowing a kiss while the words sweet dreams float in a cloud over his head. It's cute.

Z_MAGIC_MAN

Did you just blow me a kiss?

I'm aware that texts can be read in a multitude of ways. I choose to read this one as flirty.

WishIHadAGirlName7

Yeah. I guess I did. Least I can do for the guy who saved me tonight and then carried me inside my house .

I wait a second or two before I hit send because even pushing the button is a testament to how much I want this guy. I'm bold. I do bold things on occasion. Not always out of necessity, either. But this is ringing my bold buzzer.

Then as quickly as I hit send, I get a message back. He is a man with confidence. He sends me a short video of him blowing me a kiss. Not one of an animated teddy bear or an actor from a movie, but him. Zane Bradbury.

Z_MAGIC_MAN

Lunch tomorrow?

I want to say yes, but I want to get to Club Mera early so I'm going to be leaving for downtown right around lunchtime. I'm not even sure I'm going to class at all tomorrow.

WishIHadAGirlName7

Raincheck? I have to take care of something tomorrow and I won't be there for lunch.

Part of me wants to invite him along. There's safety in numbers after all. But I don't want to seem too pushy or forward.

Z_MAGIC_MAN

I could tag along. I haven't taken a sick day in a while.

While I'm still reading the first message another comes in.

Z_MAGIC_MAN

I want to get to know you.

I'm picturing myself as one of those cartoon characters that has hearts for eyes.

WishIHadAGirlName7

I would like that, too.

If I was the kind of girl who got giddy, I would be right now. This has been a very weird week, but it's turning out really well.

Z_MAGIC_MAN

Meet me by the coffee cart in the morning? I'll buy.

Hell, I'll leave right now to make sure we're there at the same time.

WishIHadAGirlName7

Two days in a row? People might talk.

I'm semi-proud of the response. It's just flirty enough but not too much.

Z_MAGIC_MAN

They'll say what a lucky guy I am.

I like his reply much better, and at this rate the stomach fluttering is never going to end.

WishIHadAGirlName7

See you then. Sweet dreams.

Z_MAGIC_MAN

Sweet dreams.

I smile as I drift off to sleep hugging my phone.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 8:11 am

Chapter

Twelve

When my alarm goes off for school, Aimee is already up and dressed. Of course she is. She didn't stay up until the wee hours texting a guy. If she had, she would know sleep is impossible when your mind is spinning with fantasies of said guy, and she would hate that morning didn't give her enough time to properly dream about him.

"Fucking alarm," I grumble, pulling the blanket over my head while it continues to chime and sing and make its annoying electronic noises.

"I don't feel well, RJ." She's sitting at the foot of my bed with her legs dangling over the footboard.

"Do you want to stay home today?" I can make that work. I'll text Zane and tell him our field trip is postponed. I sit up so I can see more than the back of her and when she doesn't answer, I scoot to the edge of the bed beside her. "We can watch TV, make cookies, eat all the chips and snacks."

She shakes her head. "No. I don't want anyone to know. I don't miss school."

"You're going to miss this afternoon so we can go to Club Mera." I shrug a shoulder. "We could skip the morning, too."

Her sigh comes from deep in her chest and she flexes her fingers, staring at them as if she's willing the magic back into her body. She turns to me. "I don't know what to do

without it, RJ. Who am I if I'm not a witch?"

I take her by the shoulders and make her face me. "You're Aimee Baum. And you're getting your magic back. If it's the last thing I do, you're getting it back." I'm solemn. The words mean something to me.

Aimee nods. She's the one person I don't generally lie to. "Okay."

I wait a minute until I'm certain her breaths are back to normal and she doesn't have the I'm-going-to-vomit-from-stress grimace on her face. "Thank goodness because I'm supposed to meet Zane at the coffee cart."

Her eyes widen. "I lose my magic and you make a date?"

"No reason for both of us to suffer." I grin at her, but she narrows her eyes and shakes her head.

"You might be the most selfish person I know." Her smile says she doesn't mean it.

"Yeah, but I have a date." I wag my eyebrows and she laughs. It's a semi-normal morning.

"What are you going to wear?" She eyes my closet with the same disdain she's always had for it. "Bob the Builder overalls, or are you going as a minion?"

"Ha ha." Not ha-ha at all, but I can give her this one. "Builder, of course." I roll my eyes.

"At least go glam." She walks to my closet, shakes her head, then heads to her room. When she comes back, it's with a white tank and a flannel shirt she ties around my waist.

“This isn’t glam.” I hate to break it to her, but this is me. Everyday.

She nods. “Yeah, but he apparently likes you as you are. We’re just going to dress it up a little.” She hands me some spangly sunglasses. Designer. Her style. But I slip them on and suddenly, I’m not Bob the Builder. I’m a better version of me.

“Sometimes, it’s just about the accessories.”

I nod. “Yeah, but I can’t wear them in class.”

I have naturally wavy, usually frizzy hair. But I also have hair product that makes it shiny and semi-well-behaved. And when she pushes the glasses up and my hair frames my face while the glasses hold the top back, I look kind of amazing on that careless level of not trying that other girls can manage, usually with a messy bun. A simple pair of gold framed glasses is a game changer. Who knew?

Obviously, Aimee knew. And now, I know, too.

I walk into the common area in front of the buildings where the concrete is crowded with witches waiting for their first classes to start. My first class starts at nine. Aimee’s starts at 8:40 and I don’t know what time Zane’s starts, but I see him by the coffee cart. Fuck. There’s no way a girl can resist all that .

He is wearing a tight shirt stretched across what I personally know is a rock-hard chest. Jeans that make his legs look long and his waist look thin. Hair that’s just a little too long, but perfectly styled so that he looks careless but in an artful way.

He looks up from his drink then down like he doesn’t see me, but I know he did. Then, he looks up again and smiles. It’s the smile that gets me. Every time.

I walk over with Aimee, trying for cool, hoping an untied shoelace won’t be the thing

that ruins my morning .

As we walk over, Aimee says, “Don’t go and make lunch plans with the pretty boy. We’re going to that club.”

I stop walking because I wouldn’t ditch her for lunch plans. “I already invited him along.” And I flash her a grin of my own.

Before she can respond, we’re at the coffee cart in front of him. Or actually, he’s in front of me and I wait for him to say something, but Aimee motions for me to lift the glasses.

My heart is thumping. This could go so wrong. I could get my hair tangled around the metal that holds the nose pads in place, or rip off my own ear, or something else to embarrass me to within an inch of my life. But I risk it. Because I need to change my game and this is my chance.

Chances don’t come around every day, so I flip the glasses up, smile back at him, and say, “Hey.”

But we’re not having the moment I want us to have, the one I’ve gone over in my head ten or thirty thousand times. Instead, he’s almost somber.

“Is everything okay?”

I stare at him because his smile has faded and there’s some sadness in his eyes. “Another girl was attacked.” My head tilts on its own while I wait for the rest of the story. “Ariya Glover.”

“Ariya Glover.” I repeat her name because I know her. We aren’t friends, but we’re friendly. I’ve had a few classes with her. She’s actually one of the people my age

who's talked to me here, who doesn't think I get special attention and favors because I'm my mother's daughter. And then I look up at Zane.

This is a hard time for all of us since we're all equally in danger, but there's something I can't quite put my finger on about his reaction. That is, until I figure it out. "You dated her, too?"

"I mean..." He shakes his head and shrugs, then pulls me away from the rest of the group. "It was a blind date. Only happened once. She was nice enough." A second later he sighs and rakes his fingers through his hair, pushing it back for a second before it all falls back into its disheveled perfection. "This can't all be because of me." I don't know a lot about distress. I'm not one of those women who is particularly afflicted with things like that, but I can hear his, like an extension of his voice. It makes it deeper. Uncertain. Regretful.

I want to ease whatever he is feeling. And it doesn't matter that I haven't really told anyone what I saw. Not my mom, not Aimee, not anyone. I'll tell him. "I saw the...villain." It's such an odd word, but I don't know another.

"Villain?" When he says it, I think of superhero comics and the green men who try to crash through them.

"Villain." I nod and say it with some conviction this time because I don't want to use the S-word. It's too real and I don't know what else to call her. "She had black eyes."

"Black eyes?"

I nod. "It was dark, but I think so." I take a second because there's something I'm missing, some random fact that is nagging my mind, that might tie some of the details together for me. "Where?"

“What?” He looks at me with his brow pinched and his eyes narrowed, like he doesn’t understand the question. “What?” he asks again, softer this time.

“Where was she when it happened?” The need to know is burning inside of me even though I’m certain I already have the answer. I can’t look at Aimee or I’ll blurt the entire story out and the secret of the grimoire will be no secret anymore. “I need to know, Zane.”

“At a club downtown. ”

And I know. I absolutely know. Because the grimoire showed me. “Club Mera.”

He nods and I want to tell him so badly how I know, to not have that spark of distrust standing between us.

“How did you know that?” His voice is low, almost quiet, but I look behind us to make sure none of his friends are paying attention.

“I can’t tell you.” And I wish I could. I wish I could go get the book and share it, but I can’t. It isn’t mine to share, and I don’t know that I didn’t summon this syphoner anymore than I know he didn’t somehow mark the victims. I also can’t tell him about the syphoner trying to take from me and failing.

He nods and I don’t know if he’s agreeing to my silence or if this is some ironic guy thing that he’s going to use against me for the duration of whatever this is between us.

“Okay. You’ll tell me when you can, or when it’s too big to keep inside.” He smiles. And then he moves closer so we’re almost pressed against each other. “But you have to be careful.”

“I’m careful.” I smile up at him.

Then the best moment of my life happens. Zane Bradbury slides his hand onto my waist so it rests just over my hip and his fingertips are low—super low on my back. The touch is intoxicating. My pulse hitches. He has moves and he knows it.

Him knowing it doesn’t stop me letting him pull me close enough that only the thinnest beam of light would dare try to fit between us. “I hope so.”

“RJ, I’ll meet you back here at 11:45.” Aimee has to get to class, but I have a couple minutes. Not that I plan to do more with them than linger here and be touched by Zane Bradbury. At least until he either realizes I’m not nearly the right girl for whatever this is or I have to go to class.

“Okay,” I call over my shoulder without turning too far away from him.

He doesn’t kiss me or move closer, doesn’t lean in or do more than smile. “Do you know Ariya?”

“I saw her there. At the club once.” I pull back because it’s what I do when I fuck something up. I pull back from it so that when it falls apart, I’m protected.

He looks at me as I continue backing off. “I should get to class.”

And then he’s beside me, heading to the building where I am expected to sit and study the magic for the test I am not going to pass in a few weeks. “Hey.” I stop and look at him because I want this. I want him. But that doesn’t mean I’m not going to figure out how to protect myself. “Are we still on for lunch?”

I should say no.

But I can't.

“Yeah. I'll meet you here.”

He grins. “I forgot to ask where we're going.”

I look at him. He's going to find out eventually. Might as well be now. “Club Mera.”

Chapter

Thirteen

I 'm not into class today. Don't want to be here. I'm sure it's worse for Aimee, but she didn't complain about coming to school. As a matter of fact, when Mom tried to keep her home, keep us both home, Aimee wasn't having it.

She hasn't missed a day in five years, and doing it now would lead to questions. And she's right, but that's no surprise because she's usually right. I haven't spent much time looking at her today because I can't meet her eyes. Fortunately, I don't have any morning classes with her. She's in an entirely different building.

As I take a spot in the back, a professor I've never seen before comes in. She puts her books on the desk and then walks around to the front. "Good morning, people." The murmur of voices and movements quiets and she folds her arms and leans her ass against the desk. She's a small woman—maybe five feet tall if her heels are four or five inches—and she has long red hair tied into a braid over her left shoulder. She's wearing a green dress that is form fitting and could easily work if she's headed to a party after work. It's got rhinestones sewn in, and if I was one to criticize the garments worn by others, I would tell her that it's a little too dressy for fifth-year Magic Theory.

Instead, I pull out a notebook and poise my pen for notetaking.

"I know that with everything going on and the attacks on witches, we're all a little bit worried." A little bit? She hadn't seen that...woman. She doesn't have a sister who's

been bled dry of the thing that makes her herself. “My name is Lilith Creighton. I am a master witch and I’m not afraid to say that I, too, am worried.”

She looks at the clock. “We’re going to discuss what you can all do to protect yourselves should you come into contact with a syphoner.”

A girl in the front—Marissa Morgenstern—raises her hand. “I thought the police weren’t willing to say it’s a syphoner.”

“Well, I’ve been around longer than the police have been working this case. And while syphoners aren’t common, they do exist.” Undoubtedly.

“Have you met one?” I ask the question not because I’m curious, but because I want to know where she gets her knowledge from.

She nods. “Yes. This was sometime ago, and the ‘legend’”—she uses air quotes—“of the syphoner was floating around after a couple of attacks.” She shakes her head. “It’s the eyes that draw a witch in. The power is in their eyes.” And she stares at me for a second before moving on with her story.

“I was walking at night near the beach and I came across a woman staggering; she’d been drained by a man who was twice her size in weight and he came chasing after her. I wanted to be brave and protect her...” She shrugged and looked away. “I wasn’t brave. I hid and watched him take her power, drain her. Kill her.”

“Oh.” It’s as if we’re having a conversation rather than a teacher-student interaction. “Was he caught?”

She shakes her head. “No. They know his signature, though. So that’s something.”

“Signature?” I watch CSI and all those crime shows, so I know signature in that

context, but I can't figure how it means the same thing here. We all use the same spells, the same potion recipes, the same ingredients and chants and incantations.

She nods. "Every witch and wizard and sorcerer has a specific signature to their magic. It comes from their power source and it's traceable, so if that signature turns up again, at least they'll know." That's semi-useful information.

"The signature is what's left behind?" I can't help it. If someone else wants to talk, I'll let them, but I have specific questions and I need to know how to help my sister.

She nods. "The tell-tale signs."

I jot the word signature into my notebook, and more questions swirl in my mind. "So, in the world there are people who have magic in them and those who learn magic over their years, how to use it, anyway. Would someone who's had their magic syphoned away be able to relearn magic?" Maybe it's an option for Aimee.

"The evidence all points to no. When a syphoner takes magic, they take the inherent ability and all the power." That isn't what I want to hear. But I write it down in the exact words she said it. "Learned magic is a different kind. Still leaves a signature, but it's not the same as what we can do."

"And magic taken by a syphoner can only be returned if the syphoner is killed? Does it have to be killed by the person whose magic it stole?"

She shakes her head. "No. And all of the magic stolen will return, not just the last victim. A syphoner uses magic differently, but takes so much more than they need." She shrugs. "To be honest, there's very little known about syphoners and their abilities."

At least I know for certain that if we find this syphoner and finish her, Aimee will get

her power back.

I look at the teacher solemnly. “Why would a syphoner not be able to take a witch’s magic?”

The professor cocks her head and a veil of long red tresses falls over her shoulder. “I don’t know that I’ve ever heard of that.”

Well I have, and I want an answer. That syphoner looked at me, said I wasn’t like the other one . But I am a witch, born to the same parents, live in the same house. We go to the same school and we take the same classes. She’s older and her magic is stronger, but mine couldn’t be taken. It has to mean something.

I wish I could make sense of it. More, I wish none of this had ever happened. I wish we would’ve never found the grimoire. It’s crazy to think that now because when we found it, I’d been so excited. And I felt connected to that damned book. But on the flip side of that I don’t know if by using the grimoire, or even just by opening it, we brought the syphoner back. We don’t know if she’s somehow connected to the magic in the grimoire or if the timing is just a coincidence, but Mom always says that there’s no such thing as coincidence.

Another thought pushes forward. If she’s connected to the grimoire and I felt a connection when we found it, does that mean I’m connected to her? Aimee said she didn’t feel it, but for me, it had been like lightning, sharp and strong.

As I am about to ask another question, the intercom speaker behind the desk crackles and Dean Ryman’s voice warbles through. “Ladies and Gentlemen, under the current circumstances and with the danger surrounding students of the Institute,” he doesn’t say syphoner or even allude to it. He’s only willing to mention danger , “we are canceling classes for the remainder of the day so that a sweep of the building can be made and wards put in place.”

Wow. This is serious. In all the five years I've been a student, the Institute has never closed. Not for weather. Not for any reason. Certainly not for danger.

“The attacks have taken a more serious and frenzied nature than any in the past. It goes without saying that we expect students to shelter at their homes and not be out at the beaches or on the street. I cannot stress enough the importance of protecting the magic burning inside each of you.”

Sorry, big guy. This witch has plans for the day.

The sound of books closing and bags zipping open makes a dull murmur in the room, accompanied almost harmoniously by the sound of keys clacking as laptops are shut down. I have to head to my locker because I want to stuff my books in there.

Nothing, not even a shelter at home command from Dean Ryman is going to keep me from going to Club Mera and finding out what happened to Ariya Glover.

After I've stuffed my bag and books into the locker I use at the Institute, I shut the door and smile. Zane is standing there with a smile on his face, leaning against the locker next to mine.

“I wouldn't be a gentleman if I didn't make sure you and Aimee make it home.” He is standing close enough I can see the flecks of gold in his melted chocolate eyes, and there is a curl behind his ear laying against his neck that is begging for my finger to run through it, but I shove my hands in my pocket. I don't know if we're at that kind of place yet. Or if we will be.

“I'm not going home.” I say it softly because there are other people around—probably a nosy janitor lurking, too, though I don't see him—and I don't want word to get back to the dean.

“You’re still going to that club?” He lifts his eyebrows and stares at me, and I could fall into his gaze, but I don’t because I can’t fawn over him and worry about a syphoner and wonder why I was allowed to keep my magic and Aimee wasn’t.

I nod. “Yeah. I have to.”

“I didn’t know you were so close to Ariya.”

Certainly not as close as he was, but I need information, and that club is the only real clue that I have. “Well, I didn’t date her.” I smile, or try to, but the coincidences are building. And being with him might mean I’m in danger, too.

He pushes my hair back and tucks it behind my ear. “I could drive you. We could bring Dylan for extra protection.” He grins. “I think he might have a thing for your sister. It would be helping him out. Doing him a favor.”

I don’t need the distraction, but I also want him to come along. But not for protection. Not for me anyway. I’m not scared, but Aimee without her magic is more vulnerable. No way will I be able to convince her to stay behind, so if there’s a need for magic, having Dylan and Zane along is a good idea.

I nod for a few other reasons I don’t want to examine until I’ve had a chance to digest them. He smiles. “Thank God. I didn’t want to have to beg.”

An hour later, we’re sitting in Zane’s Jeep across the street from my house. Aimee and Dylan dropped the car we share off at home and Zane and I followed them to pick them up. “I didn’t know you lived in the Hadley house.”

All the houses in this town have history because the town is rich with history. “We’ve lived here since I was born, I think.” I wonder how long it would be before they called it the Baum house, or if we would have to move out before that happened.

He smiles as Aimee and Dylan climb out of her car. I lean forward and lift the seat so they can climb into the back, and Aimee squeezes in behind me, but Dylan hops into the backseat over the open side where Zane has removed the top.

Aimee and Dylan sing along to the radio as the wind whips through the Jeep and I worry about the condition of my hair. But this is probably the best ride I've ever taken into a town I'm not supposed to be visiting.

"It doesn't look like much." Aimee isn't understating it. The building has a few windows but they're high up and probably belong to an apartment upstairs. The rest of it looks like sheet metal that has been pieced together to make the outer facade. The door is heavy and plain black, and the sign across the top looked better online and in what the grimoire showed me than it does in person. It looks like hand painted cardboard, although with the amount of rain we get here, it's probably metal. Sturdier than cardboard, anyway.

I nod at her as she leans up between the two seats. I honestly don't know if she did it for a better view of the building or if she did it because it puts her closer to Dylan. And right now, I don't care. I'll ask later. Right now, all I care about is finding out what I'm supposed to see at this place.

