



Vampire's Vixen (Married At First Bite #2)

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Description: Vampires don't usually come knocking on my door, asking me to help them find love. But when Zandre, a vampire who's been broken-hearted for two hundred years, asks me to find the reincarnation of his lost love, I'm not certain if I'm up to the job. I've never searched for a past-life love before.

But just as I think I've found her, the woman is killed, leaving Zandre even more bereft. I convince him to move on, but in the process of trying to find a new love for Zandre, he sets his sights on me. In the meantime, I'm struggling with changes in my life, and trying to make a go of a business that doesn't seem to be flourishing.

Can I convince Zandre that I'm not his lady love, even as I'm trying to accept the new changes coming into my life?

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CHAPTER ONE

The moon rose high over the clear night, on its way toward waxing. The forest around me was silent, with the faint sounds of dripping water off the tall timber. My breath formed a white mist in front of me and my nose dripped from the chill. I had almost worn earmuffs, but that would impede sound, and listening was imperative. I had to be alert in case anything out here crept up on me. I had to be ready.

Tall shadows around me loomed like denizens of the dark as I entered a small clearing. My heart racing, I forced myself to continue on. A twig snapped, startling me, and I jerked to my left, trying to see through the darkness. My eyes had already adjusted, but I wasn't used to stumbling through the forest at midnight. I was getting a crash course, though—like being thrown in the deep end of the pool.

I tried to make out what, if anything, had been responsible for the twig snapping. I squinted, then forced myself to stop.

Close your eyes, feel the energy, reach out with your inner sight...

I spotted a nurse log lying across the forest floor, and so I decided to take a break. The moss that covered the trunk was damp, but it wasn't soaked, so I gingerly situated myself on the velvety trunk and let out a long breath.

As I slowly closed my eyes, I reminded myself that I was warded heavily. That yes, while I was alone, there was someone waiting in the parking lot for me, and he was ready to come to help the moment I gave the word. I had my phone, but I'd turned it off to everybody but Reese, one of the Dark Moon Society's guardians, as they were

called.

After a moment, another twig broke and I slowly turned in the direction of the noise. There, under a fern! I could see movement, though it was low to the ground. Another moment and I yanked my feet up as a red fox streaked by. I barely caught sight of it before it vanished across the clearing into the undergrowth.

A tangle of fern, huckleberry, skunk cabbage, and brambles, the foliage spread through Shorestar Park like a blanket, covering the ground, along with the layers of detritus—years of compost built up from fir needles and vine maple leaves, mushrooms and moss. The trails were kept clear, but the forest itself was a wild child of nature, one of the shadowed places that belonged to the Fae and the woodland spirits and the creatures that lurked in the shadows.

I was out here to learn how to trust myself, to commune with the land around me. It was more intense than any lesson I'd been taught during my days at Midnight Manor Academy, but if I were to belong to the Dark Moon Society, I had to learn how to walk in the shadows and stand tall. Nightshade, the leader of the coven, had ordered me into the woods to "Find what you find," and while Reese was standing ready in case I got into serious trouble, he wasn't allowed to help me in any other way.

What am I supposed to find? I'd asked, but Nightshade refused to tell me. She just said that I'd know it when I saw it. And so here I was, creeping through the forest, cold and uncertain, looking for something that I'd only know if I was alert enough to recognize it.

After a while, I stood. Whatever I was looking for, I wouldn't find here, sitting on a tree. I turned toward the depths of the park, which was well over six hundred acres of thick timber. With a deep breath, I started walking again, determined to finish the task.

* * *

Five...ten...fifteen... minutes later, I felt hopelessly lost. I had no clue which way I had turned, and now every step was difficult. The park was on a hillock, rising from the waters of Puget Sound, sloping upward toward the center of the island.

The grade was growing steeper, and I realized that I was in a ravine, heading uphill. I had a walking stick with me, but it was still difficult in the dark. I had only my senses to go on, and the faint light from the moon.

As I struggled, trying to step carefully so I didn't sprain an ankle, I happened to glance to my left again. There, farther along the slope, was a glowing light.

I froze. What the hell? There weren't any streetlights in Shorestar Park, none that I knew of. So what was it? Wondering if it were someone with a flashlight, I kept my gaze on it, but the light didn't move or shift position. It was rock-steady.

"Maybe that's what I'm supposed to find," I whispered, more to keep myself company than anything else. I began to wade through the foliage in the direction from which it was shining. As I grew closer, the hairs on my arms stood tall, and a trickle of sweat chilled my forehead.

Whatever it was, my body responded to the energy. My stomach clenched, and my hand—holding the walking stick—began to shake. There was power here, a power so strong that I wanted to turn tail and run, but that was the last thing I could do. Not if I wanted to secure my place in the Dark Moon Society.

"Work through the fear," I muttered. "Feel the fear and do it anyway. You can do this. Nightshade wouldn't send you into danger..."

But that wasn't true. She had and she would again—sending me to take on a psychic

vampire had been dangerous. And yet I had done it. But this was for the gold. This was for a place in the Court Magika's Order of the Moon, and I didn't want to fail. My aunt had gone through this, and now it was my turn.