"Maybe they're saving for renovations."

What I know is that we're not going to find out anything sitting in the Jeep. I open my door and walk across the street. If I sit in the car another minute, I might talk myself out of it. Especially since this isn't what I imagined when the book showed me the sign.

The others come up behind me because I've lingered with my hand on the door for a few seconds, which gave them time to get to me before I go in. No one is in a big hurry to get in there, but we look peculiar, at the very least, standing outside, holding

onto the handle like we're trying to keep the building from taking off.

Finally, I take a deep breath, pull the door open, and walk inside. I'm two steps in when Zane tugs the back of my shirt and I stop walking. The place is dark. Dank. And it smells like alcohol and something else I don't want to think of. If any place could use a cleaning spell, even one that sets it on fire, it's this place.

I try peeking through the darkness to see what I can make out, but the only light burning right now is a neon behind the bar that says drink. It should probably say buy and spill .

Zane has his hand on my arm and he pulls me back toward him. "Slow down. We need to be careful."

"Careful." I parrot the word and let him slip his fingers through mine. Doesn't stop me from calling out, though. "Hello?"

He tugs me back when I walk ahead. "RJ..."

It's because he sees them before I do. A man and a woman, sitting at a table in this mostly dark room. The man stands and comes toward us. He's not big, not wide, but thin. I would bet he's a runner. The woman flicks on a light that's sitting in the center of her table. She's pretty with deep red hair, like the color of blood, but her skin is so pale it's as if I can almost see through it. It doesn't stop her from being beautiful.

He's still mostly a shadow because the light is behind him. "For heaven's sake, Colt," she says from the table. "Stop being ghoulish and flip on a fucking light." She has a slight accent, but I can't place it.

I can't take my gaze off her. Not even when the man she called Colt is directly in front of me and a light comes in. He didn't move, didn't seem to touch anything but

now he's illuminated. His eyes are rimmed in shadows of their own and his hair is hanging in his eyes. He has a sharp jaw and a square chin. His eyes are gray or maybe silver. And he's wearing a scowl.

He breathes in deep. "What are you...doing here?" I thought he was going to ask me what I am. And anymore, I'm not sure.

"One of our friends was here last night."

He laughs like I've just said something funny. "A lot of people's friends were here last night."

"Jesus, Colt. You don't always have to be such an asshole. Obviously, they're here about the girl." She slides out of the booth and glides across the floor toward us. She's tall, too. Taller than I thought. She holds out her hand. When I take it, it's frozen—like really cold. "My name's Lacey. This is Colt. Since I met him ten years ago, I've called him AssColt. It's a name that'll probably catch on the more you get to know him. Don't mind anything he says. He surrendered his humanity and his common sense. "

"And she's hanging onto her humanity like there's a bare-chested lifeguard waiting to save her from it."

Oh, that's about all I need to bear from him, and thank you, but not interested in knowing him. I inch closer to Zane. Aimee looks at Colt and nods. "You're a vampire."

She pays so much attention in Supernatural Beings class, of course she's the one who recognizes him for what he is.

And just when I think I have it all figured out—or at least part of it—he shakes his

head. "I'm a dhampir."

"Sounds fancy. Means he's the son of a vampire mother and a human father." She rolls her eyes. "Takes his fangs a little longer to grow in." She pulls her lip back to show hers off. "I'm about to finish turning."

I nod because I don't give a fuck. I want to know about Ariya Glover. "What happened here to the girl who was...syphoned?" It's odd to say it out loud.

Colt shakes his head. "It was fucking crazy. She was minding her business, dancing with some chick. Not a chick like her, but a human chick." He shakes his head and puts his hands up. "This other chick comes in." He stares hard at me and I'll kick my own ass before I back away, but he moves in closer until Zane pushes him back. When he steps back into place beside Lacey, he smiles. "She smells divine. You're a lucky boy."

I glower at him because a scowl isn't enough. "What happened to the girl?"

Lacey rolls her eyes. "She was just dancing when this bitch came in and stood at the end of the bar. I was working so I saw her." She shakes her head. "This woman scanned the room, like she was taking it all in. Her gaze stopped on the girl and the girl froze like she knew." She glances at Colt. "And then she turned and she walked toward the...syphoner."

I'm starting to hate that word.

"It was like there were ropes of electricity connecting them. I thought it was some kind of light show at first, a gimmick from a band or something. But then I saw that girl's pain." Colt shakes his head and gives his own shiver. "Fucking weird, man."

"Colt tried to stop it." Maybe he had some redeeming qualities after all. "But as soon

as the girl started toward the syphoner, there was some kind of shield around them. He couldn't get into it."

Yeah. I've seen that part up close and personal. I'm not interested in seeing it again. And weird doesn't quite describe it. "The girl came toward the syphoner?"

"Yeah. At first I thought they knew each other." Lacey continued. "But when the girl was about three feet away, the ropes of power just..." She glances at me then back at Colt. "When it was finished, the girl just fell into a heap on the floor and the woman walked out and left her."

Colt nods. "Your girl fought though." He looks at Lacey as if he either wants corroboration or he wants her to finish telling it. She doesn't move. "Tried to throw a spell. But it was like the syphoner knew what to expect, how to react. And every time the girl tried to break free, the syphoner had a counter ready to go."

"But it didn't seem like they knew each other?" I look at Lacey because Colt has a strange glimmer in his eye.

"No."

"You guys go to that fancy institute school for witchy witching?" Colt looks at Zane then at me when I nod. "Your library has a giant collection of information about the last syphoner epidemic. Maybe you should check there. Might be some battle information."

It makes sense, and I don't know why I didn't think of it. The Institute has the largest magic library in the country. They would have records of the last syphoners and how the battles were won. Or maybe there would be a grimoire with information we could use—a spell or potion or glamour—to stop her.

“You said syphoner epidemic?”

Lacey laughs and nods. “Yeah. They tried to keep it all hush-hush, but your witchy numbers were depleted by a few thousand. Entire families were wiped over the course of a few months.”

“Was there more than one syphoner?” There had to be information somewhere. Even if they were hiding, the Institute would’ve collected information for whatever council oversaw and tried to create plans and spells and wards to prevent this kind of thing.

Now, on a day where I don’t have to be there, I very much want to be at the Institute.

“I don’t know how it works. It could’ve been one, could’ve been twenty or two hundred. They don’t teach a lot of witch history at the public high school.” Lacey shakes her head. “Colt’s right though. Your school should have all the deets.”

I nod, ready to go, when Colt takes me by the arm and moves in closer to me—like he wasn’t too close before. “Did you know that being bit by a vampire is a very sensual experience?” And then he brushes his hand under my hair so he can thumb the pulse point at my throat, and he leans close enough I can smell copper on his breath. “I would make it good for you.”

Zane shoves him back. “Get the fuck away from her.” But I don’t need him to say anything. I can feel the power in me. Stronger with Zane’s touch, and whatever the dhampir is promising is nothing compared to what Zane is doing to me.

His touch sends shivers to all the best places.

“Thanks for the information.” Zane grinds the words out and I look at him as we turn to leave the club.

When we're back in the Jeep again, he doesn't start the car right away. He waits. Looks at me. "What do you think?"

I don't know what any of it means. "I think we're missing something."

"Maybe we should write down what we know." Aimee is big on lists and flash cards and even score cards. "It'll be easy to keep track of."

And this time, she's right.

Chapter

Fourteen

Zane drops Dylan off, then brings us home—and we beat Mom by at least an hour. When Aimee walks inside, I linger with him in the Jeep.

“Thank you for driving today.” I would’ve done it since Aimee doesn’t like driving in the city, but this was definitely better.

He smiles and it’s probably the nicest part of my day. “No problem. I don’t mind.”

The silence stretches and I should probably get out of the car, but I don’t really want to. I want to drag this out for as long as I can. “Do you want to come in? Maybe you’ll see something we can’t.”

He reaches to brush the hair off my face and smiles. “I would love to, but...” And he pauses, which makes me think he wouldn’t really love to at all.

When he doesn’t finish, I shake my head, humiliated. I just wish he would send out signals that didn’t make me think he wants me one minute and then doesn’t the next. “It’s okay. Forget I asked.”

“Hey.” His voice is low, almost a whisper, but it’s potent as fuck, starts a small fire in my belly. I could fall into the soft expression, the hint of a smile on his face. “I don’t want to forget you asked, but I don’t want the first thing that your mom knows about me to be that I snuck into her house so I could be with you.”

“You wouldn’t be sneaking. You’re walking in and out the front door.” He’s dated a lot. Probably has lines for every occasion, but I don’t care. I like this one. And I don’t want him to go. “I didn’t say I was inviting you to my bedroom. Just a couple friends sitting at the kitchen table working on solving a mystery.”

“Well, when you say it like that...” His grin spreads across his face and he climbs out of the car. I’m already out when he walks around to my side. “I was coming to open your door.”

“Oh.” A warm flush goes through me and if I was one of those Dear Diary girls this would get its own page. “I got it.”

“I can see that.” The smile doesn’t waver, not mine or his as he clasps his hand around mine.

When we walk into the house, Aimee is already at the table with her list-making supplies—papers, multiple-colored pens, sticky notes for footnotes—and she looks up, then at our hands, then back to her paper. “Well, okay then.”

I don’t know what she means, or if I should care. If it’s important she’ll tell me later. Otherwise, it’s just Aimee being Aimee, noticing things, and reacting to it in her subdued, mostly easygoing kind of way.

“RJ, maybe you should get drinks. We might be at this for a while.” She nods to the kitchen like I don’t know where we keep the drinks in this family, but I offer Zane a chair and head to the fridge. We don’t generally keep soda in the house, so our choices are water, tea, or some sort of juice that tastes more like cough syrup than juice.

I don’t bother asking Aimee. She only drinks water. I pour myself tea and poke my head out of the kitchen into the dining room where she’s set up. “Zane, we only have

water or tea.”

“Tea’s fine.”

I smile. It’s another thing we have in common. When I deliver the drinks, he smiles up at me, and it could be nothing, but it feels like something. “Thanks.”

I want to do nothing for the rest of the night but stare into his eyes, watch him, and daydream about him.

Aimee kicks me under the table and shoots me a frown. “Are you two ready?”

The moment has passed. I shrug. “Sure.”

She’s the list maker. I’m just watching and hopefully contributing something worthy so I don’t look stupid in front of Zane.

Aimee knows everything I know, but I have no idea how long until Mom comes home, so I’m not quite brave enough to ask Zane up to my room. Yet.

Instead, I watch Aimee. She starts with a column for each girl’s name—Ariya, Margery, Rowen, and Aimee. She’s added her own name, and I cock a brow. “I thought we decided you were an opportunity more than a target.”

“But what if I wasn’t? We don’t know that I was random, or that I don’t fit a certain profile. We also don’t know why she took my magic and not yours.” If I didn’t know her better, I would say she was bitter. But this is Aimee. Calm, peaceful Aimee. I would be bitter, but not her.

I shrug. I don’t know the answer any more than she does. “She said I was different.” We probably should’ve set ground rules for what we were going to discuss in front of

Zane, but we didn't.

Aimee doesn't look at me and instead, continues writing. "All the girls whose magic was stolen are students at the Institute." She writes Institute under each of their names. "And they're all girls. I don't know if that makes a difference."

"We should count it anyway."

"Also, they're all first-family members. Except Aimee. But she might have been an opportunity." I repeat the theory and look at Zane while I speak. He nods then takes a long drink of his tea. "Maybe we need to see how many first families have daughters."

I nod. "Yeah."

"My family does, but Dylan's doesn't. Neither does Finn's." Aimee writes the information on a Post-it and marks the paper and the Post-it with corresponding digits. I look at Zane and we both smile. "Nobody really knows much about Hadley."

When he sets the glass down, he runs his fingers back and forth along his jaw. "I dated all of them." I glance at Aimee and she looks down again, but when I look at Zane he shrugs one shoulder.

"You dated Aimee?" I'm certain I would remember that.

He nods. "Second grade. She was the first girl I ever asked to be my girlfriend." That meant I was in Kindergarten, before I knew anything about witches or magic. It's when I thought my mom was going to take me and Aimee to visit Jurassic Park and I couldn't wait to go.

But considering the last few days, I can't believe she didn't tell me. And that's the

part I don't know how to handle. It isn't like I would be jealous about something that happened way back then. Now that it's come up, I don't know what to do with it or if I should comment at all. It was second grade. A thousand years ago.

"Oh." It's the only word I can come up with.

Aimee clears her throat and looks from me to Zane. "Yes, well, I don't know that any of these things are more than coincidence or not, but I think you should be careful." She purses her lips and won't meet my gaze. "Maybe you shouldn't see each other until we know that dating Zane isn't a part of it."

I shake my head. This is the first guy who ever looked at me the way he does, and I don't care if there's a line of syphoners waiting for all the women who have dated Zane. "No, I mean, maybe, but she tried to take my magic." Maybe it just wasn't powerful enough for her. "She couldn't."

"Maybe she was at capacity? She stole Ariya's magic and then mine, so maybe she didn't have space for yours. I don't know if that's a thing or not. But if it is, she might come back for you." Aimee tilted her head as if she was trying to convince me.

Zane glances at me then at the list. "Aimee might be right, RJ. I mean, I don't want to be the reason you get...syphoned." I hope it's disappointment making him frown. But damn Aimee for bringing it up.

"It's way more likely that being part of first families is the reason." That's only logical. "Unless you have some syphoner woman scorned out there." I glance at Zane. He smiles and shakes his head. "So obviously it's about the power of the first families, right?"

Aimee shrugs. "Maybe." But then she nods. "You know, when she was coming for me, I could feel her magic. It was like...when we do magic together." She wags a

finger back and forth between us. “There’s a flow between us . It was like that.” I nod. I always feel that flow, but when the syphoner tried to take my magic, I didn’t. I didn’t feel anything but a slight annoying tug.

I meant to tell Aimee earlier, but with the club and all the things we found out there, I forgot. “I talked to a professor in class today. A sub, actually. And she said that all magic leaves a footprint or some tell-tale piece of the magic behind. She called it a signature .”

Zane tilted his head at me, and the light hits him in a way that makes him look as if he is glowing.

For a second, I am too captivated to do more than stare, but then Aimee kicks me under the table. He’d been talking. “What?”

“Zane asked you how we find it?” Her voice is sharper now, like she’s pissed off that I wasn’t paying attention.

Fuck. I knew there was something else I needed to find out in class. “I didn’t ask.”

Aimee is silent for the biggest part of a minute, and I don’t know if being without her magic is changing her, but she’s usually much more calm than the energy she’s putting into the universe right now.

She glances at each of us. “I feel like it was someone who could have studied magic at the Institute. I think that’s how she knows how the person she’s stealing from will react. When she was coming for me, I tried to throw a spell. But she pushed it off. Then another.” Aimee traces the woodgrain on the table with her fingertip. “Honestly, it felt like she knew everything I was going to do, like she has the same training we have.”

I can almost see her mind working, thinking of classmates and adding them to her mental list or discounting them.

“Wouldn’t we have recognized her?” We’d each been at the school for five years and while I didn’t talk to everyone, I knew most of their names and faces. I see a lot because I’m quiet and I don’t belong to any particular crowd there.

Zane shakes his head. “Not if she used a glamour.” Well, that certainly complicates things.

“Then it could be anyone.” And I’m not kidding. Our suspect pool just grew by about the entire witch population.

Aimee nods and frowns again. She looks at me, but it’s more as if she’s looking through me. “First, even though I knew what she was doing, the touch was nice, comforting, like she wanted me to know she didn’t want to do it, but that it would be okay.” Her gaze isn’t on something in this room but something in her mind, a memory, maybe a vision even, but I doubt it.

“I just remember being suddenly very tired.” But it was because of the spell not because she had managed to take any of my magic. And I don’t want Aimee to think fondly of any part of what happened. Comforted or not. “You’re only okay because Mom had a potion.” I don’t like thinking of what could’ve happened to Aimee. I could have lost her. And that is no little thing for me.

“At my folks’ house, in the vault, there’s a bunch of books about the first families.”

“The vault?” I’ve never heard of anyone but banks having a vault.

He nods. “I could take you there.”

Aimee is shaking her head but when Zane looks at her, she stops and smiles, like she doesn't want him to know she doesn't want me to go. "RJ, Mom's going to be home soon and she'll be worried if you aren't here."

"I think Mom would want me to do whatever I can to figure out how to get your power back."

Aimee shakes her head. She's frustrated with me and I'm not sure I understand why. "We know how. We have to kill the syphoner."

Aimee, who is all about peace and love, isn't going to be altogether happy about having to kill anyone, but she'll do it or stand by and let it be done if it means she gets her power back.

She won't be the same after. And I don't want that for her. Or for me. But I would rather be the one who has to do the killing so she doesn't have to suffer through that.

I nod and smile wider. She's arguing for no reason. I'm going to go to his house with him anyway. "Yes, but we don't know how to find out who the syphoner is. One of the books might help." I couldn't speak any sweeter if I was made of chocolate and sugar.

"RJ, I think it's a bad idea."

I look from Aimee to Zane and back again. "That's why you're not invited. Just tell Mom I'll be home later." And that's my final word on the subject.

Chapter

Fifteen

Zane's house is the most extraordinary thing I've ever seen, like nowhere I've ever been. Even the Institute isn't so grand and spacious. It's more like a castle than a house. There are turrets and a skywalk that connects one part of the house to another as if one part was added on later and the two pieces needed linked. The brick is whitewashed and the roof is solid black.

The doors are twice as tall as any regular door and Zane pushes one open then smiles when he looks back at me. I'm still marveling because I don't know anyone who lives like this. "Come on."

I follow him inside and stop and look around.

Fuck. There is a statue in the foyer. A statue of a woman in a long robe with a leaf headdress and closed eyes. She's holding a flower and looking down.

"Dad turned Mom to stone when I was a baby." He says it so matter-of-factly and off-handed, I can't tell if he's being truthful or not.

I stop walking. "Really?" His father's a witch, I know that much. But generally spells like that don't work on other witches, and no way would he have that kind of power if his mother wasn't one.

He shakes his head. "No." And he laughs. "Mom saw that statue when they went to

some statue park a few years ago and she bought it.”

“After this week, I think anything is possible.”

He smiles and holds out his hand and pulls me through the house so I don’t get to see much other than passing glimpses of rooms. One room seems to be a showplace for a very black, very large grand piano.

“You play piano?”

“Chopsticks.” He laughs. “My mom plays.”

The library is as big as the one in town, with as many books, and this one has a painted ceiling. “Wow.”

“Yeah. My dad loves books.”

“And the ceiling painting?” It’s of cherubs and angels and harps and clouds.

“Took him years. And then years of being seen by chiropractor to fix his neck.” He looks up and pretends to paint like I wouldn’t understand his joke.

“It’s impressive.” And that’s an understatement. It’s detailed and colorful and makes me feel like I’m actually heading toward heaven. He smiles and we move on through the library to stand in front of a wall. “It’s a nice wall.”

He chuckles and my heart does a little dance even though he’s dropped my hand. “It’s more than a wall.” He gives it a little push and it slides back to reveal a staircase.

Well, now staring at a wall makes sense. Although, it occurs to me that I don’t know him very well. I don’t know why he all of a sudden likes me, why he’s brought me

here, why there's a wall in his house that slides open to reveal a stone staircase that seems to descend into darkness. He walks in, turns, and looks at me again. "You coming?"

I look around him to see if I can see anything below. "It's dark."

"They're motion lights. As we walk down, they'll come on." I look again and he smiles. "I would never hurt you, RJ."

"I know that." I wave my hand and chuckle, snort too. "Of course." I follow behind him, holding onto his shirt as I tiptoe down the stairs. "You're not a serial killer or a syphoner, are you?"

Not that I expect him to tell the truth if he is, but I wait anyway.