I cautiously navigated through the ferns and vines, grimacing as my hand brushed a stinging nettle leaf. Welts rose immediately, and I winced as the sting from the plant burned against my skin. Skirting the area where I thought there might be a full patch of it, I cleared the plants and came out into another small clearing.

And there was the glowing object.

I caught my breath. It was a tall rock, standing between two yew trees, and it glowed with a neon light. Sparkles came flying from it, and—as I approached—my inner alarm bells began to ring. Beyond the rock, faint lines of light stretched between the trees, crackling like miniature lightning bolts.

“What the hell?” My fear fading into curiosity, I stepped close to the rock. There was some sort of writing on it, but I couldn't read what it said. Instead, I glanced beyond the rock at the yews. There, standing in the center of them, was a man.

He wore blue jeans and leather boots that must have had platforms a good twelve inches high. He was at least seven feet tall, maybe more, and his eyes shimmered, black except for the glowing white slits that reminded me of a cat's eyes. His coat dragged against the ground, made of ragged patchwork, and his hair flowed over his shoulders, down his back. He wore a headdress fashioned like a giant crow, and feathers trailed down his back.

I caught my breath and stumbled back. I'd never seen him before, but I knew who he was. Nobody who ever lived in a shadow town forgot tales of the Crow Man, a messenger of the gods—the Morrígan in particular. But he paved the way for the gods to speak, acting as their liaison through the crows and ravens and birds of the

world.

He was best known over in Whisper Hollow, but the Crow Man knew no limits as to where he could appear. I slowly knelt, cowed by the raw power standing in front of me, but waited for him to speak. I honestly didn't know what to say.

"Welcome to my forests," the Crow Man said, and his voice sang on the wind, low and sonorous, ricocheting around me. "Priestess of Aphrodite. Stand before me."

I slowly rose, almost unable to breathe. His voice sent a jolt through me, down my spine like lightning. As he stepped toward me, the forest shivered with every step, letting out a sigh as though it mirrored his breathing.

He stared at me, his gaze piercing my soul, and I felt something stir that I didn't know I had within me—passion and a hunger so deep that it made me ache. And yet...I knew that if I drank from his well, I would lose myself forever, lost in the spiral of his magic.

The woodland quaked with every step he took, as though he were a giant crossing mountain tops. Tears trickled down my cheeks—he was so incredibly beautiful and terrifying. He stopped when he was almost within my reach, staring down at me. His eyes flashed and a shower of sparks flecked the black orbs, emanating from the blinding light that filtered through the slits of his pupils. I wanted to run, to fall facedown, to be anywhere but in his presence, and yet, I could stand here a thousand years in the intensity of his power.

With one hand, he reached up to the trailing feathers of his headdress. "Your priestess petitioned me. She follows my Lady of Phantasms and Nightmares. The dark tides are returning, and the elder gods are waking." He held out his other hand. On his index finger was a ring, a massive sapphire, the largest I'd ever seen. "If you would join the witches who fight against them, kiss my ring in pledge."

I finally found my voice. “What oath am I making?”

He grinned then, sly and deadly. “Your oath is to follow those who lead the fight against chaos, even through the Veil. Your honor to the gods who seek to prevent chaos and fury from the ancient world, from rising new in the world. Your Lady, Aphrodite, is one of those who stands against the dark tides.”

I knew he was telling the truth. It resonated on such a deep level it almost doubled me over. Aphrodite, my goddess, was—along with some other goddesses—joined with the Morrígan, and as such, with the Crow Man. I quickly whispered a prayer for guidance, but the moment the words escaped my lips, I knew that this was the direction in which I was supposed to journey.

I looked up at the Crow Man, who waited, frozen as though he was a statue. I wanted him to reach out, to touch my face, but the thought of his fingers on my skin sent warnings through me. If he did, I’d never be the same.

“I will,” I whispered hoarsely. “In the name of Aphrodite, I pledge myself to this cause.”

Leaning forward, I bent toward his hand. As my lips touched the sapphire, a wave rolled through me, painful and beautiful and the most haunting song I’d ever heard echoed around me. I began to cry, as I stood. I’d just bound myself to a task so great that it dwarfed everything around me. As I straightened up, his sly smile turned somber, and he looked almost sad.

“Your pledge has been accepted. By the gods, by the Morrígan, by Aphrodite, I bind you to this task, to this journey, to this mission. May all of the gods protect you, and may my crows pick your bones if you break your vow.” And then, he reached up and drew one finger down my cheek, and I came so hard that I almost fainted.

With a delighted laugh, he winked at me. “Welcome to my world, Maisy. You now belong to Midnight Point, and all the shadow towns under my watch.”

Without another word, he vanished, and the energy streams between the two yews vanished. I was left alone in the forest, wondering what the hell had just happened.

CHAPTER TWO

Aunt Astra was waiting at home for me when Reese dropped me off. I was exhausted, grimy, achy, and filled with wonder. As I gave him a grateful smile and opened the door, Reese winked at me.