"No." He stops after we've made a slight curve and turns on the step to look at me. Right now, we're about the same height. I can see every fleck of gold in his brown eyes, and can smell the woodsiness of his cologne. It's all very heady.

His gaze lowers and he looks at my mouth. I know he's going to kiss me. I want that kiss more than I want anything in my life. I lean in, and he looks at me. "I'm sorry, RJ. I didn't bring you here for this..."

I nod. Of course he didn't. I'm not his type. Although I'm going to need him to stop sending me messages that make me think he might want to kiss me. "No worries."

I walk past him because I can't keep standing on the step feeling like an idiot, gazing at him with all that want and need and desire unrequited. It's more humiliating than I can almost stand and if I wasn't here to try to figure out how to help Aimee, I would probably leave.

When I get to the bottom of the steps he's close and he reaches around me to flick on a light. The upstairs was impressive, decorated professionally and with a spare-no-expense kind of budget. But the basement is populated with game consoles, a jukebox, three big-screen TVs hung side by side and some theater seating in front of them, some stand-up arcade games, a pool table, and a foosball table.

"Damn, I forgot to bring money for tokens." I look over my shoulder at him and he smiles as I walk around the room, exploring, touching the cool, smooth wood of the pool table, pressing buttons on the arcade games, flipping the little men around on the foosball table.

He smiles. "No tokens necessary. Maybe we can come back and play after this mess is all straightened out."

I don't want to get my hopes up. But my hopes have other ideas.

He holds out his hand and I slide my palm over his. He laces our fingers together as he leads me to another door. It has a push button device on it and he inputs some numbers into the keypad and the door makes a whooshing sound as it opens.

"It's like a vacuum seal." He smiles and we walk inside together. It's another giant area, but it's painted stark white and there are about twenty or twenty-five bookcases along the wall, each covered with glass and lit by a pendant light that hangs over the top.

Each case has a series of books sitting next to one another. On the shelf that he opens, one is leather and two are canvas. He pulls out another shelf from near the middle of the case and picks up a leather-bound book, flips it open and nods, then hands it to me.

It's heavy. Smells old. Pages crackle when I turn them. "Wow." He waves me to a

table that is old and ornate and probably the table where some English king planned his wars in medieval times or celebrated his victories in his great hall after. The table has a couple of more modern chairs on each side .

When he pulls out a chair and smiles, I sit and he leans over my shoulder with one hand on the table the other on the back of my chair. “This book is a history of the Institute.”

On the first page, there is a hand-drawn picture of the Institute’s two center buildings.

The second page is written in Latin and I flip past it because I don’t have a good enough command of the language that I can translate without staring at the words for a while. I don’t want to embarrass myself.

Each page is a mixture of English and Latin and I read through some of the English parts. The Institute for the Arts and Sciences of Magic was established in the year 1824. I probably learned that in some class somewhere. It was necessary at the time to provide education and history to those with power and ability.

It goes on for pages and pages and pages about the history of the Institute. And then in 1964 the Institute burned entirely to the ground. “ In 1979, after the fire destroyed the original Institute and depleted the stored magic inside, the Institute was rebuilt. At this time, there was a dedication brick built into the foundation of the last building built which is the middle building on the left side. ” He reads the words over my shoulder.

“Left side as we look at it?” I look at Zane because this is important. I don’t know why, but that dedication is important.

“I don’t know.” He shrugs.“But maybe if we find out and we find it , we’ll be able to figure out if it’s involved and why.” I like that we’re on the same page about it. “I

know where to find a picture of the nine first families.”

“How can they be the first families if they’re our parents?”

“They’re the first families at this version of the Institute.” He shakes his head. “I don’t know all the details, but what I know is that when the Institute burned, the magic from the original first families infused in the buildings that protected the witches inside burned up with it.”

“So, this version of the Institute is protected with the magic of our families?”

He nods. “I think so.” He flips through the book, holding his spot with the fingers of his left hand while his right turns a few more pages “Bradbury, Steros, Hadley, Deville, Strain, Dupree, Tempest, Murick, and Foster are the first families. There’s a picture at the Institute.” He’s not reading. It’s apparently common knowledge.

I stare at the book as he continues reading right up until he closes the book and looks at me. “You can borrow the book if you want.”

“Oh, no.” I do not want to be responsible for this thing. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.” But maybe he has information on some other shelf in here, since the size of this place rivals that of the Institute’s library. “Do you have any books here on syphoners?”

“I don’t know. There’re a lot of books.”

“Then I guess we better start looking.” I pull my lower lip between my teeth and half smile because I have a picture in my mind of the two of us shoulder to shoulder, singlehandedly finding the information to save us all and restore Aimee’s powers.

He smiles and glances at me. “Fine with me. We can stay here all night trying to find

whatever you want.” His hand is warm at the small of my back as he guides me toward a line of shelves at the back of the room. “This is where we keep the oldest books. The ones written before the first Institute was ever built.”

I lay my hand on the glass over top of the books. There’s power in this case. It’s pulsing, as if the bookshelf has its own heartbeat. The covers are different from the others. Some are made of fabric, others of leather, and still others are only yellowed pages stitched together with twine.

We spend hours going through the books. First, because they’re so fragile, and second because some are hard to read and we both have to try. Instead of going twice as fast by reading a book each, we spend twice as long trying to figure out what is on the pages.

Every once in a while, I catch him watching me and I smile at him. I don’t know what’s going to happen when this is all over, but I’m savoring these moments where he’s so close to me I can feel the heat of his body, his chest pressed against my back as he reads over my shoulder, his arm around my side, hand on the table beside mine.

We’re three or four books into our investigation when he pulls one from the cabinet that is glowing when he sets it on the table. I’m afraid to touch it.

“Go ahead. It’s just a spell. I thought it might help us find what we’re looking for.” His smile is softer now than it was. “I’ve been standing beside you all day, breathing you in, and I want to get this all finished, so I can breathe you in at the movie theater, at dinner, at night.”

The words are probably the best I’ve ever heard. He’s got a way of saying things that make me shiver in the best way. I stare at him for a couple seconds before I snap out of the trance and open the book.

The pages flip on their own one at a time—probably thanks to his spell—and then stop. The page is blank. Like every other in the book.

“Maybe it needs a spell to show the words?” I look at him. On one hand, I want to show him that I’m up to the task, but on the other, I don’t want to fail in front of him. I don’t want to look like a fool. Right now, he doesn’t doubt me. Right now, he thinks I’m capable. And I don’t want to prove him wrong. I don’t want him to know that my magic is faulty.

But he’s waiting for me, wants me to cast the spell to make the words appear. I can hear Aimee’s voice in my head. See the words in your mind, hear them in your heart.

I want to, but my doubts are bigger than the sound of her voice. “What if we’re opening magic that could call syphoners from the...abyss?” I want it to sound as treacherous as possible. “What if it’s a trick? Something one of the syphoners put into the book to call up an army of them and your spell awakens it?”

“And what if it’s only a cheap wizard’s hiding spell and we can be the heroes who give the magic back to everyone who was robbed of it?” His confidence is that of a man who’s never failed, whose magic always turns out exactly right. He doesn’t know the pain of setting something on fire by a transposed word that changed the entire meaning of the spell, or a semi-naked history teacher because instead of answers, I said the Latin word for pants.

He leans in and his breath is hot against my neck and ear. “Show me what you can do.”

As far as incentives go, it’s potent, makes me want to succeed. But I can’t move. This book is a jillion years old and if I destroy it...

“Did you know that the spells don’t have to be said in Latin or Romani or Russian or

the languages they're written in? They only have to be said to be understood."

I stare skeptically, one eyebrow cocked. "Why didn't they ever tell me that at school?"

"They want us to learn, but just say the spell in English and it works. Every time. I promise." Well, if he's promising... I withhold the eyeroll, but he chuckles anyway. "Fine, try a spell on something else first. Not the book."

Well, there was an idea.

"Okay." I look at the table across from the one we're sitting at. I close my eyes and murmur the words. "Pull the chair from beneath the table. Flip it over on the top if you're able."

The chair shifts, rocks, but doesn't move, until it does and it twists, turns, and flips over onto its seat then slides onto the edge of the table.

"Holy shit. I did it."

He laughs. "Why are you surprised?"

There are about a thousand reasons. None of which I'm secure enough to share with him. Only Aimee knows my secret and I'm keeping it that way.

"All right. Try the book now."

He could do it and without risk, but I want to prove myself now. And I want to prove that language doesn't matter. If it's true, my mistaken magic days are over. Language, as far as I'm concerned, has always been my problem.

I nod at him. “Willow and billow and words of right, show yourself into the light.” I wag my fingers at the book—not that I have to, but magic is half about the flair—and the pages start to wave. Holy shit. “It’s working. Look!” I point at the pages as the words fade in one line at a time.

He nods and rests his chin on my shoulder. “I see, RJ.” He whispers my name and if I turn my head toward him, he’ll kiss me, I know it, but I don’t want our first kiss to be in his basement among dusty tomes that haven’t been opened in a hundred years. And I don’t want it to be because he’s proud my magic worked. I want our first kiss to be emotion and need and desire.

I’m not settling for less. But I have to clear my throat to find my voice. I glance at him then back at the book and start reading. There is a load of information about syphoners. “Look at this.” I point to one of the paragraphs. “ A syphoner can absorb magic from any witch or magically infused object whose power source is visible or able to be used by the witch .”

“So, everyone at the Institute is in danger.”

I nod. “I guess so.” There’s no consolation there. The next paragraph doesn’t make me feel better, either. “ A syphoner can also store or save magic in an object to protect the syphoner from magic madness .”

“What is magic madness?”

I shrug and flip a couple pages to see if there is mention. “Magic madness is an incurable illness suffered when a syphoner, a priestess, a warlock, or a vampire drains the magic of two or more witches with opposite signatures and attempts to join the magic to form a greater power source.” That sounds heavy.

He continues reading where I left off. “It is also stated that the nine first families will

form an alliance and dedicate their power signatures to the Institute for the Arts and Sciences of Magic. The nine first families must each have a signature which opposes the others so all nine facets of magic are represented.”

Oh great. “So we could be dealing with a syphoner who’s going mad because of the mixed magic that she’s stolen.”

I continue to read down the page. “ To keep the balance of magic in the world, a syphoner will be born into one of the nine first families of every generation to ensure that no magical alliance is overcome by power or the thirst for it. The powers will bind to the dedication but remain separate and distinctive to each of the firsts. A syphoner can be killed only by another syphoner who is holding the weapon of power of the firsts .”

I have no idea what that means, but it makes me wonder who the syphoner is of our generation. I make a note to figure out who has siblings because it has to be someone in Zane’s crew of friends.

Zane walks to one of the bookshelves. “I think we need to know the magical signatures and what facets of magic they are each representing.”

“Why?” It doesn’t sound like a bad idea, but I’m curious as to why he thinks it’s important.

He tilts his head and the light from one of the chandelier lights overhead casts a halo on the top of his head. Fuck. How’s a girl supposed to keep her mind on magical signatures and facets of... whatever when she’s locked in a little room with a guy who looks like Zane Bradbury?

“I don’t know, but we might need it later.”

I nod. “Okay.”

He brings another book back and flips it open. This one is already in English so neither of us has to cast a translation spell to figure out what it says.

He starts by reading silently then looks at me. “Did you know that Ariya Glover was accepted by the academy before she was ever born?” He points to a passage on the page and I read it, uncertain why that matters. “It must mean something, since the rest of us had to go through extensive testing.”

If I’m honest, I didn’t have to go through anything, but Aimee did. So I nod.

I go back to reading my book while he continues reading his .

“This says the first families created Magic of the Scepter.” There are pictures of nine different small wands and one large scepter that appears to be all nine wands put together to form the jeweled base. “That has to be the weapon of power, right?” I tap the page with my fingernail as I hold it up for him.

He takes out his phone and snaps a picture of the pages and the silly girl part of me thinks he’s taking the picture of me. I flush with heat for a second then realize he’s taking the picture of the scepter.

“Weapon of power?”

When he glances at me, I read the passage to him about killing the syphoner.

He nods. “I would think so.” At best, we’re guessing, but there isn’t really anyone we can ask.

“Does your book say what those powers are?”

And now I know why they're important. When we figure out who the syphoner is in our generation—as soon as we make sure that person isn't the one robbing others of magic—we're going to have to get the scepter to them. The legends we'd heard before weren't complete. No one mentioned the scepter anyway, so we can't count on that being the total of the information.

He is flipping through his book while I look at pictures of the wands. The Hadley family wand has a blue sapphire protected by twisted wire that extends from the slender silver-and-ivory handle to where they meet a couple inches over the stone. The Illusion Stone.

I tap his shoulder and the touch is electric, zinging up my arm. I don't know what it all means, but it's damned pleasant, probably the most pleasant thing I've ever felt in my life. More so than it had been in the car.

He turns and smiles. "Yeah? "

I want to be flirty, tell him that I only wanted to touch him, but that isn't wholly true. I have an actual reason and remind myself that as soon as we get through this, we'll have plenty of time for flirting.

"I think I found what we're looking for." I point at the page.

"I can't wait for everything to be back to normal." His voice is low, almost husky and I ache to hear more, but instead I hand him the book. "The facets of magic are connected to the wands."

It only takes him a moment to flip through all nine pages and then he grins. "Maybe the wands are in the dedication stone at the Institute."

I don't even have a guess so that makes as much sense to me as anything I may come

up with, plus I certainly have never seen anything like the picture at our house—the Hadley house. Although, it could be that the house is full of cubbyholes like the one where we found the grimoire, so it could be there and I don't know.

Having the information is powerful and I feel that in my soul. “Maybe we should go check.” I cock a brow at him. Probably as witches of the Institute and since he is one of the first families, we shouldn't go anywhere, but the sooner this over, the better.

Chapter

Sixteen

There is something to be said for the four giant buildings and how imposing they look in the dark of night, the moon as their only illumination. “The picture is inside, in the Hall of Greats.”

On the way over, we’d talked about the picture of the families. It was his parents and the parents of the rest of his group. “Did you write down all the facets and which families they belong to?”

I nod and pull out the piece of paper I wrote them on, even though he isn’t looking at me. He’s still looking out the windshield as he pulls into a spot—his usual spot—and we sit for a second.

“Do you remember where the dedication is?”

He nods. “Middle building on the left side in the foundation.”

Still, we don’t move. We continue to sit in his Jeep. I sigh. I’m not usually a woman who’s plagued by fear. I get nervous about things, but true fear is odd for me. Right now, though, I’m shaking. I don’t want my magic syphoned and being here at night when the place is deserted is eerie .

But he doesn’t seem to be in a big hurry either. “Weird day, huh?”

“Kind of.” Not that I’m complaining. “I kind of like some of the turns it’s taken.” I smile and gaze at him. He’s the turn I like. The one I’m glad this day took.

He leans his head back against the seat and looks at me. “Me, too.” And then he twists his body so he’s facing me. “I like you, RJ.”

I want to close my eyes and savor the words. I want him to say them again. “I like you, too, Zane.” And I like saying his name, especially when it comes out soft and kind of breathy, emotional, even.

His smile is slow as it spreads across his face. “I’m going to go inside and get the picture. Then we can find the stone.”

My stomach swirls. “I think we should go together.” I don’t want to be alone in the car, and I don’t want him to be alone in the Institute. More, I don’t want him rethinking this thing between us when I’m away.

“I might have to break a window.”

“Well, I might have to help you.” It’s all I can think of to say.

It is a second more of gazing at one another before he nods. “Two witches are better than one, right?”

I nod, and he winks, and my heart starts a heavier, faster beat. Zane is the kind of guy that takes a woman’s breath away, makes her body react.

We walk across the lawn like we belong there, hand-in-hand as a bonus, and head to the building that houses the Hall of Greats. It isn’t the one with the dedication stone, but we’re working on one thing at a time. We’ll get to it.

When we get to the building we need, we both stop and look up at it. There are windows, but no way can either of us reach them, even if I stand on his shoulders, so we walk around the building, checking for a way in.

The grass crunches under my feet and the wind is almost warm blowing against my skin. And he's still holding my hand. This is definitely climbing the charts of one of the best nights of my life. But I keep it to myself as we round the backside of the building. It's a place I've never been because I've never had a reason to so of course, the railing that is halfway around an opening in the ground instills me with hope.

"Is that a basement?" I run toward it, and he takes me by the arm and pulls me back.

"RJ, we don't know what's down there."

"Well, we should definitely find out." I use the arm he's still holding onto to tug him down the stairs behind me.

"What if there's no way to get upstairs from here?"

I shrug as we get to the bottom of the stairs and the heavy metal door with a shiny silver knob. "I don't know yet. I'm sure we'll think of something." And then, while I'm smiling at him, gazing into his eyes, I give it a twist and pull the door open.

The inside is dark and the musty smell of a basement is strong and stark. But I walk inside because my sister needs her magic back, and I have questions I need answered.

Plus, I want this whole mess to be over so if Zane wants to date me, there's nothing holding us back.

He pulls out his phone and turns on the flashlight then swings it around until we've both seen all the areas and every wall. "It's a boiler room." I am a master at stating

the obvious.

“Yeah.” He laughs. “But there are some stairs over there.” And this time he moves to walk in front of me. I don’t mind that he’s doing the leading. It’s actually fine with me because this place is creepy as fuck.

We get to the top of the stairs and there’s a door there and he pushes it open so we’re in the hallway directly across from the Hall of Greats.

“How’s that for convenient?” he asks in a whisper, like someone might hear us if we use our regular voices.

“Well, if we can get the picture and get back out of here without getting caught, it will be most convenient.” I use my regular voice and flash him a smile.

He leads me into the room and as we pass by the statues, the light shining from the base of each one comes on. I look around. “What if someone sees us?”

He shrugs. “We might have some explaining to do.”

I giggle. I’ve never giggled so much in my life as I have since I met him. Part of me is giddy, and the other part of me hates that.

But he’s still holding my hand, keeps it clasped in his until we get to the far wall of the room. In the center between two windows is a picture in a frame. It isn’t the biggest picture or the best quality, but it’s what we need to look at. It’s the first families for this version of the Institute.

We both look for a minute before he reaches to take it off the wall. As he moves it, an alarm sounds and a light starts flashing in each corner of the room in time with the blare of the siren.

“Oh shit.” I cover my ears and he throws a spell to make it all stop. It does, and he’s still holding the picture. He takes it out of the frame and rehangs the frame on the wall then takes my hand. We head back to the basement and out. We don’t know if he threw the spell in time but we got what we came for. There isn’t a reason to stick around.

But we walk through the grass and stick to the shadows until we’re on the other end of the campus at the second building on the left side. “We should check the cornerstones. It’s where all the builders put their dedications.” He says it like he believes it, so I do too, since I don’t have any idea.

We’ve checked the two back corners and are onto our third when he shouts, “I found it.” He runs to the front on the near side of the building. “Here it is, RJ!”

I jog toward him. And there it is—the block of the foundation that holds the magic of the nine first families inside it. “Do you think the wands are inside there?”

He taps his knuckles against the front of the brick where the dedication is etched into the concrete. “Would they really put their weapon of power inside?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, we need to figure out how to look inside.” I give the block my own skeptical tap. “Might require tools.”

“Yeah.” He nods, then shakes his head. “What about a spell? If we put our magic together...” He shrugs. “It could work.”

Or it could spin horribly out of control. Especially if we’re relying on my magic. I’m not first-family magic. “Maybe we should check our places first. If we let that magic go and put it out into the universe, the school could be in danger as well as everyone

we know.”

For a few seconds he doesn’t say anything, he only looks at me. I don’t mind it. It’s warm, like a caress, and heat flushes through me. I want him to lean in, to press his mouth against mine, to kiss me until I can’t breathe or think, until my knees are weak and there’s only him.

I’m not settling for anything less. I don’t want a quick kiss in the car. I want the entire experience.

He doesn’t lean in .

And that’s okay. For now.

Instead, we head back to his car, still holding hands, and he opens the door for me and waits until I’m inside before handing me the picture. When he walks around to his side and slides behind the wheel, he turns the dome light on and we stare at the picture together. The top of the Jeep is open, and the moon is shining, but even the dim light on the frame of his Jeep helps us see the picture better.

Not enough though, so he shines his flashlight onto the picture. “Do you know all these people?”

He nods. “Yeah.” He points out the individual families. “These are Finnick’s parents, and there are Isador’s, Dylan’s...” He points them all out. When he gets to my father—who doesn’t even belong in the picture—he says, “And that’s Viktor Hadley.”

“No, that’s my dad.”

“Are you sure?” He takes the picture and shines the light directly on my dad. “I

thought your last name was Baum.”

“It is.”

“No. Unless your dad is Viktor Hadley, or your dad has a twin named Viktor Hadley.” He highlights the names typed in and attached to the bottom of the picture.

“See? Viktor Hadley.”

“My dad’s name is Vincent Baum. Not Viktor Hadley.” I don’t know why but I’m only two shallow breaths shy of a panic attack. “My dad’s name is Vincent Baum.”

He lays his hand on my shoulder and this time the electricity between us pushes away the anxiety. I breathe slower, easier.

“Viktor Hadley was the first headmaster of this version of the Institute.” He pulls his lower lip between his teeth. “I read about it when we were at my house. He was accused of being a syphoner. ”

“My dad?” I’m still not buying this Viktor Hadley bullshit.

Zane and I both look at the photo again, and I’m leaning into him. He takes a slow, deep breath. He sniffs my hair and a little thrill runs through me. “Is your Mom not in the picture?”

I shake my head. “They must not have been together yet.” I check the writing at the bottom. This was taken about ten years before Aimee was born. “They weren’t.” Although it doesn’t explain why my father is called Viktor Hadley in the picture.

Witches have a slightly longer lifespan than normal humans, although I don’t know why or even if that matters to this part of the story, but it’s true. Maybe the guy in the picture known as Viktor Hadley is actually Vincent Baum. “Maybe he changed his

name after he was accused.”

“Why would someone accuse another witch of being a syphoner?” The question I really want answered is why someone would call my dad a syphoner, but I’m sticking to the generic so Zane doesn’t latch onto how anxious I am.

He shrugs. “Maybe they saw something? Or…” He pauses and shrugs again. “I don’t know.” And then he turns to me, slides one hand under my hair, and strokes my jaw with his thumb. “Are you sure that’s your dad?”

I nod because I couldn’t form a word if my life depended on it. I’ll be lucky to ever be able to speak again. His gaze is soft, and there’s such tenderness in his touch I could melt.

“Then we have to figure out what’s going on.”

I don’t tell him that my dad left a few weeks after I was born and never came back. That I haven’t seen him and have no real memories of him, but I know what he looks like because there’s a fucking picture of him and my mom hanging in the living room over the television. So, every time I look at the TV, I see his big goofy grin, and I’ve always hated it because it reminds me of me.

“I think I need to talk to my mom.”

He nods. “Then let’s get you home because one of these days I’m not going to be able to stop myself from kissing you and I don’t want it to be while you’re freaking out about your dad and this Viktor Hadley mystery.” We even think alike.

I might be in over my head. Way over. And I don’t think I want to come out anytime soon.

Chapter

Seventeen

When he pulls into my driveway, I feel like I should linger, thank him for helping me, even though all we did was find more questions than answers, but I climb out because I have to talk to my mom. I have to get this thing straightened out with her.

He waits until I have the door open and am half inside before he pulls away. I look back to wave a second too late for him to see. So, I take a breath and walk inside. Mom is, of course, waiting for me.

“Robbie Joe!” But then she meets my gaze and hers is the one that softens. I’m angry, although I’m not sure why. “RJ?”

I have the picture in my fucking hand and I should say something but I don’t know what. She’s lied to us—to me and Aimee—for the entirety of our lives and what if he really is a syphoner? A syphoner is born into every generation. For balance. Maybe.

No.

They would’ve told us .

“Who is Viktor Hadley? And why is Dad in this picture?” I hold it out for her to see.

“Where did you get that?”

“That doesn’t matter. What matters is that Dad is in this picture and he’s called Viktor Hadley. Is that his name?” My voice is steel, or whatever is harder and tougher than. I’m tired of being lied to, tired of being treated like I’m a fucking child.

I stare at her, my gaze as hard as my tone.

Before she can answer, Aimee comes down the stairs and stops. “What’s going on? RJ? What’s wrong?”

I sigh and look at my mother. “You want to tell her? Or you want me to do it?”

Mom looks at me. “I knew this time would come.”

“So, you have your lies ready then?” I’m past angry.

“Sit down, girls. We need to talk.”

Instead of telling her that she had the chance to tell us the truth every day, I sit and wait for Aimee to sit beside me, although the words are there, dying to be spoken.

She holds out her hand for the picture and I hand it over. She pinches it between her thumb and index finger and traces my dad’s face with the middle finger of her other hand. “He was so young here.”

He looks exactly the same in the picture as he does in the one over the television, which was taken while Mom was pregnant with Aimee.

She breathes out slow. “He was on the...on the board for the Institute. A founding family. One of the Firsts.” So that is him. I knew it. I fucking knew it. “Things were going so well. He was the headmaster. Everyone loved and respected Viktor. He was a master at magic.” She smiles. “Like you girls.”

But we all know she means like Aimee. I'm just more angry so she's trying hard to kiss my ass and keep me calm so I don't explode all over her.

"He worked day and night to make sure the wards were in place and the dedication magic was ready."

"You knew him then?" I nod to the picture. "You knew him when the Institute was being built?"

She nods. "Of course, I did. I helped decide the curriculum based on what I'd learned and what helped me when I was a student."

Added to her list of sins was my Magic Theory class. Who the hell needed to know the theory of magic?

Mom glances at me as if she can read my mind. And maybe she can. I've never asked the specifics of her magic or what magical facet is her special skill.

"RJ, Aimee, there was a mistake when Viktor was born." She shakes her head. "He has magic. So much beautiful and powerful magic. He has the art of illusion, restoration, the power of divinity, and all things psychic—all at his command." She speaks of him with such reverence and her love for him is obvious.

"Then what was the mistake?" I need to know.

She sighs and wrings her hands and takes a sip of a drink I don't remember seeing in front of her a moment ago. It's a dark amber colored liquid that smells of alcohol. But that can't be right because my mother doesn't drink. She doesn't even keep alcohol in the house.

She holds up the glass. "It's whiskey. I'm a conjuration witch. That's my facet." She

sighs, toasts the air, and drains the glass.

“What was the mistake?”

“He had all that magic but couldn’t use it. He needed the magic of another witch to use it. ”

I stare at her. “He was a syphoner. So they were right.” All those accusations had been spot-on truth.

She nods. “He was part syphoner. And they threw him away because of it.” There’s a sadness in my mother that I hadn’t noticed before, although I doubt it’s ever been hidden.

“Is that why he left?” I’ve always wondered but have never asked because I didn’t want to be the one who made my mother sad. When she nods, my blood burns. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

“Your father shouldn’t have been a syphoner.” I don’t know if she has some metaphysical reason for saying so or if she’s lamenting that he is, or was, one.

“Why?” I need more than her opinion. I need a cold hard fact. Or I’ll just face that he’s the syphoner and I have to...end him.

“In each generation of the first families”—which I now realize we are—“there is only one born. Our generation had two.” She sighs and it comes from deep in her chest, makes her seem deflated by the time she’s finished. “It never happens. I looked in the annals of magic, searched all the information I could find, and never before had two syphoners been born into the same generation. Much less into the same family.”

“So, Dad is out there bleeding power from other witches?” I mean it to sound blunt

because she lied to us. For the entirety of our lives. I want her to feel bad for it and, if I have to use Dad and her feelings for him to do it, then I will.

Mom shakes her head. “No. Your father would never.” She stands and walks to the photo of her and our father that hangs on the wall in our house. “There was a mistake when your father was born. He was given both sets of power. The divine power of a witch and the ability to drain such power as a syphoner.”

“Okay.”

“Your father isn’t one of the syphoners who steals from others because he has always had his own power inside of him. He’s rare and as far as I’ve ever been able to find out, the only one like him. It took him years to learn how to use his magic.” She glances at the grimoire that’s now open on the table. “That’s his. Has some of his power stored in it.”

“What?” Power stored in it?

She nods. “A syphoner can save magic or store it, if you will, in an object. If it’s stored, it cannot be stolen.” That was how it opened to the specific page I needed. “It can be retrieved and returned when the spell is taken off the object.”

“Whose power did he put into it?”

She smiles softly. “It’s a mixture of mine and his.”

I shake my head. “This is all a lovely story, Mom, but I need something. A scepter. A wand. The pearl of illusion.”

Her face pinches. “How do you know about that?”

“I did some poking around.” And when her frown deepens, I continue. “I’m an adult and a witch. I can protect myself.” I don’t tell her that the syphoner had been unable to take my power. “I did some research with Zane.”

Aimee twists her head to look at me. “Nice.” And gives me a thumbs up.

“We need the wand to create the Scepter of Power to kill the syphoner.” Another syphoner, so I have to find my dad. “Do you know where Dad is?”

Mom shakes her head. “I don’t hear from him. Occasionally, I’ll open the top drawer of my dresser and see a note in a spell that wasn’t there before. But I don’t know where they come from.” She shakes her head. “And since you girls found the grimoire, I can feel him as though he’s nearby, but I believe it’s only his magic from the book.”

As angry as I am at her, her sadness cuts me. It’s so visceral. “How did you know how to tend to Aimee? Is it because of the grimoire?”

Mom looks at Aimee then at me, then she nods at Aimee as if Aimee is the one who asked. “Because of RJ, Viktor wrote in the grimoire what to do in case...”

“Because of RJ?” What the hell does that mean?

Mom glances at me and nods. “We knew from the time Aimee was a few months old that she had the gift. She filled her room with bubbles when she was six months old.” Yeah. I’ve heard the story before. “Since she had magic so young, we knew she wasn’t a syphoner.”

“And that means I am?” It explains a lot, even if I don’t particularly want to believe it.

“We started checking with other families to see if there was a syphoner. It was no easy task.”

I scoff. “Yeah. I’ll bet.”

“We were in the middle of rebuilding the Institute so we were all around one another.” I stare at her through narrowed eyes. She’s saying I’m a syphoner. It’s a broad change of fucking tune from all the years she was telling me to use my magic, call on my magic , feel my magic . Anger burns inside of me as she continues. “We checked the children of all the first families for the girls. Because if the syphoner in one generation is a man, the next generation will be a woman.” She closes her eyes as if she’s remembering. “But it doesn’t have to be his daughter.”

I nod. “All the others have magic of their own.” Because of course they do. “So that means you thought, or maybe you think , I’m a danger to Aimee.” I don’t phrase it as a question because there’s no question to it. “So you’ve had the antidote spell ready since I was a baby.”

Mom nods. “You were young and we didn’t know what we do now.”

“Which is?”

“You have to know that you can take the power. You wouldn’t know to try until you were told. And it isn’t as easy as just taking someone’s power.” Although it had certainly looked that way when the syphoner I’d seen—one whose identity I still don’t know—was draining the power from my sister. Apparently, she isn’t going to tell me how to do it either.

I stand because no way in hell am I going to let my mom justify not telling me what I am as a matter of safety. She’s my parent. If she was worried about me using my power for evil instead of good, she should’ve told me what I am and then taught me

how to be the good version of a syphoner.

“You should’ve told me.”

She nods. “Yes.”

Nothing like agreement to take all the wind out of my anger. “Why didn’t you?” She’s my mom. The person who tells me when my jeans make me look shorter or my hair needs a good conditioning. She tells me when I’m hurting Aimee’s feelings. She could tell me anything. I might get mad, but I would hear her. I always hear her.

She sighs. “Because if you didn’t know what you could do, then you couldn’t do it.” She shakes her head. “Syphoning magic is a conscious decision. You can’t do it by accident. Can’t stumble on how to do it.”

“And you didn’t trust me?”

“You don’t know what that kind of hunger for power will do to you.” She tries to reach for my hand, but I cross my arms and sit back. “It brings all the darkness a witch is to the surface.”

“So it was better to let me think I was inadequate? Better to let me...suffer?” Weren’t parents supposed to want to help their kids, make their kids stronger, better? “Thanks for that, by the way.”

I can’t even see past how angry I am at her. How disappointed I am that they didn’t trust me. That there’s a spell in the fucking grimoire that was written in case I hurt Aimee.

“We thought being at the Institute would help the magical cravings. You would be able to use the magic of the buildings and the other witches to satisfy your need to do

magic.” I’d never thought of it as a need before, but it was. As much as I needed to breathe, I needed to do magic.

She crosses her arms and looks at me, turns her entire body to face me.

“RJ, we did everything we could think of to keep you safe and to keep Aimee safe.” Her voice is soft, a plea, and I can’t hear it right now. I’m so angry that I can’t even look at her.

Now I’m the one shaking my head. I’m hurt and angry and I can’t believe they hid this from me instead of showing me how to fight the craving for power and overcome it. Instead, they chose to lie to me, hide who I am, what I am, from myself.

I get up and walk to the door. “I’ll be back later. I need to think, and I can’t do it here.”

“RJ!” Mom calls after me, but I’m already outside. Aimee will talk to her. Or she won’t, and Mom will worry either way. But, right now, I have to figure out what to do with all these emotions and all this new knowledge.

Chapter

Eighteen

I run out on my mother because I can't stand that she's lied to me all my life and just expects that I would be okay with it. There are a thousand possibilities running through my head of how my life could have been if I'd known all this time what I can do. If I hadn't been forced to feel inadequate. And I don't know if they're realistic because I've never had the chance to find out, and that is my mother's fault.

When I'm down the street, far enough I can't see the house anymore, I call Zane. It's dark out and eerie, and there's a chill in the air that makes me think I should've brought a jacket. Apparently, I don't have to be scared. I'm one of the things, one of the dark creatures stealing power from other witches.

"Hey. I'm glad you called." His voice is soft and deep, and I want to believe that he's glad, but my life has been one lie after another lately.

I'm at a point where I trust no one. But if there's one person I want to count on, it's him. "Can you meet me?" I don't have anyone else to ask and I don't want to be alone.

"Did you find something out?" I try not to be suspicious, try to remember he has a stake in all of this, too. His magic is in as much danger as anyone else's, but my stomach curls into a tight ball. What if he knows what I am? He's a first-family member. The information about my dad is probably written in some book somewhere, and the first families would obviously know.

And now, Zane wants information I don't know that I want to give.

"Kind of." I shake my head. I don't want to admit what I am to him. That I'm a danger to him and every other witch on the face of the earth. I don't want him to know about my dad or me. But he's never done anything to lead me to believe that whatever this is between us isn't new and wonderful and real. Still, I'll proceed with caution. I can't have the family secrets out until I know what will happen if they are brought to light. "I just don't want to be alone."

"Okay." He clears his throat and I love his voice. It's funny the things that occur to me at random times, times when such serious things should be taking all my mind's space, when my guard should be up and ready. "I can pick you up."

"I'm walking to the park by my house." I'm about a block away.

"I don't like you being out there alone with this crazy syphoner on the loose."

Oh, if only he knew. If only we knew each other better and I could tell him the truth and not be worried about the difference it would make. But I appreciate that he's concerned, and my stomach flutters.

"I'll be okay." I like that he cares so much, despite how much this is all weighing on me.

"We can just stay on the phone until I get there." He pauses and I can hear his car start. "What happened when you went home? Did your mom tell you anything?"

"No, she lied to us." I can't get into the specifics, but I can give him the overview. "There are things about my dad, personal stuff, that she should've told us that she never did." I pause. "It's why he left."

“Moms have secrets.” He says it as if it’s one of those things about life that people don’t ever realize. But I know it. I know it a lot better now than I did a few hours ago. My knowing it, however, doesn’t make it right.

“I know, but she didn’t just keep a secret, she lied. About everything.” I shake my head. She has her reasons for not telling, and I have my reasons for being pissed off about it. “If she was just not telling us stuff...fine. Whatever. But she didn’t just omit information. She’s woven elaborate lies.” I can’t even believe the amount of deception she’s had to employ. We aren’t children anymore. She’s had a thousand opportunities to tell us about our dad, at least. Most recently, when she found me with the grimoire. Although now I understand why she’s been so angry.

He lives about five blocks from the park on the other side and he pulls up as I’m walking in from the opposite direction. When he has the car angled into a space at the front, instead of waiting for me to come to him, he gets out of the car and walks toward me. It only takes a few steps before he’s within arm’s length, and he steps closer and tugs me into a hug. “Everything is going to be okay, RJ. I don’t know how or why I think so, but I want you to know that you can trust me.” His voice is soft, full of promise, and I don’t want to read too much into it but I honestly can’t help it. My hopes are going to take a hard fall if he isn’t being sincere.

I tilt my chin up to look at him. “I can? ”

He nods. “Yeah.” More solemnly, he adds, “No matter what.” And he grins. “You want to get out of here? I know a place. It’s quiet. We can talk.” When I cock my head because when a guy takes a girl to a quiet place , it’s almost never to talk, he holds up both hands. “I promise. Just to talk.”

It isn’t that I don’t trust him. I just don’t know how to handle this situation. But I won’t be turning my head or running away this time if something happens.

When I nod, we walk back to his car together and he opens the door for me. It's very old-school and I like it.

We're mostly silent on the way to the lookout. It's outside of town but on a cliff that overlooks the entire town, including the Institute. Earlier, the sunset would've lit the sky with shades of amber and pink and purple and gold.

He rolls down the windows and flicks the volume of the radio higher. "Come on." For a minute after we're out of the car, we stand at the edge of the cliff. Up here, nothing looks dangerous. From up here, the town looks peaceful and quiet. We can't see a syphoner or the bad things that happen in the darkness. Up here, we're safe. And alone.

"You think it'll ever be the same?" He looks at me as we sit on the hood of his car. "That the Institute can go back to the way it was before all this syphoner business?"

"My mom said that there was one, a syphoner, running loose before and they handled it. Lockdowns and whatnot until the syphoner was...gone." Although I hate the idea of how that happened. "She said when it was over, everything went back to the way it was." I hate ever saying the word and more I hate pretending that I don't know all about it.

He nods. "I'm never going to let anything happen to you," he whispers and leans in. I don't move. I wait for the soft brush of his lips and when it happens, I want it to never end.

Sparks fly between us. Literal sparks that land on the hood of his car in a splinter of orange that turns to ash, and when he pulls back, he leans his forehead against mine. "With you around, I feel...energized."

He holds up his hand and I press mine against it. This time, I feel the sparks in my

belly and my chest. It's like little bursts of magic between us. They zip from my hand to his. "Me, too."

For a few seconds, all the bad things fade away and it's only me and him on a clear night at the lookout. "We're going to figure this out, RJ."

It's like he knows the exact thing I need him to say, but part of me—a small part, but it's there—wonders if he would still feel the same, still want to be my...whatever, if he found out I am a syphoner.

I don't want to think about it. And I sure as hell don't want to tell Zane and risk it.

We sit for a couple minutes doing nothing more than holding hands which is still nice, and I wonder about the sparks between us, if it's real magic, or if it's just some romance thing that happens between witches. I've never heard of it before.

Certainly, if it's a witch thing, someone would have mentioned it in the hallway or during some after sex brag session. I hear things all the time because people talk around me like I'm not there, but I've never heard anything at all about sparks like this.

Maybe I have magic, after all. My dad has magic. He's both witch and syphoner, so the idea that I could be like him isn't out of bounds. I wonder if there are others.

I've used/borrowed/leached off Aimee's magic a thousand times to cast my own spell, to make my magic work. It's what's kept anyone and everyone from knowing I'm different. Although, there were times I could do magic at the Institute without her being around. I wonder who I was leeching off then.

It doesn't really matter, although I suppose I need to keep that up for now, but she doesn't have magic anymore.

“I need to try a spell. I have an idea and want to test it out.” If a syphoner is using Aimee’s magic, then it should have some kind of active energy. And that energy, according to Professor Creighton, will have Aimee’s unique signature. I’m going to try to use the energy that is uniquely Aimee’s to find it.

He nods. “Okay.”

While our connection is still buzzing, I close my eyes, tilt my head up, and murmur the words for a finding spell while I imagine Aimee, alone at home without her magic.

My body turns clockwise—and when I say it turns, I mean I’m not the one in control of it and sometimes magic like that scares me—but when I open my eyes, I’m facing his windshield and a picture of the Club Mera sign flashing in the glass.

“Did you just do that?” Zane looks at me. “It wasn’t me, but I felt it.” Softer, he whispers, “I felt it.”

“I did it.” When I answer, he blows out a short quick breath. “I should’ve thought of this earlier. I did a spell to look for Aimee’s magic.”

He cocks his head. “That shouldn’t work. You aren’t connected to her magic. You shouldn’t be able to do a finding spell.”

“I just pictured Aimee. Remember Professor Creighton, the sub? She said that all of us have a unique magic signature. I focused on Aimee’s.” Or maybe it worked because I am connected to it. Maybe because we’re sisters and we have the same magical bond to our parents who bestowed the magic, or because I have used her magic before to create my own.

Tonight, I’m using his, and for a couple seconds the idea distracts me enough that I

wonder if using his magic means Zane and I are connected now, too. Part of me hopes it does, but that's the naïve girl part of me. The independent woman hopes I'm not. At least not until I know him better. Lust and desire aside.

But the very last thing I need right now is his suspicion. Especially since I'm about to ask him to take me to Club Mera.

Chapter

Nineteen

C lub Mera is crowded enough that I can't really see anyone, but I can feel Aimee's magic here, the pulse of it in my skin. We walk to the bar and find Colt and Lacey.

"Hey. It's Romeo and Juliet, the Blair Witch version." Colt looks us up and down.

I would love to stand around and banter with him, but I'm a woman on a mission. "Have you seen anything weird tonight?"

He shakes his head. "No, but this place is popping. A priest could come in and do a ritual exorcism but if he didn't do it right in front of me, I wouldn't notice."

Lacey rolls her eyes at him. "Useless as usual." She moves to stand nearer to me. "About an hour ago, there was a flash of energy and one of the lights blew out. Like that night." We all know exactly what night she's talking about. The night the syphoner stole Ariya Glover's magic.

I nod. An hour ago could mean that the syphoner isn't here anymore, but I still feel the magic.

Zane puts his hand on my shoulder. "You can't do this, RJ. We don't have the scepter or the spell. What if she takes your magic?"

I should tell him that my magic isn't in danger because I don't have any, but I'm still

a big fat liar which is also apparently a family trait.

Instead, I look up at him, see his concern and falter. But I have to do this. I don't have another choice. "I'll be careful. I just want to see her." The pulse of Aimee's magic is stronger now, and I move toward where I think it is. Zane follows, his hand still on my shoulder.

I try to stop him, want to send him back because he could very well be in danger. He is vulnerable to a syphoner, but I'm not. I can't let him go with me. I stop walking, although the pulse is like a second heartbeat in my chest now.

Overhead, there are small can lights that flash in time to the music, and the one directly above me brightens and then explodes. I turn because the pulse is painful now, and I am between the syphoner and Zane. I see the ropes of power coming and I move to block Zane but he shoves me from behind and I stumble, trip, crash hard to the floor on my knees. The ropes from Zane to the syphoner are glowing with his power.

I have to stop it. I can't let her have his power.

"Get off him!" I don't have any magic to throw at her so I use my body, trying to break the cords, but then I feel his magic flowing into me and I have to break away. I can't take his magic. I don't know a lot of things, but the one that sticks with me in this moment is that I will have to die to give it back to him.

The syphoner runs out, zigging and zagging between the people on the dancefloor on her way to the door. I want to chase her but I can't leave Zane on the floor. He needs to get to my mother, for whatever potion she gave Aimee.

I put my arms under his and use every bit of strength I have to help him to his feet. Colt steps forward to take half Zane's weight. He's weak and stumbling when I help

him to his feet and now there are no sparks when we touch.

Damn. It was the magic, after all. I'll lament later, but right now, I have a syphoner to chase.

Colt tries to lower Zane onto a stool that Lacey brought out, but I have to get us out of here, find the syphoner, and save the magic world before this bitch of a syphoner drains them all dry. I don't have time for Zane to take a rest to recover. I'll get him to my mother. He isn't unconscious, just weak which is a good sign. I hope.

"Where are you going?" Colt shouts at me over the throb of techno music and feet clicking on the concrete floor.

"Outside," I yell back and continue pushing through the heavy crowd. Every couple steps I take, I look over at Zane. He's definitely not getting better, not rebounding, and I'll be lucky to get him back to my mom in time.

I can't think about that now. I have to get to the door, get him some air, put him in his Jeep and get the hell out of here. The bead on Aimee's magic is gone, too. I don't feel it anymore. Probably because the syphoner layered Zane's on top of it. And without his magic, I have nothing to leech off to find it or the syphoner.

We finally get Zane to the parking lot and strapped into the front seat of his Jeep. I won't be able to drive as fast as I would like because the goddamned Jeep doesn't have its doors on. Earlier, I'd thought it was cool to ride that way. I'd loved the open air, felt free not worrying about the knots in my hair or the windburn. But now, it annoys me .

I pull out of the parking lot onto the road and speed toward the highway. "Where the fuck would she go?" And like the universe is on my side, like there's some mystical force that wants me to win this battle, a picture of the Institute flashes up onto the

windshield in living fucking color. It startles me enough I jerk the wheel hard and we skitter to the side of the road. I grab a hold of Zane's shirt and hold him so he doesn't fall out. I can't be responsible if a seatbelt fails, but he isn't falling out on my watch.

I skip the highway exit for home and go two more miles in the relative darkness of only the occasional passing headlight to the exit for the Institute. There's no way for me to know how far behind the syphoner I am, but I've broken all the speed laws I could break but now, I'm stuck in town traffic which isn't much more at this time of night than a couple cars heading to their late night/early morning jobs, and the few people who don't hide their drinking at home but drink at one of the pubs and have finally decided to call it a night.

It's enough to change green lights to red and slow me down.

"Come on, come on, come on." I wait, foot tapping against the floor of the Jeep while I wait to be granted permission. Zane lurches backward, his head thrown against the seat as I stamp the gas pedal and zoom forward.

The Institute looms in the distance. Large. Imposing. And dark. All the things even a witch hates about going somewhere in the night. Even a witch with power wouldn't be excited about running into a syphoner, but for one without who is supposed to put an end to the reign of terror of another, it's fucking terrifying.

I don't have a wand or scepter or whatever tool I should have for the job. I don't have enough magic in me to ignite the spell without the magic of another to help me out. In short, I don't have a prayer. All I know for certain is that I have to stop her. And I have to do it quickly, quietly, and without a single bit of fanfare that might identify me as one of her species.

Sure. No fucking problem.

I whip the Jeep into Zane's normal parking spot just down from an old Chevy and for a second I wonder why the syphoner parked the car instead of pulling it in front of the school. I also wonder why I did. In hindsight, it seems like pulling up to the building might've been faster. But it's too late now.

I look at Zane—the way the moonlight casts a halo on the top of his head, the way he's slumped in his seat like he's asleep. He's still visible and that's dangerous considering what we're doing here.

Like I'm an angry parent disciplining a misbehaving child, not one who's asleep, which in this situation could also double for passed out, I push him down in the seat. "Wait here." I don't know that he can move on his own, although I probably don't have to worry about it since his head is lolling and it would take physical maneuvering of his arms to work the seatbelt, and I don't think he's capable.

I roll out of the Jeep and run toward a strange shadow—it could be an anomaly of magic or light—at the base of building two. When I get there, a piece of the ground is dug up and a corner of the building is missing. Not a piece, but the entire corner, and I don't have to guess what was there. I know already. The dedication stone, the one infused with the magic of the first families.

Son of a bitch.

I say the words aloud, then silently, then aloud again as I stand staring at the stone like I can make it appear through the force of my will. Spoiler: I can't.

Instead, I head toward the light burning in the building. It's in the lounge of the lower level. I look in a window because the last thing I need is to be surprised when I open that particular door, but I see nothing except the triangle of light created by a half-closed—could be half-open if I had any optimism at all—door that is about halfway down the long center hall.

I pull the door open, trying to remember if this is the building with the squeaky hinges or if it's another. Fortunately, it's the other. This one is quiet and unlocked so the beginning of this very bad idea is at least going in my favor.

On the tiptoes of a very silent pair of black boots, I move toward that light and try to peek inside before I spring through the door and yell, "a-ha!" which is the only part of the plan I'm even semi-proud of. If I'm honest, it's actually the only part of the plan that I have managed to visualize thus far.

It takes one deep breath and then another before I yank the door open and frame myself in the doorway. It's also at that moment that I realize I don't have a weapon of any kind or anything to shield myself from whatever spell the syphoner might throw.

I hear the buzz of lights and another fluorescent fixture bursts in a shower of sparks, even though the light isn't on. It gives me the boost of confidence that I need. This bitch hurt my sister and Zane, who might someday be my boyfriend—especially if I am the one who returns his power because I went fifty shades of badass and took on a syphoner. Of course, I probably will have to mention that I am also a syphoner so I'll lose some points, but being a syphoner who saves the day...I can see it going my way .

So, I'm going to do what has to be done. I can feel the magic of the Institute inside of me. I'm infused with it. I think. I feel something anyway, and I'm pretty sure it isn't gas from the taquitos I ate earlier. If it is, this isn't going to go well.

The words to the spell are fresh in my mind and I murmur the Latin phrases over and over so that a whip of activity swirls around me. I have to say the spell three times—I'm almost finished—and finish it with *et ita fiet* or so it shall be done . As I'm about to utter those last words because the magic is swirling, the janitor steps out from behind a shelf and yells, "Stop!"

I twist toward him, the magic and spell broken. “What?”

And now I have to start again.

“You can’t kill her.” His voice is urgent, high-pitched.

And he’s right. I don’t have the scepter.

“Who the hell are you?” How the hell does he know what I can or can’t do, but I have a feeling he’s more than just the janitor.

As I’m standing, staring at him, a burst of magic nearly knocks me down and I turn. The syphoner is trying to attach herself to me the way I’d seen her do to Aimee.

I can grab the energy ropes and hold them because they have no effect on me. I know what it means and why but there are cameras all over this building and I don’t know if they’re monitored or not. Probably they are.

I can’t worry about that now. I snap the syphoner’s cords and she falls so I can drag her closer. She’s sliding toward me. Her body twisting, aiming her feet first and then her hands toward me. I’m careful because she still has magic inside of her—Aimee’s and Zane’s.

I don’t have magic, don’t have a way to use any, and the only spell I know to fight her won’t work without the scepter, so I throw myself at her, use the momentum and strength in my body to keep her down, swing my arms without aiming and connect to her body with one hand and her face with the other.

She squeals and the intensity and pitch of the sound pierces my ears. There’s no defense to it except to cover my ears which leaves me vulnerable to her attack. But she rolls to her feet, stares for a minute, still screeching, then runs. Again.

And once more I'm too slow to do a fucking thing about it.

Chapter

Twenty

When I can stand again and the ringing in my ears dies, I look at the janitor. He's still standing, still staring at me. He hadn't made a single move to help me and I would like an explanation but first... "Who are you?"

As I stare, it appears as if a blanket slides off him and the face he's wearing melts away as though it's made of wax, but it's a glamour. I've seen one before and I've seen it melt away.

I've seen his face before. All my life it's hung in a portrait with my mother over the television. "Dad?"

He stares at me, unblinking. "Yes." He takes me by the arm and I'm too dumbfounded to resist, although I would damned sure like an explanation. "We have to get out of here."

I think of Zane in the Jeep in need of my mother's help. That's the only reason I'm letting him pull me toward the exit. "I have to get home to Mom. Zane needs her help." I don't know if he's the one who's been at school all these years or if he just assumed the face of the actual janitor, but I'm not about to stand around and explain anything to him. He's the one who should be explaining things to me.

Because Zane is slumped in the front seat where I left him before I went inside the Institute, my dad—who I still can't believe I'm seeing—sits in the back. He doesn't

try to talk to me, which wouldn't do him any good anyway because I'm focused on the road and getting home as quickly as I can.

I don't want to think about anything other than getting Zane to my mother and getting him healed, but my dad—a man I haven't seen in years and could barely remember—is sitting behind me.

“Zane's going to be fine, sweetheart.” It surprises me for a second that he uses Zane's name, but if he's been around the school, Zane's is a name he would know.

I whip the car onto the road that leads to my house and then glance at my father in the mirror. “Don't call me that.”

He left us. Good reason or not, I'm not a child. I don't need his consolation now. The time for that, along with the truth, was years ago. So I don't talk to him now, just pull up in front of my house.

I jump out of the Jeep and run around to the passenger side. Dad has already climbed out and is helping Zane stand, although he's mostly limp, and I shove my shoulder under his arm and lift him to match what Dad's doing on the other side.

When we get him inside, Mom motions me toward the sofa and I ease Zane down as gently as I can, but he's no lightweight. I finally have proof that muscle weighs more than fat. There isn't an ounce of fat on this guy, but he weighs a lot.

Mom repeats the same process with Zane that she used on Aimee and I watch her as closely while Aimee stands beside me, her arm a comfort at my waist.

To her credit, Aimee doesn't stare too hard at Dad. Doesn't even give him much more than a glance. And I wonder for a second if she knew about him, but she didn't. No way could she keep a secret like that from me. From anyone. She's shit at secrets

and the bigger they are, the harder it is for her. This one is the Mount Everest of its kind.

Mom steps back from Zane and we wait for him to open his eyes. Mom glances at me. I don't know if she can tell he's important to me or not, but she seems to be respecting it because she looks at me, not Aimee. "He's resting, RJ. He's fine. Do we need to call his parents?"

I don't know the answer. "Maybe in a little while."

We leave him on the sofa and move into the dining room and sit at the table. Aimee and I are on one side, a team, and Mom and our dad are on the other.

"Are you all right?" Mom asks and reaches across the table for my hand. I nod and lay my palm across hers and she curls her fingers and gives me a squeeze.

"I guess you have questions." Dad looks at me first, then Aimee. I want to be mad, to not ask him anything out of pure spite because there had to be a better way to protect us than by abandoning us.

Aimee speaks up first anyway. "Why are you here?" She is looking at him, and even for me, it's hard to tell if she's pissed off. Her voice is soft, but her hands are clenched into fists in her lap.

"I've always been here." I want to call bullshit or at least point out that our ideas of here are very different. But I'm still silent. "Being in the house with you all was too dangerous. But I couldn't leave you. I've watched you grow, turn into beautiful young women, then beautiful adult women. "

I don't need my ass kissed. "That isn't the same as being here, helping with homework, mowing the lawn and being friends with our friends' dads." These were

things normal families did. And we'd missed out while they lied to us, over and over and over again.

He nods. "Don't you think I wanted to be here for all of that?"

I shake my head. "No. I don't." The anger is real, makes me more honest than I probably would be if I hadn't spent my entire lifetime being lied to.

"Well, you're wrong, RJ." He shakes his head and looks at Mom for a second before he turns back to me. "I would've loved to be here with you, to be able to teach you how to throw a spell and tap into powers you might not recognize from the jump. But I did what your mother and I thought was best."

I don't bother to hide my eyeroll. "Does it seem now like it's the best?" I'm sarcastic because they made decisions that affected all of us. Not just our family, but the entire town now. There are four people who've lost their magic. There's a fucking syphoner on the loose and I'm the only one I know of except for him who might be able to put the syphoner out of business. Time to train for such an endeavor, since they have always known it could happen, would've been nice.

"We didn't know all the ways that the future would play out." Mom's voice is soft and she tries to hold my gaze, but I'm not in the mood to be placated. My sister, the boy I like, and two innocent girls have been stripped of their magic and if we can't get it back for them, I don't know what that will do to them.

I turn to our father. "Why did you protect the syphoner?"

He looks at my mother and they lock gazes. "I protected you, RJ. You couldn't kill her without the scepter and we didn't have it."

I nod. "The stone was already dug up and opened before I got there. The syphoner

must have it.” Which means not only can I not kill the syphoner, but now she has the power to kill me.

Dad smiles at me and reaches to pat my hand. I pull away before he makes contact and he ends up patting Mom’s palm. I’m not intentionally rude, but I’m hurt and it’s not going to go away just because he let his glamour slide.

“The scepter has never been at the school.” He smiles like he’s made some great statement about hiding a magical staff that may or may not be part of some old legend. I’ve decided that I’m not going to believe in anything until I see it. This is what they’ve done to me. And I’m angry—fists balled, eyes narrowed, blood burning—about it.

Aimee nudges me with her knee under the table. I look at her and she smiles softly, like she’s trying to calm me. “Tell me what happened.”

“Zane and I went to the club where the syphoner has been before.”

“Club Mera.” She fills in a blank for our mother, who’s taking mental notes. Her idea of me and Aimee staying safe is not hunting down a syphoner on the syphoner’s hunting grounds, but for now, she won’t ground me. I’m sure of that much.

I nod at Aimee. “I used magic to find your magic, so I could link myself to it.” I didn’t want to explain too much. “And the spell led me to her, the syphoner. She was at Club Mera. She was going to take my magic”—but of course I have none—“and Zane pushed me out of the way. She took his.” I nod to the sofa. “And then she got away. I followed her to the Institute and we fought, but I didn’t have the scepter and he stopped me from throwing the spell and holding her in it until I could find the scepter.”

We both look at Dad. “Who is the syphoner and why did you protect her?” Aimee

asks him.

He sighs and looks at Mom, who nods. “Her name is Elizabeth, and she’s my sister.”

His sister? That’s the reason he let her go.

“Lizzie was taken away when she was young and put into a sanatorium when she started syphoning from other spellcasters.” He shakes his head. “As soon as I found out she’d been released, I came back to the school and started watching out for you. Protected you.”

He says it as if we should be grateful; he acted like a parent and protected his kids. “Well, she got Aimee’s power, and Zane’s, and two other girls’.” I cock my head. “You’re not really doing so well.”

It’s been said that I am the daughter who tests my mother’s patience. Dad’s feeling the test of his patience right now.

He shakes his head and sighs. “She’s always been angry that even though she was as powerful as any witch at the Institute when she used the magic of others, that she didn’t have a place inside the Hall of Greats.”

“The power isn’t hers.”

“That wasn’t her fault. But when they denied her, she let the darkness and greed taint her heart. Syphoners crave power and if they aren’t taught to control the cravings, it overcomes them.” He says it as if syphoning another witch’s magic isn’t a conscious choice she’s making. As if she’s not responsible for what she did to Aimee and Zane and Ariya and Rowen. “But now, she wants to destroy everyone who denied her.”

I know I’m right before I ever speak the words. “The nine families.” It doesn’t take a

genius.

He nods. “She’s trying to end their magical lines.”

“And what’s stopping her?” I shake my head. How did anyone ever let her get this out of control? “You certainly aren’t going to.” He made me let her go at the Institute. It’s his fault she’s still out there. I could’ve held in the spell. And because he won’t finish her, it means I have to do it. The weight of that responsibility is heavy on my shoulders, but for Aimee, I’ll do whatever it takes to get her magic back.

“I’m here to stop her.” There’s no strength in his statement. That’s his sister. And if he’s anywhere near as close to his as I am to mine, I can’t say that I blame him. Not for not wanting to hurt her, anyway.

“The way you did at the Institute?” He’d let her go. Made me let her go.

“I lost everything once protecting her.” He shoots my mom one of those pleading puppy dog looks, and I hope she isn’t falling for it. “I won’t give you all up a second time.”

I scoff and Mom glances at me. “RJ.” She’s about three seconds away from calling me by my full name.

I don’t care.

“You cannot be falling for this.” Clearly, Mom is. But I look at Aimee. She can’t meet my gaze. “You’ve got to be kidding me. You too?” I throw my hands up and shake my head. “Dads don’t leave. Period.” I stand, calmly push my chair in, and walk up the stairs to my room. They can fall for his shit if they want to. I’m out of here.

Chapter

Twenty-One

I 've watched ten or so years of the Housewives of various cities. So I know what betrayal is, what it means. Although, I never thought I would suffer such a thing from the people who are supposed to love me most in the world. I can't even imagine how Aimee is feeling right now, although she seems to be taking it fine.

I close myself in my room, though I hate leaving Zane downstairs with them, but I couldn't stay and watch Mom making googly eyes at Dad. It also wasn't like I could carry Zane up the stairs.

My room is clean and all the clothes that are usually slung across the back of my desk chair and on the armchair by the window have been picked up, which means Mom's been snooping. She's called it "cleaning" since we were kids, but we all know she's a snoop and a diary reader. She's the reason I stopped writing in mine.

It would annoy me, but I'm long past annoyed. I'm too angry to be annoyed. And I don't see a resolution.

A syphoner craves power. The greed overcomes them. It's the gist of what he said about Auntie Elizabeth. I'm a syphoner who was also never taught to control her cravings, although, technically, I've never suffered any—that I know of.

"RJ?" Mom knocks, then opens the door and pokes her head in. "Can we talk?"

She's already in the room so saying I would rather not won't do any good. Her house. Her rules.

I shrug and wait for her to sit across from me on my bed. "How are you not angry? He left you, too?"

Her lips twist to one side. "I don't really know how to explain it. Your dad did what he thought he should do to protect you both."

"She got to us anyway." Aimee is magically bereft.

Mom nods. "Yes. But he had to leave because of what he is as much as what she is. It's very dangerous for him to be here. A syphoner is always in danger."

"He has magic."

"Yes, but it's complicated. To protect Elizabeth, he had to expose himself as the syphoner and he was cast out. They turned him away though they continued to use his teachings and his spells and his grimoires to teach." She shakes her head. "Like everything else, there are political issues involved. Or there were then. Powerplays. Shifts in leadership. Jealousy."

I don't care about any of that. I care about the lies. The things they never told me. "I'm a syphoner, Mom." I don't care about the politics at the Institute. I care that I've been lied to all my life, that they've let me feel as though I was less.

She nods. "Yes."

"Who's to say the darkness that is eating his sister alive won't come for me?" I'm afraid. As afraid as I've ever been of anything. Including clowns .

“You’re not like her, RJ. You control your power cravings every day. I’ve seen it.” She sounds so certain.

But I too have seen things. I saw Elizabeth’s eyes. They were black and cloudy. Devoid of life. I feel a sliver of that every time I leech off Aimee, although until now I didn’t know what I was feeling. I also didn’t know I was taking magic from Aimee, and the things I’ve learned since this whole mess started make me wonder what’s going to become of me.

I’ve also seen how devastating it is to be without magic. I know first-hand how shitty it is to never have it in the first place. I’m knee-deep in my own pity party and it isn’t helping anything at all.

“Maybe you should’ve told me.” I know they did it to protect me, but if they’d told me, raised me as what I am, I could’ve learned to protect myself.

Mom said something about me having to know how to take the magic before I can do it. I wish they’d been honest before now so I at least have an idea what I’m dealing with.

She looks at me and nods. “Yes, I can see that now.”

I want to be pissed off at her. But I can see why she did what she did. I even understand it. The lying wasn’t just to keep what I am from me. It was to protect me from it, too, and protect me from how others will treat me when they find out.

Zane is going to know. I sigh. It’s going to change everything. I’m not as worried about everyone else, but I don’t want him to think of me with all the dark evil inside of me.

“You have a lot on your shoulders.” Mom’s voice is gentle as she takes my hand and

holds it between both of hers. “And we made mistakes, but I’m here and your dad is here and we’re going to help you get through this. You don’t have to do any of it alone, RJ. ”

I nod. Although, I don’t believe her. No one but me or my dad can finish this with the syphoner, and obviously he won’t do it. It’s his sister. I couldn’t kill Aimee no matter what she did. And I hope she feels the same about me. I don’t expect Dad to feel any differently about his sister.

“Where’s the scepter?”

She flips her gaze to mine as if she doesn’t think I should know about it. Then she sighs. “I don’t know.”

“I’m going to need it to...handle the syphoner.” I don’t want to use the word kill just yet. I know what doing this to her will make me, and I have to get my head wrapped around it.

“I know. I’ll speak to him.”

“In the grimoire, in any grimoire anywhere , is there information on how to defeat a syphoner without killing them?” For my dad’s sake, I want to do a little bit of research and make sure I don’t have any other choice before I do it.

I didn’t hear my door open, but now Dad is standing in the frame. “Yes. You can syphon her power without killing her. It would make her a mortal which would be as bad for her as if you killed her.”

“But she would still be alive.”

He sighs. “She would always be looking, always trying for a way to come and get her

magic back, hurt the person who took it from her.” He shakes his head. “She isn’t the person she was. The darkness inside of her is too big now.”

“Is it going to get that big inside of me?” Maybe there’s a way I can prepare, or block it out.

He shakes his head. “No. I’ve watched you, RJ. Your mother raised you with light and love. You’ve grown into a kind young woman. Lizzie had the darkness in her from the start.” His voice is thick. This must be hard for him to talk about. “You can take away the magic that’s inside of her, but the darkness will still be there.”

For centuries, humans have been way more dangerous than witches, although every movie about witches since *The Blair Witch Project* has made it seem the other way.

“It’s a lot to think about.” Dad nods and Mom stands. “But you can handle it, RJ. You’ve always been able to handle it.”

Mom slides her arm around his waist and looks up at him, then back at me. “You’re not alone here, RJ. We’re on your side and we’re going to do whatever it takes to help you.”

They turn and walk out of my room, and for a while I’m alone with my thoughts. I check the magic database that we all use for school, but there’s nothing written about syphoners except that we should all be vigilant right now, walk in groups, be prepared with shield spells and counter spells—which allow a witch to take their magic back as it’s being stolen.

If the Institute had prepared us from the beginning, instead of only doing it now, Rowen and Ariya, Zane and Aimee might’ve been able to save themselves before Auntie Elizabeth was able to drain them dry.

It's late when I walk downstairs for a glass of water. As I come into the living room, Zane sits up. "Hey." He might be without the power to cast a spell, but his smile is magical.

"Hey. How are you feeling?" I walk into the room and look at him. He certainly looks the same for not having magic. His smile is as dreamy as ever, anyway.

"I feel...empty." He shrugs one shoulder. "Could be worse." When he smiles, I smile back. Suddenly, my worries don't seem so worrisome. "You saved me?"

I shrug. Obviously not. He doesn't have magic. Or if so, only in the most limited sense of the word.

For a moment as I sit beside him, I wish this was all a dream and I was just a normal girl falling—and I really am—for a regular guy. A small, immature part of me thinks that if we don't get their magic back, we can pretend this part is all a dream, something that we made up in our minds. But I'll always be what I am, and they will always know what they had and lost.

Damn.

"I guess I owe you one." There are worse things than to be owed a favor by Zane Bradbury.

"No, you don't." On the other hand, I don't want it to even be thought that he's only with me when this is all over—and I really hope he is—because he owes me.

He turns so he's facing me and leans in, or maybe we both do, I can't tell. But we meet in the middle, his mouth on mine. And there are sparks zinging between us. Relief and longing surge through me in equal portions. It wasn't just the magic. Not that made the sparks between us anyway.

When he pulls back, he smiles, ducks his head, and pulls his lips between his teeth. I've never seen anything more adorable; nothing has made me want him more.

"Was that okay?"

God yes is too strong an answer and a simple yes probably isn't strong enough. I settle on a nod because even if I wanted to say God yes right now, I don't know that I could.

My skin is burning and my lips are still tingling. I want to act normal, but I'm not sure what's normal for this situation.

"I went to the Institute tonight." My voice still sounds shaky and breathy .

He looks up. "What happened?"

"When I got there, the scepter wasn't there, but the syphoner was. And the janitor." I look down because he's picked up my hand and is holding it in his. I like seeing us connected like this. "The janitor was wearing a glamour. He's actually my dad."

"Wow." His eyes widen. "No shit."

I nod. "My dad is Viktor Hadley." There. I said it.

To his credit he doesn't jerk his hand away because my father is a reputed syphoner. He doesn't even pull away. His thumb strokes the soft space between my thumb and forefinger. The touch is intoxicating and I breathe in slow and deep.

"Are you sure that guy is your dad?" His voice is soft, and I understand the question. If I'm not sure, maybe it isn't true. Maybe I'm not the syphoner's daughter. This is the moment I should tell him the truth, but as soon as I do, everything will change.

He's going to turn away from me. I'm not really ready for this all to end. Even if my being a liar is going to make it worse for both of us when he finally calls it quits.

And then like it's been sitting at the edge of my subconscious waiting to make its way to the front of my mind, I wonder if the glamour was my dad being the janitor or the janitor as my dad. I don't know that I can trust anything from these people. What if the janitor knows things from being around a magical school for so long? There are witches who learn magic. Maybe he's one. Maybe the man in our house isn't Viktor Hadley but is just a janitor who wants to be a part of this.

How would I know?

I'm probably just making myself crazy. But until I know for certain, I'm not trusting anything anymore.

Chapter

Twenty-Two

After the damage done last night at the Institute, they've called off classes again today and I wish this was one of those lazy days I could spend with Aimee practicing magic or with Zane, but instead, I'm home, in my room alone, already dressed in a pair of tight jeans that I borrowed from Aimee's clean laundry basket and a white crop top with cap sleeves. I put on eyeliner in case I run into Zane downstairs. Is it still shallow if I admit it?

Of course it is. Especially at the moment, considering my sister has spent the night in her room crying over her lost magic. On a normal night, I would have gone in and consoled her, but I'm the thing that took from her. Not me exactly, but someone like me, and I was and still am afraid that seeing me would only remind her of what she's lost.

She hasn't said it, but she's never going to be able to look at me the same again. And I can't blame her. She's the one without the magic she was born with, and seeing me will remind her of what she lost in more ways than one.

On the other hand, I might also be the only one who can give her back what was taken from her. I hope that I can get it back for her. The alternative is that I fail, which also means I'm probably dead.

When I walk downstairs, my mother is in the kitchen, humming while she's cutting fresh fruit, and my father is arranging pastries on a platter. I watch them for a second

and it looks like they've been doing this for years, maneuvering around one another without disrupting the flow of activity, sharing space.

I don't know how to feel about it, so I turn and walk into the dining room. They have a whole drink station set up on a tray in the corner. One of their daughters is missing her magic, the second is a syphoner and is probably about to be voted out of the Institute for the crimes of others, and they're here planning some sort of breakfast to-do, and judging by the amount of food and the number of pitchers of OJ and coffee, they've invited a lot of people.

I glance into the living room and try to see over the back of the couch, I can't see if Zane is still lying there. I thought that once I went to bed last night, I wouldn't be able to sleep knowing he was on my sofa, in my house. But as soon as I laid my head on my pillow, as cliché as it sounds, I fell asleep. I don't even remember dreaming, which I suppose is better than sleepwalking myself down the stairs and crawling onto the couch next to him.

Thank heavens that didn't happen. I don't know if I would be able to survive that kind of humiliation. Although considering what I'm likely facing, I probably should've taken the chance.

"He's in the shower," Mom says from behind me. "He had a bag of clothes in his Jeep."

I nod because somewhere in my house, in one of the three bathrooms, Zane Bradbury is showering. Naked. I don't have any words and I doubt my mother will be impressed if I blurt out that particular thought, so I shut my pie hole. The nod is my only safe move.

"Go wake up your sister. We've called a meeting of the nine families." She gives me a push toward the stairs. "Tell her to get dressed."

I turn to look at Mom. She's wearing her June Cleaver pearls with a pair of jeans and a high collared summer sweater that doesn't have sleeves. Her hair is falling loosely over her shoulders and she's smiling. It's been a while since I've seen her look so carefree. As happy as she is, though, I'm still not quite ready to welcome Dad back with open arms.

As I run up the stairs, the bathroom door opens and Zane steps into the hallway, and I watch a droplet of water fall from a curl onto his white shirt and spread into a small circle. I never knew water could be so damned sexy. And maybe it isn't the water, but the man on whom the water falls. I don't know. But I'm speechless, mouth dry, heart pounding, palms sweaty.

"Good morning." His voice is enough to make my stomach flutter. He tilts his head. "You look pretty."

There's a very real chance I'm going to swoon, so I lean my shoulder against the wall. "Thanks." I try to keep my voice normal, but I sound like one of those girls who knows how to seduce. You can bet I'll be practicing that tone, though.

"RJ, did you wake up Aimee?" Mom's calling up the stairs like she knows I'm about to say Aimee who and invite Zane into my room.

"On my way," I call back to her. Softer, I say, "I got sidetracked."

He grins. It's a brushed his teeth already grin, and I am close enough to smell the toothpaste. I never thought of minty fresh Crest as a particularly erotic smell, but damn. Zane, dripping and minty is a lot for a girl to resist.

"I'll see you downstairs." He smiles again and walks past me. I wish he would come back for one of those quick kisses couples give one another, but he's down the stairs before I can blink away the fog. If things weren't so fucked up, I would talk to Aimee

about it, but my love life insecurity is nothing compared to what she's going through.

Before I can knock on her door, she opens it and yanks me in then slams it shut behind me. "Did he kiss you?"

I shake my head. "Not this morning."

Her eyes are wide. "He kissed you last night and you didn't tell me?" She's way too giddy, far too involved in my life at the moment for this to be normal.

"I didn't know if you would want to see me." I don't know how to explain so she doesn't end up blaming me.

She squinches her brow as if I'm not speaking English. "Why would I not want to see you?" For a second, I think I've hurt her feelings. "You're the one who's going to get my power back. And even if you don't, you're my best friend. Of course, I care that the boy you like kisses you." She hugs me. "Was it amazing?"

I nod because words don't do it justice. They're going to have to create a new word to describe how much I enjoyed that kiss.

I wonder if it's always going to be this way for us. If we're always going to be this close or if we'll end up like Dad and Elizabeth.

The doorbell starts ringing downstairs and I tell Aimee, "They invited over the other families."

"What for?"

"I don't know." I shrug. "Maybe to talk about the scepter?" I only know that each of the nine families has a wand that fits into the staff and makes the scepter. "Mom has

donuts and pastries downstairs, and fresh fruit.”

If there’s anything that will get Aimee up and moving, it’s the promise of glazed donuts and fresh berries. “I’ll be down in ten minutes.”

The doorbell rings again. “Better make it five.”

“Go guard the donuts. I have no magic, I’d better at least get something dipped in sugar.” She runs for her bathroom and I head downstairs. I suppose she’s getting used to the idea of not having magic for now, enough she can make jokes about it anyway. I only hope she doesn’t have to be without it much longer.

When I get to the dining room, I see the Bradbury’s have arrived and Zane is standing beside his mom holding a goblet—I didn’t know we owned goblets—of orange juice. The Faulkners are standing near the pastry platter and the Glover and Foster mothers are huddled together in the corner with my mom. The Steros and Dupree families arrive together soon after, and Finnick shows up with his parents, the Strains. We’re still waiting for the Muricks when the Devilles and Tempests arrive.

I haven’t seen Dad since the kitchen and I wonder if the great Viktor Hadley is waiting to make an entrance. My mother moves to stand at the head of the table and apparently, we aren’t waiting for the Murick family to arrive.

She lifts her glass and we, the children, gravitate toward the other end of the dining room as the mothers take seats at the table. Three of our kitchen chairs have been added to the dining room table to accommodate nine families. The fathers stand behind the mothers and, like they’ve rehearsed it, the wives all sit at the same time .

I look at Zane, then Aimee, who just joined us. “What about Isador?” she asks Zane.

“The Muricks aren’t a first family, but they hold a seat of power at the Institute since

Viktor left.” He keeps his voice low, but my mother nods as though she’s confirming his story, although how she heard it is beyond me.

After about twenty or twenty-five seconds of the women sitting straight and the men moving to stand behind them, my father walks out of the kitchen. They all gasp. Well, all except my mom. She doesn’t share the shock and awe that comes with seeing a banished man walking in like he owns the place. And technically, he does. Our house anyway.

He moves to stand behind my mother. I glance at the others at the table. Mrs. Bradbury is watching Dad with a quiet kind of curiosity, one raised eyebrow but no scowl. Dylan’s mom, MaryAnn Tempest, reaches for my mom’s hand and clasps it. I didn’t know they were close, but I’m not really surprised by how little I actually know.

Three of the moms are staring between my dad and my mom, probably gauging her reaction. Maybe they’re trying to guess how long she’s been keeping this monster-sized secret from them. Or maybe they want to know by what right my dad is back in town. Or maybe they’re sorry they ran him away for being a syphoner when according to everything they know, the syphoner stealing the power of their children is a woman.

“I want to thank you all for coming.” His voice is steady and sure, and it strikes a chord inside me. Like from a distant memory. Like a dad who used to read me bedtime stories. “I have news you all need to hear about the syphoner.”

Now they’re all listening, and Zane reaches for my hand and laces his fingers through mine. I know he means to comfort me, but it’s having a wholly different effect on me. I’m not complaining, but listening is going to be a lot harder with the sound of my heart pounding in my ears. I focus on my dad, listen harder than I ever have before.

“The syphoner is my sister, Elizabeth Hadley.” He just throws it out there without much preamble at all and he stands even as Rowen’s mother shoves her chair back and Ariya’s father advances until Mr. Bradbury steps in his way.

“Calm down, Paul. Vik can’t control Liz.” He speaks with the familiarity of a man who knows everyone in the room. Comfortably. “I think we owe him that, don’t you?”

Paul Glover shakes his head. “No, I don’t think so. If he’d finished Elizabeth when she started up back when the kids were young, Rowen wouldn’t be in the hospital fighting for her life right now.”

“You expected him to kill his sister. Then punished him when he couldn’t.” Mom shakes her head. “My husband and my daughters were punished for something that wasn’t his fault.”

“I could kill my sister.” Piper’s mom, Maura Steros, looks around. “If it came down to it.”

“Mom!” Piper shakes her head.

Maura shrugs. “She’s a bitch. Has been since we were kids.”

Piper hides her face. “She’s so embarrassing.” Aimee hugs her.

Dad waits for silence before he speaks again. “There had to be a next generation syphoner before anyone could end Elizabeth.” He doesn’t say it, doesn’t say that the next generation syphoner is in this room, but they all start looking at one another, then at their kids.

“Who is it, Hadley?” Felix Tempest demands of my dad. “ We know it isn’t your

girls since a syphoner isn't born into the same family in consecutive generations. So, who is it?"

Dad is unbothered. He lets them all bicker among themselves. They're arguing and it's affecting my mom. She hates conflict. Except with me, that is. Until yesterday, I thought she lived to fight with me, but I'm cutting her some slack right now. She's had a lot to live with, gave up a lot more for us. Right now, though, she's probably trying to guess which one is going to stop being her friend because of what's about to happen. To her credit, she lifts her chin. She has her pride.

Finally, Dad holds up his hand, and they all fall silent. It's not hard to see who's the leader of this pack. I hide a laugh behind a cough behind my hand. "It doesn't matter who the syphoner is. What matters right now is that we need to produce the scepter."

They look from one to another and back again. I can't believe these are the people that the gods put in charge of a place as accomplished as the Institute, in charge of an entire generation of magic.

"I'm not giving you my wand." Paul Glover crosses his arms and shakes his head. "Not without some guarantees."

A couple of the others agree.

"Guarantees?" I don't like the ominous sound of that word.

"What happens to the next generation syphoner once they end Elizabeth?" Ah. Now I understand the guarantees they want. Ending Elizabeth doesn't end the problem. They want to end the syphoner who ends her.

"You know the prophecy as well as I do. If the next generation syphoner is killed"—Mom's gaze flickers but everyone is watching Dad so it passes

unnoticed—“Then a new syphoner will be created. ”

“Then I want the next gen syphoner locked up. Chained in selenite.” I swallow hard, but I can’t blame them. I’m sure when my grandparents gave birth to Viktor and Elizabeth that they didn’t look at her and think she was going to grow to be a greedy magic thief who didn’t care who she hurts.

“And you know as well as we do that a syphoner can end another syphoner with the scepter, but that scepter can also be used by the syphoner to drain the entire population of magic.”

Well, I didn’t see that one printed anywhere, so I, in fact, did not know it.

Ariya’s mother, Analise, looks at my father. “What if this syphoner, the next gen one, loses the scepter to Elizabeth?”

Dad nods and glances my way. “This syphoner will need to be trained.”

“I’m not handing my wand over to some unnamed syphoner. Not happening.” Chad Foster has been through a lot with Rowen. They’d lost a son already, and Rowen had been stripped of her magic. He had every right to be nervous.

“I’m the syphoner.” I step forward, braver than I feel.

Aimee moves to stand beside me. “I’m the syphoner.”

Zane. Piper. Finn. Circe. Aurora. Dylan. We form a line across the dining room, all claiming to be what I am.

And we’re going to do what our parents can’t. We’re going to fix this, once and for all.

Chapter

Twenty-Three

Zane's father smiles and nods. "Look at them. If anyone has a chance of fixing this, of putting an end to the issue, it's them."

Dad nods.

There's always a voice of dissent. Today, it's Maura Steros. "One of these children is going to..." She pauses, not wanting to speak of what I have to do. "Handle Elizabeth?"

Zane moves forward. "Not one of us. All of us."

"What does it look like in action?" My dad looks at Zane, questioning with curiosity, not doubt.

"It's a team working together. All of us with the same goal, the same purpose. Not our own gains in mind." He shakes his head. "It looks like us coming together to handle a threat to all of us."

My dad nods, looks at the others. "I guess we'd better get to work, then."

I glance at him. "What does that look like in action?"

He chuckles but doesn't answer. The men in the room are very busy moving my

mother's dining room table to the corner of the room and stacking the chairs on top. And then they stand in a circle, their hands clasped.

For a few seconds nothing happens. Part of me wonders if anything is going to. But the air swirls the fan blades overhead and it starts spinning and everyone's hair is blowing back—mine, Aimee's, Mom's, everyone's.

It is like a tornado inside the house and I can't keep my eyes open, so I don't see the exact minute the wands appeared. When I open my eyes, I see the jewels inside them glitter in the light. There are seven blue sapphires and two rubies. My father and Zane's father hold the rubies.

I glance at Zane and Aimee. This is like nothing I'd ever seen. My mother is holding a staff. It is gold and about as long as my mother's arm, made of thin, twisted metal. I don't think it is real gold, not solid anyway, but what do I know. I'd never seen anything so shiny and beautiful.

Mom moves to the center of the circle and holds out the staff. The wands, which are semi-long, with the stones bent at an angle on a skinny, gold, thinner piece of metal, don't look as if they will fit the twisted staff, but where there's magic, there's a way.

One by one, the wands are added to the staff and twist onto the top so the jewels make a pointed tip. For it being a weapon, it looks delicate, as though a strong wind could splinter it back to its separate composite of parts.

I don't see how this thing is a weapon against the syphoner. She had magical cords that extended from her body and attached to Aimee and Rowen and Zane and Ariya. They Glowed. Sparked. This thing looks like a children's toys. I'm skeptical, but my mother turns to me, eyes red, mouth tight. Her magic is fused to the staff. All of them have magic fused to it.

She turns back to the center of their circle as they chant. I should've paid attention in Latin class. "What are they saying?" I whisper to Zane because he's the kind of guy who pays attention in every class even though he doesn't have to.

"Sapphire beam, ruby blood." He says it again, then a couple more times. And then he whispers, "Trabem sapphiri, ruby sanguinis."

I watch them all, waiting for their sapphire beam to come for my ruby blood, for one of them to know it's me and turn their magic scepter on me. The fear is so powerful I tremble.

Aimee clings to me on one side and Zane holds my hand on the other. I don't know if they were before or if they only started now, but I'm comforted when I realize they are there.

The staff is a scepter now, and the wind has died, the fan is still. Aside from the table being in the corner of the room, everything has returned to normal. I can't stop looking at the scepter though.

Even when everyone is talking among themselves and the scepter is ignored on the table, I'm drawn to it, walk toward it like it's calling me.

The sensation is odd. Before I can reach for it, Dad intercepts me and steers me into the kitchen. I look over my shoulder at it as he pulls me toward the sink. "RJ!" His voice is sharp. I glance at him, then back at the scepter. The magic inside of it is meant for me, and I want to hold it in my hands, feel it coursing inside of me. The hunger is real. The need is strong.

"RJ!" This time it's my mother calling me, and I look at her. She's regal and tall, and I can almost see her power. "RJ!" I've disappointed her. I don't know how, neither do I care .

I can't stop looking at the scepter, can't stop wanting it, needing it with such intensity my body trembles. I need it and I've never experienced longing so powerful. Not even Zane brings this kind of hunger.

"Fight, RJ. It's calling to you because it knows what you are." My mother takes me by the shoulders and forces me to look at her, then gives me a shake when I try to turn away. "Fight. You have to be stronger than the scepter or you will lose yourself, do you understand?"

I do. I very much understand that the scepter is powerful. The power is a siren calling to me. And I want it. I want it now.

"You command the scepter RJ, not the other way around." Her voice is strong and I can feel it in my stomach. More than a flutter, less than an ache. "Can you do this, RJ? Can you be strong enough to save your sister, command the scepter?" She keeps saying my name and it's purposeful, reminds me who I am. It grounds me.

"Command?" I can't imagine being in charge of the power instead of taking it for myself.

Mom nods, looks at me, and gives me another shake. "Command."

"How?" I can't figure how to make it work because the call of the power in the scepter and the temptation to grasp it is too loud.

My mother stares at me, her gaze piecing, her eyes dark with magic. "Fight for control of the power, RJ. It's the only way to command the scepter."

I look at the scepter then close my eyes, but the power continues to call to me. I open my eyes and shake my head. "I can't."

“Yes, you can. Try harder.” She jerks my shoulders again. “You are the only one who can save your sister’s power, who can save your friend Zane, Rowen, and Ariya.”

She’s right and I know it, but I’m being provoked by the strength of the magic. It surges when I look away, drawing me back in, making me want.

“Take it away, Mom, please.” If she doesn’t, I won’t be able to think or breathe. “Take it away,” I tell her again because the urge to push past her and take it is strong, too strong. I need to get a handle on myself, but I won’t ask her again.

She looks at me. “No.” When she shakes her head, it is with confidence and determination. “You’re going to do this, RJ. You’re going to do it for Aimee and for the rest of your friends.”

Aimee and Zane are nearby, the others watching me fall to the pull of the scepter. “You have to want to save them.”

“I do want to.” And I don’t like the suggestion that she thinks I don’t. But as angry as I am at her, I want the scepter’s power more. I don’t want to want the magic, but the surges are intoxicating.

“All right, then you have to pay attention.” I nod but the scepter is close and now she’s holding it. “Do you see it, RJ? It’s nothing without the person who wields it. It’s just metal and stones.” She twists it this way and that and the light sparkles off the stones and the metal.

She’s wrong, underplaying it, and we both know it, but I’m waiting for her to hand it to me. I don’t want to do anything, not move too quickly and take it from her, to act too anxious, to beg to hold it.

She waves it closer to me. “Mom.” I can’t help it. I need to hold it.

I curl my fingers around it. The power is an electric bolt. My eyes close and my head falls back, a soft sigh escaping my lips.

“Mom?” I look at her. I can’t do this, the power is too much. It’s too strong to resist. I glance at Aimee. She looks hopeful, has faith in me that I am going to be able to return her power to her. “Show me how to use this thing.”

Chapter

Twenty-Four

“W ow. You look like...” Zane smiles and shakes his head. I’ve been fitted with a cloak. It’s the kind that has a hood and sweeps the floor and ties at my chest.

I shrug because the compliment is everything a girl wants to hear from the guy she likes and, witch or not, I’m still that girl and he’s the guy. “If I move wrong it chokes me.”

“I would say don’t move that way,” and his smile is everything, “but I’m busy trying not to drool.”

I laugh and shiver at the same time. I never would have been able to imagine Zane Bradbury looking at me like this, saying sweet or flirty things to me.

Although, since it started, I’ve wondered what would happen when this is all over. I want to ask, but I’m afraid of the answer. I’m afraid it will all be over and I’ll go back to the Institute, finish school, and never be thought of again. I don’t want to hear that answer, although I doubt he would say it so harshly.

When I don’t speak for a few long seconds, he asks, “What are you thinking about?”

“About what happens when this is all over.” Honesty.

“You’ll be a hero.” He looks down and takes my hand. “I’ve been thinking about it,

too.”

“And what do you think?” My breath catches and I hold it.

“When everyone is after you, likes you, I mean...” Red creeps up into his cheeks. “I wonder if you’ll still like me enough to let me hold your hand.”

I don’t know if it’s the cloak or the magic or what has given me the confidence to smile, move closer, and slip my arms around his neck. What I do know is that the move shifts the cloak and the cord holding it around me slides up my arm and to my throat. The cloak itself weighs a lot and it pulls me backward.

He smiles and unfastens the tie but holds the swirled fabric—it reminds me of a curtain but in gold and a deep blue—at my shoulders so it doesn’t fall to the ground. And then he lowers his head and kisses me. His mouth brushes mine, then comes back for a second go-round. And this time, it isn’t a brush. It’s more a caress, hot and wet, and he’s holding me with his fists in the robe still pressed against my shoulders.

I tilt my head and the kiss deepens. It’s a once in a lifetime kind of rush and I savor it, soak it in. When he finally pulls back, I take an extra second before I open my eyes.

“I won’t care who else wants me.” I smile, proud I’m able to come up with words, glad I don’t have to lie.

He leans his forehead against mine and smiles. “Good.”

Being at the Institute—my parents have decided it’s the only place I’m safe—and not being in classes is odd. I spend all of my time in the training room. It isn’t really a training room. It’s actually the physical education part of building four. With hoops on each end of the hardwood, it’s big enough to play basketball, too small for quidditch. Plus, we don’t have flying brooms. I didn’t spend a lot of time in this

building prior to this week because I'm not what one might call athletic. I trip. I fall. I cause others to do the same. Since I was a child, I was the final pick for teams.

Today, though, I'm here, kissing Zane at the tipoff circle—just because I don't spend much time here doesn't mean I don't know the lingo. I watch TV.

There is an entire obstacle course set up for me to use the scepter to practice. I've asked a hundred times if it's dangerous, if the magic will become less because I'm wasting it to train, if putting so much said magic in the air isn't a calling card for the syphoner to come find me, but my parents and several of the other parents who are working with me have assured me that the Institute is a safe space, the only place where the use of magic doesn't send up a storm of mystical energy.

I don't know if I believe them but I'm here working, unbothered by my syphoner auntie, so perhaps it's true.

Zane holds my hands in his. "How many more nights do you have left of training?"

It's a good question, but I have no idea. I've been doing this all week, learning, harnessing the power of the scepter. Doing everything I possibly can to ignore the call of the power.

"I don't know." I shrug. No one has really told me the plan. "Can I ask you a question?" I look up at him, hopeful. I've been scared to ask him or his friends or even Aimee, but I have to know. "Does knowing what I am change things?"

He stares. "Things?"

I nod .

"You mean you-and-me things?" He smiles at me and my skin heats because it's

exactly what I mean. “No.”

My breath whooshes out. “You’re not afraid I’ll drain your power?”

“No. You’re risking your own life to get mine back for me.” His voice is low, deep, intimate, the voice in my dreams when I dream of him. “And if you wanted my power, I would give it to you anyway.”

I sigh. If I had any Scarlett O’Hara in me, I would swoon.

He grins and lowers his head again. I like that he’s taller. I like looking up at him.

When Zane Bradbury kisses, he uses his entire body, wraps it around me—or that’s what it feels like. Sensual. Seductive. At least, I think so.

This kiss is every bit as enchanting as the last, but is cut short when my father clears his throat from the doorway. Zane smiles at me, gives Dad a wave, then backs away and exits out a door on the other side that leads to the walkway to building three.

Dad has what looks like hula hoops in his hand and he walks toward one of the archery targets that is set up near the door Zane just exited. He sets it in a stand about ten feet in front of the target then smiles at me as he sets another off to the left of the first and a few feet closer to the target. The third he puts on a pedestal stand that is closer to the target but three feet taller.

When he turns to look at me, he smiles and pulls the scepter out of a pocket that doesn’t look nearly big enough for a three-foot scepter to be in, so I assume he’s using something dimensional—a way to transport something that uses other dimensions to absorb weight and size. It’s a trick he only just taught me. My cloak is equipped with such a “pocket,” one that my mother calls a “portal.”

I stare at my father as he holds it out to me. They take it away from me after training, probably because they can sense how much I want it. Trust is one of their big themes. Some of them trust me, some don't. They need me, but this isn't their first go around with a syphoner, so I can't really blame anyone for how they feel.

"RJ, I want you to loop your magic through the hoops then strike the target on the third blue ring." He walks to each hoop and then touches the target where he wants me to strike. "Right here, okay?"

When I nod, he comes back to me and hands me the scepter. I have a moment—it's a short one—where the magic surges through me, and I exhale slowly because the feeling is so...incredible. Almost erotic.

"Focus, RJ." Nothing like my dad's voice to snap me out of the moment.

I shake off the lust for power and envision myself guiding the magic in the scepter through the hoops to the target.

"Go," I whisper and send the bolts of magic from the scepter out. I can see them in the air—three separate pieces—and I will them together into one and then weave them through the hoops to the target and it explodes in a poof of green foam and red, white, and blue melted plastic.

Dad claps, jumps, and does a fist pump. "Do you feel it, RJ? You're ready." He comes to where I'm standing, takes me by the shoulders, and pulls me into a hug. It's the first time he's touched me at all since he's been back, and for a second, I'm a child. I want this hug.

But that fades and he's just a stranger who needs something from me, hugging me as if he has the right. I push him off. "What are you doing?" My voice is pure venom, infused with the thousand questions I've been saving for him since he disappeared.

He steps back and holds up his hands in surrender. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

I nod then drop my head so my chin is very near my chest, and sigh like I’m being forced to endure more than I should. “No, I’m sorry.” I hold up my hands and wave them back and forth. “I shouldn’t have snapped at you.”

“I’ve been gone. And now that I’m back, you deserve all the explanations, all the moments you need to collect them and analyze the words.” He sighs, but his is faster, an almost chuckle with a smile. “I owe all of you, but most especially you. You shouldn’t have grown up thinking you were less. You should know that you’re more than every witch here. You should’ve been told that from the beginning and I’m sorry you weren’t.” He moves toward me again as if to hug me and I feel every bit the spoiled ass that I’m acting.

His story is that he went away to protect us, but a part of me wonders if having a daughter like me is the real reason. If it’s the guilt of knowing that he made me this way or the fact he made me this way then let me suffer for it without a single word of explanation about why I couldn’t cast a spell without Aimee or the Institute, why my magic always went so wrong, why my life has been what it is. I don’t know anything at this point, except the weight on my shoulders lessens with every skill I learn and every touch of the scepter.

“It doesn’t matter now.” I shake my head as if I can shake the subject out of it. I cannot. Thoughts I’ve been plagued with since the day I was old enough to realize I was different aren’t going to go away through the sheer force of my will and their explanations. Time is all that will ease me.

“It matters to me.”

“What matters to me right now is that I have to find Auntie Elizabeth”—a woman I had no idea existed until a week ago—“and I have to kill her.”

My father nods. “Yes.” The silence is charged with all the questions he wants to ask but doesn’t.

I wait for more from him, but he only stands silent. “Is there a plan? A way to draw Elizabeth to me, or am I to go hunting her?” Either way, we’re almost at the end of this whole thing.

His chest rises and falls on a deep breath before he meets my gaze. His is stormy, dark. Mine is loaded with patience I wish not to be false, but most certainly is. I want this finished so I can move forward, have a life, take my exam, become what I have trained for years to be.

“We’re going to draw her here, to you, where you will be waiting. The scepter will be infused with magic from your friends and the first families.” He speaks softly and I picture it in my head, me in my cloak and Elizabeth in...something more modern likely, since she’s being drawn here.

A thousand times since I’ve seen the scepter’s magic, I’ve pictured her falling, pictured myself dying, pictured neither of us being stronger than the other and all of this for nothing. But in all those times, I’ve never imagined her wearing anything memorable or specific.

“Are we to be dressed like Merlin and Gandalf, or can I wear something comfortable that doesn’t weigh thirty pounds and might strangle me before I fulfill my destiny of murdering my aunt?” I think, with everything that could go wrong, I should stack the deck in my favor and clearly that cloak with its beading and its hood and the length and awkward weight is not a garment that will work in my favor. “Isn’t someone in the first family able to use a needle and thread and give me one of the dimensional pockets as well?”

My father considers, or pretends to, at least, my question. “Your mother sews. And

the pocket is a spell only.” He stares at me for a moment. “You can ask her.”

“Are you not talking to one another?” It probably isn’t my business, but he isn’t going to get by saying that to me with no explanation. Not now, when I’m expected to risk my life for all of them.

“Things are difficult.” He shrugs. “I’ve been away and she’s more used to being alone than having me under her feet.”

He’s been sleeping on the sofa, though they try to act as if everything is as it should be between them, although only the heavens know what they think we believe it should be.

I nod. “Well, you’re going to need to clean that up because...if I fail, Aimee and Mom are going to need you.” And it’s a very real possibility.

“We should get back to work so that doesn’t happen.” He smiles and moves to replace the target I blew up. He adds more hoops. “Make the magic tighter this time, RJ. And relax. You need to feel the magic inside of you.”

Oh, I do. So much.

But I get back to work because this is my destiny and I’m going to give it everything I have. Starting right now.

Chapter

Twenty-Five

I can do this. I can win and restore all the power to the children of the first families.

My life depends on it. Insecurity won't do right now.

This is my mantra. I've been repeating it over and over in my mind, and saying it aloud on occasion.

There is about to be a battle that ends someone's life, and the air is thick with the knowledge of it. Or maybe it's my imagination which has been running wild since this morning when I awoke and my father told me today would be the day. Elizabeth would crave more magic soon, so it is time. Word has been spread that the Institute will have a congregational meeting of witches. It means nothing. Every day that we have classes we have congregational meetings of witches. The ridiculousness of it isn't lost on me.

But my father swears it will work. There has been a power shroud placed over the gymnasium and nothing attracts a rogue syphoner like a power shroud. That is the tale he told the other first families when he convinced them to pour magic into it .

I can say that the idea is brilliant because, for the first time in my life—without having the scepter in front of me—I am tempted to drain the magic from the shroud. It wouldn't hurt the families as the shroud only has bits of their magic, just enough to keep it in place. But it's enough to tempt me. To make me crave.

“Be strong,” my dad says, his hand on my shoulder.

I nod because I’m so overcome by my need for power that I can’t speak. I’m also a little freaked out at the idea of cords shooting out of my stomach to drain the power from it. And even more freaked that someone might see me that way.

“What does it feel like? Draining someone’s power?” I could find out. It would be so easy. He’s got witch power and he’s standing right next to me. But he’s also holding the scepter because no one—my parents included—thinks I should have it until it’s time to be used. It’s too much power for someone so young, they said. But they were all thinking that it was too much power to put in the hands of syphoner when she’s standing in the most magically infused building on the face of the earth. I didn’t need to be able to read thoughts to hear their hushed whispers.

“It’s like...” He closes his eyes for a second. “It’s like that first bite of cake while you’re on a diet.” That didn’t sound terrible. “But then after that first bite, you have to have all the cake and you have to gobble it down as fast as you can, and when the cake is gone, you have to go find more cake because you’re sure you’ll die without it. And the more cake you eat, the more you want. The more you need . Until you can’t think of anything else.”

I nod. I like cake.

“RJ, you have to be stronger than the desire. You can’t let the darkness get you.” He shakes his head and looks at me. Whatever he sees, I can’t guess. But it’s enough to make him look again, to stare, to stand in front of me and shake my shoulders. “You listen to me, RJ. You have to be stronger than all that desire to take. You like brownies, not cake, you hear me?”

I nod again.

“When this is over, I’ll tell you what I do to fight it.”

He thinks I didn’t hear the whispers in the dining room after their little parents meeting. They were all guessing, saying whichever kid it was who had the power to syphon would have to be sent away. Locked up. Taken far from the Institute. It’s what they should’ve done with Elizabeth. I understand they’re scared. That, however, doesn’t make it easier to hear. To know.

“Better tell me now.” I could really use the advice.

But before he can speak, one of the lights overhead flashes brighter, dims, then explodes in a shower of sparks.

“She’s here, RJ.”

I nod because I can feel her. I can feel the stolen power inside of her.

“Remember, get her into the Hall of Greats.”

I’m not particularly fond of the idea, but I nod. The others are going to throw a spell that locks us in there until I can cast the killing spell and zap her with the scepter. If all goes well, she turns to dust. If it happens not to go well, she’ll break the spell, drain all their magic, and the lines of the first-family magic will die. No pressure.

The doors blow open and it’s like something out of a movie. The lockers in the hallways open. Papers are sucked out and into the gymnasium as she stands in silhouette from the lights outside and the brightness of the moon.

She’s got my hair—full, thick and curly—and Aimee’s build—petite and athletic. But when she steps inside, her eyes glow and she stalks across the lacquered hardwood, her heels clicking on the surface with every step.

Her eyes are glowing red, and it reminds me of some of the old pictures in Mom's photo albums from when we were kids. It looks like this woman is in a permanent state of having Mom take her pictures.

I stand still, well aware that I am supposed to be leading her toward the Hall of Greats, but I can't move. I can feel Aimee's power in her, and Zane's, and I want them. I want them so badly I can taste it.

She looks at me and laughs. For a second, I wonder if she knows how intensely I feel it. It's in my bones, in my blood.

The wind whips around me, blowing my hair into my face. It's a nice trick and I can tell she's using Aimee's magic to make it happen. I laugh because it's very 1980s movie magic. I leech off her stolen magic to slam the doors shut and make it stop.

She yanks away my hold on Aimee's magic and I stumble backward. I never realized using magic was that physical before. I thought it was all mental. Not for the first time, I wish someone would've fully explained all of this—what I am—to me and how it works. For now, all they've told me is how to handle this.

I'm going to do this for Aimee because as soon as I touched her power, I could tell the difference between when she had it and what it is now. With Aimee, her power is light and bright, not dangerous. In Elizabeth, Aimee's power is darkness and terrifying. She better not have destroyed my sister's goodness. I will make her death decidedly more painful if she has. Mom gave me that spell too, just in case.

When she gets close to me, she stops. "You?" Like she can't believe little old me is going to be the one who takes her down.

I nod. "Me."

Although, up close, she's beautiful in a way that I don't think I've ever seen before. She glows with magic. She has the magic of four of the first families inside of her. And when I look close enough, I can see the lines of power in her eyes.

"It's not your magic."

She circles me. "It is." Her voice is low, hoarse, as if she's been screaming.

"It belongs to them."

"They're children. They have no need for it." She shakes her head. "My magic was stolen from me."

"No," I say. "We never had magic. You and me. We were born without it."

"It's mine!" she screams and another of the overhead lights blows. There is a loud boom—thunder inside the building.

I flinch because I don't like thunder when it's outside in the sky. I sure as fuck don't want to be alone with it inside.

"Where is the Scepter of Power?" Without touching me, she lifts me from the ground and I can't breathe. It's as if the hand she has curled in the air is actually gripping my throat.

I can't answer her because I can't speak or breathe or see how this is going to end well for me. I clutch at a hand that isn't there, trying to break free to get oxygen to my lungs while I kick my feet trying to reach the ground that has fallen away from me.

The edges of my sight are tinged in black that is getting thicker as it moves in .

And then I fall, and it feels as if the drop takes forever before I crash to the floor.

“Stand up, RJ!” I can hear Aimee’s voice in my head and I don’t know how or why, or maybe if she’s standing at the door watching because this is quite the commotion and they’ve all probably come running, but I get to my feet and look around for her, and see her standing by the door.

“I can feel them all here, waiting for me.” She shoves open the door at the side of the gym that leads to the hallway. It slams shut behind her as I run to it and push as hard as I can. The damned thing won’t move.

“Get out of the way, RJ.” Dad pushes me to the side, then throws a bolt of what can only be lightning by the way it explodes the heavy metal door and leaves a molten puddle for me to jump over.

I still don’t have the scepter, but neither does Elizabeth, so I chase her. She’s opening doors—every door—and looking inside for the congregational meeting of magicians that should be happening right now. I shake my head and run past when she opens a closet and looks inside.

As soon as she sees me, she closes that door and follows, walking as though she’s in no big hurry.

The Hall of Greats has trinkets and treasures inside that belong to the first families. I don’t know if they have magic or not, but when I turn into the room, my dad is already there—he can probably teleport and didn’t think that was important to tell me either—along with Aimee, Zane, Finn, Piper, Circe, Aurora, Dylan. Aimee and Zane have no power but are here to help in any way they can. Probably to get their power back as soon as I’ve...done what I have to do.

They are all ready, standing where they should be standing, holding the enchanted

objects of their families, watching the door with anticipation. Although, and I'm ashamed to admit it, my anticipation is for an entirely different reason.

Mine is because my mother told me that when I end Elizabeth, there will be a glorious moment when the power of the four witches drains from Elizabeth's body and will flow through me before it returns to those from whom it was stolen.

I haven't stopped thinking about it since she said it. Since she told me.

I haven't stopped wanting it. She also said, like it was some sort of cautionary tale instead of an enticement, that when that power passed through me, all of my cravings would awaken and I would have to be strong, fight not to hold onto the magic.

Use extreme caution , she'd said.

But I could never take Aimee's magic.

Before I can finish the thought, the door to the Hall opens and Elizabeth is there, standing in the doorway. "I can feel it. Give me the scepter, brother." She walks toward my father and lifts him the way she did me. He's gasping, eyes bulging, fingers clawing at the skin of his own neck. Yeah. Been there.

Aimee opens her long jacket and pulls out the scepter to hand to me. As soon as I touch it, the power flows into me. I'm holding the magic of nine families in my hand and the power of it is surging through me. I want to savor it, but my father is turning blue, the room is in chaos—the wind is back and there's chanting from somewhere—and they're all shouting for me to stop this.

But I want to hold the scepter for another minute before I aim it at her. I want to enjoy this feeling before I have to give it up .

“RJ, please!” Aimee says frantically beside me. “Save him. Save us!”

Everyone in this room knows that when she’s finished with my father, she’ll come for each one of them. But she drops him and turns to me. She wants the scepter.

It’s unfortunate because so do I.

I lift it into the air. It’s glowing now, spinning in my hand so the jewels on top blur into a purple haze that rises above, circles the room, then flows into me. The spell is complete and I throw the scepter to the side and the metal clinks along the tiled floor until it comes to a stop at the pillar holding the bust of Sir Allister Strain, the first English Lord who was proven to be a witch and came to the Americas to avoid being killed.

He’s the great or great-great or three times great grandfather to Finnick, who is standing beside Zane as they all watch me. They’re expecting me to use the power I just drained from the scepter to kill Elizabeth. It’s the right thing to do, the plan that I was forced into agreeing to carry out. But the power inside of me is intoxicating, and I wonder if this is how Aimee feels every day of her life.

There’s a voice inside of me saying I could keep it. I could have this power and use it for good. I don’t have to hurt anyone. I don’t have to drain another witch.

But then I hear my mother’s voice. The one that’s always in my head when I’m deciding whether to be good or bad. RJ, that power belongs to the first families. All of them. Not you.

I know.

You can’t keep it.

I know that, too.

Elizabeth picks up the scepter, holds it in the air then pulls it down, twists it this way and that way to examine it. After a moment, she tries again. Holds it up to the light. Nothing happens a second time and she screams. Not like a regular pissed off yell. This is the kind of scream that belongs in a scary movie when the heroine is being chased by all the worst fictional villains, clowns, demons, and scary ass dolls Hollywood has ever created.

Every other sound in the room dies and if this was indeed something from Hollywood, we would banter now. She would ask for the power. I would tell her it isn't hers. She would remind me it isn't mine, either.

We would go back and forth for a while. That makes for good TV, but this is my life and I can't think of one witty thing to say to her. Instead, I narrow my eyes, give a slight nod, and the chanting starts back up. The first families sat at my kitchen table last night and created a binding spell so strong, none of them could break it. Four together couldn't break it. Only five. So, as long as I don't let her drain another witch before they finish, she won't be strong enough to break free before I...

I wait until she's motionless, until only her eyes are a threat to me. And then Zane nods to me.

I should do it right now. But as soon as I do, the magic that let me take the power from the scepter will go back to the scepter.

"RJ!" Aimee is crouched beside Dad and looks up at me. "I can't help him without magic."

Dammit. She's right.

Zane holds the scepter, waiting for me to do what I am supposed to do. They're all waiting for me.

"You don't have to do this," Elizabeth says. "We can share the power. You and me, RJ. You don't have to give it up, don't have to give back the euphoria. "

Yes. That is the exact right word for what I am feeling. "Euphoria."

"Think of the power, RJ."

I can see them all yelling, see the wind blowing again, and this time it's me. I'm making it happen. I've got power and energy and magic flowing through me for the first time in my life, and I want to keep it.

"RJ!" It's my Mom's voice again. "It's not yours. Give your sister her magic back." I can see us, me and Aimee on the back patio when we were kids. I was about five, which would have made Aimee about seven. She's lying back on the concrete, hurt, hand over her chest. She's breathing so softly I can barely see her chest rise and fall under her hand. Mom is standing over me, her hands on my shoulders, as she gives me a hard shake. "RJ! That magic isn't yours. Give your sister her magic back."

When mini-me passes the magic back to her, my mother stands for a minute with her eyes closed and then I feel nothing. No magic. No need for it even. She'd cast a spell. And if she'd done it to me then, why couldn't we do it for Elizabeth now?

"It won't return the magic, RJ," Mom's voice in my head says.

I know it. The only way they get their magic back is if Elizabeth returns it or if I kill her.

Fuck.

Elizabeth smiles at me. She knows what I feel right now. The pleasure, the need, the magic intoxication. My thoughts are clouded, or maybe it's that they're clearer than they've ever been and I don't know how to handle it. "It feels good, doesn't it? That power."

It does.

"RJ, please! I have to help him! "

I glance over at Aimee, still crouched by our father, by the man who left us to save himself. And I'm angry all over again. I shouldn't have to do this because he was too weak to do it a long time ago. I shouldn't be the one.

Along with my anger, the allure of the magic is calling me, begging me to savor it, to keep it, and I tilt my head back, look at the ceiling, wishing I could be the girl I'm supposed to be. "I'm sorry."

For a moment, even I wonder who I'm apologizing to, and then I make a decision because I'm finally the person I've always been meant to be.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 8:11 am

It's been two months since that day in the Hall of Greats.

Of course, by now, there's no evidence that a battle took place. It's been restored and all the broken statues and relics have been repaired or replaced.

The wands have been returned to the nine first families and the balance of magic has been restored. Once more, the witch population is safe from threat.

"RJ, are you ready?" Aimee calls from outside my room.

"Almost!" I call back, still sitting at the desk reading my diary, the only record that any of this ever happened. It reads like some fantastical fantasy about a girl who saved the magical world from a danger they didn't know and would never know existed.

When the dust that was formerly my Aunt Elizabeth stopped swirling and settled into a pile on the floor, I turned and almost bolted for the door because I wanted a few more minutes with the power. I was going to give it back. At some point.

I certainly wouldn't have left before I returned the magic to the scepter and the wands to the families. At least, I don't think I would have, but I never got the chance to find out. Thankfully, Zane stepped in front of me, smiled, and kissed me.

I savored it. Held on to him like my life depended on it. I'd made promises to the first families. His family. And in five minutes, maybe ten depending on how long I could draw out the post-kiss embrace, he wouldn't even know that he liked me anymore. The deal was that no one could ever know what I am, so their memories had to be

wiped clean of any memory of a syphoner whatsoever. It was either that, or they were going to lock me up. In witch circles, majority rules. And even though Mom and Dad voted against it, I didn't have a choice, so I agreed. And losing Zane was a result, I was sure. Because whether he knew or not what I was, his parents were always going to know.

When he lifted his head, he looked down at me and smiled. It was probably the best few seconds of my life, and simultaneously the worst because I was never going to get to do this again. "I have my magic back now. Thank you." With the thumb of his hand that was tucked in my hair, he stroked my cheekbone. It was a simple touch, one I also savored, etched the feel of in my memory because no matter what, they couldn't erase my memory. I'll always know what I've given up.

Despite my sadness, I nodded and kissed him again because I wasn't finished with the magic yet, but I earned this kiss and since it was likely the last one I was ever going to get, I savored it and etched every detail into my memory.

I hated that things with Zane were going to end, but I couldn't go around for the rest of my life having people knowing I was a syphoner. Hiding, afraid to be around me because I could take power from them.

Zane, a master spell creator, helped me write the spell to call on the magic I was about to use to make him forget that he liked me, make him forget everything he knew.

I didn't do all of this because there was some great reward or because I was a hero. I did it because I couldn't stand for anyone to know I was a syphoner and this was the only way I could make sure they didn't remember.

Pulling away from Zane was the hardest thing I've ever done in my life. Well, up to that moment. Before he let go, he leaned his forehead against mine. "I like kissing you. No spell is going to change it. And I know you think I'm not going to like you

anymore once you say that spell, but I liked you before this started. You'll see. This is real."

I wanted that to be true. I wanted the spell to be cast and him still smile at me because it was what he wanted. I was what he wanted.

But the choice was out of my hands. I had to do this now or chances were I wasn't going to. I can look back and say that now because of how everything turned out. I did the right thing, the thing I promised to do, but I didn't want to.

I closed my eyes, focused the magic, held the scepter, and said the Latin phrases I'd memorized that would make them all wonder what the hell they were doing in the Hall of Greats and how everything got damaged.

I ended the spell with *fiet*, or it will be done in Latin and then I watched the memories of everything that had happened float away from them.

"*Revertere ad ubi eras*," I whispered, and the magic drained from me. I could feel it as it left, like a drain had been opened and it seeped out of my bones and blood into the air, then it went back into the jewels that made the point of the scepter.

There was a chance one of them might have seen the magic flow back into the scepter, but I'd given my word I wouldn't leave the Institute until it was done, so there was no choice but to do it there. Dad's protection spell on me wouldn't have worked outside of the Institute, and if I brought that much magic outside of the Institute, the darkness would have found me. I would've turned into her. Now I had a chance to stop the cycle of darkness and learn to be a syphoner. That was the promise my dad made to me anyway. He'd said it wouldn't make up for what I had to give up—and wasn't that just the fucking truth—but knowledge itself was power. So there was that.

I'm not sure how yet, but Dad promises the training will not be too tedious or boring.

I don't know that I believe him, but I'm glad he's home for good and we're working on trust.

"RJ! Come on! They're waiting!" Aimee calls from downstairs, bellowing is more accurate, but she hates when I point it out.

Nonetheless, I put the diary back into the drawer. No one knows I wrote the details down. Every detail I could remember. They made me promise I wouldn't. They wanted all record of the syphoner known as Elizabeth Hadley destroyed.

I lock the drawer so no one will get a hold of the diary. Eventually, I'll hide it in the wall where Aimee and I found the grimoire that may or may not have awoken Elizabeth's craving for power or set her free. Dad hasn't ever blamed me and Aimee for what happened, but when I asked, he didn't deny it either.

I slide the key necklace back over my head and smooth my shirt, check my look in the mirror—it's not going to get any better than this since I'm wearing Aimee's clothes—and dash out.

By the time I get downstairs, Aimee is already on the front porch with Dylan and Piper. We're all full-fledged witches now, having passed our tests today, and we're off to celebrate with Piper and Circe, Rowen, Ariya, Finn, Margery, Aurora and a bunch of others who have accepted me into their group at the beach.

None of them know what I did, but Zane is their friend, and I'm his girlfriend, and apparently that's enough. It's sure as fuck enough for me. After I cast the spell and put the magic back into the wand, I left. It didn't matter anymore if I was there or not. I couldn't tell anyone anything because they weren't allowed to know.

But the next day, at the Institute where I had to pretend like everything was normal, he smiled at me. Then he waited for me outside on the steps of building two and asked me to get a coffee with him. I've seen him and been seen with him every day

since.

As we're about to leave, Dad pokes his head out the front door and looks at Aimee and me. "Will you be home before dawn?"

We're going to a bonfire at the beach and then a party at Finn's house. Aimee shrugs and looks at Piper, who is being hugged from behind by Dylan who recently discovered that he is very into Piper and not so much into Aimee, since I wiped their memories of the one "fabulous" date they had. "Maybe."

Dad nods. "All right. Stay alive. Don't drink and drive." He points at Zane, whose Jeep is in the driveway. "You bring my girls home safe."

He has a new bumper sticker saying every time we go out. He swears they are good guidance for life. Don't worry, be happy. Have a nice day. Only ugly people tailgate. He's got a million of them.

Zane laughs and slides his arm around my shoulders as he walks me to the passenger side of his car. Before he opens my door, he stops and turns me toward him. "I like you, RJ."

Warmth rushes through me. "I like you too."

He leans down and brushes his mouth across mine, then drags it over to my jaw and up to my ear. "Of all the things I'm not supposed to remember, I'm glad I never forgot you." He grins and winks. My mouth falls open and he presses his mouth to my ear again. "I helped make the spell, and you suck at Latin."

He didn't help. He created the whole damned spell that cleared all memory of the syphoner and every single thing syphoner related from the memories of everyone who helped me at the Institute—except Dad and apparently Zane—and I wish I could remember the words because I want to know how he did it, how he kept me from

erasing his memory, too.

I really need to work harder on my Latin, although most spells these days are in English. He'd suggested Latin because "magic is better in Latin." Or maybe because he knew he could slip something past me. Doesn't matter. He likes me and that's all I need to know now that the danger has passed and we're back to having our futures spread out in front of us.

Putting my boot up on the dash, I glance at my reflection in the window and think back to all the chaos we've all been through and by some miracle, survived.

I went from feeling weak and half a witch when compared to Aimee and others at school, only to find power hidden within me. Unique to me. Just a bit more...unpredictable and reckless. Which is true to brand, if I do say so myself.

I mean, Aimee's great, but I don't have to be like her. I don't have to be like anyone but me .

From the dirty window, my distorted reflection smiles back at me and my chest warms.

Unpredictable? Reckless? Headstrong? Rebellious?

Yeah, that's RJ. That's Robbie Joe. That's me.

And I wouldn't have it any other way.

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