“You did good, kid,” he said.

I gave him a feeble laugh. “I’m not exactly a kid,” I said.

“You have no idea how old I am,” he said. “Go rest. You’ve had an eventful night. I can tell, just by your aura.”

As I shut the door, giving him a little wave, and headed up the steps, it occurred to me that I actually wasn’t sure what Reese was. Was he a shifter, witchblood, human, or something else? Nightshade called him a “problem solver,” but nobody seemed to know—or want to talk—about his origins. I unlocked the door and slipped inside. Reese pulled out of the driveway the moment I closed the door.

“You’re home!” Astra jumped up from the sofa. Crystal, my best friend, was waiting with her and she joined her, both looking me over as I wearily hauled my ass into the living room.

“Yeah, and I’m exhausted, and I’m hungry.” I dropped my backpack on the floor and began shrugging out of my jacket. Crystal took it from me and hung it up, while Astra gave me a thorough once-over.

“Just checking to make sure you’re okay,” she said. “Are you hurt?”

I shook my head. “No, just...overwhelmed.” I paused, then asked, “Am I supposed to tell you what happened?”

Astra gazed into my eyes. “No, child. Everyone has their own experience, and we all keep them close to the chest, at least until after we’ve been initiated. Nightshade will know if you passed the test.”

“I think I did,” I said. “If not, I don’t know what else I could have done.” I was wet from the rain and the damp of the forest, and cold, and I wanted a hot shower and then to eat my fill of comfort food. “I need a shower.”

“Go wash up and change, and I’ll put a frozen pizza in the oven. What else do you want?” Astra asked.

“I don’t know...cocoa? And whatever else sounds good and comforting. I feel like a bottomless pit,” I said.

I headed back to my bedroom, stripping as I went. I dropped my clothes in the hamper, then turned on the shower to heat up. The floors had radiant heating and my feet welcomed the gently warmed tile. I spread a towel on the vanity bench and sat down, looking at myself in the mirror. In the scope of one evening, I could tell that I had changed. The Crow Man had changed me, and though I couldn’t pinpoint exactly how, there was a look in my eyes that said I’d never be the same. Finally, I slipped into the shower and closed my eyes as I tried to shake the feeling of the Crow Man’s fingers on my cheek.

* * *

So, time for introductions. I’m Maisy Tripwater. Witchblood by nature, I’m forty-

three years old, and I recently started over in life. A couple years ago, my husband died. And then, a few months ago when my house burned down and I lost my job on the same day, it seemed like the perfect time to move back to my hometown of Midnight Point and step out on my own.

So I and my twenty-pound Maine Coon, Miss Prance-a-lot (Miss P. for short), moved back with my aunt. Astra had raised me from the time I was seven, when my parents died, so I've come full circle.

While I'm a matchmaker by trade and I recently opened Married At First Bite, a matchmaking service for Otherkin, my business isn't going as well as I'd hoped. I was the best at my business when I worked in Seattle, but the company let me go because I was too good at my job. But Midnight Point is as small as Seattle is large, and there aren't that many people looking for a matchmaker here.

So I've branched out to giving readings—both tarot and psychic—and I take on spiritual house cleansings. But I'm not sure how things will go, and I'm wondering if I made the right decision.

And tonight, I just went through a quest to see if I'll be allowed to enter the Dark Moon Society. And now I'll face whatever the fallout happens to be.

* * *

Astra and Crystal were waiting for me in the dining room as I wandered in, clad in my sleep shirt, robe, and fuzzy slippers. The pizza was fresh and hot out of the oven and it smelled so good I began to salivate as I walked toward the table. My stomach rumbled and I settled into a chair. Crystal pushed a mug of hot cocoa over to me, and I took a long sip, closing my eyes as the warmth raced down my throat.

"I'm so tired, but I'm also...well...wired, if you know what I mean." I placed a

couple pieces of pizza on my plate and sprinkled parmesan over the top. Sausage, pepperoni, and pineapple—my favorite. “Thank you so much.”

Crystal cleared her throat as she bit into her pizza. “So, was it hard?”

I nodded. “Harder than I expected. Actually, I had no clue what to expect. But trust me, it ended up being far stranger than I expected.” I glanced up, catching Astra’s gaze.

She shook her head. “Remember, don’t tell her what happened to you. It will set up expectations in Crystal’s mind, and since she hasn’t undergone her quest, that could get in her way.”

I let out a slow breath. “I guess you’re right,” I said.

“You know I’m right,” Astra said. Her phone rang at that moment and she glanced at it. “Nightshade.” She answered. “Hi...yes, she’s right here... All right, I will. Four-thirty tomorrow? I’ll see if she can make it.” She muted her phone and asked, “Do you have time tomorrow afternoon to meet with Nightshade?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I have appointments in the morning, but I can make time tomorrow afternoon. What’s she saying?”

“She can make it,” Astra said. “Do you want me to... Right. All right. Four-thirty tomorrow.” She set down her phone and said, “Well, you’re in the Order. Nightshade wants to chat with you tomorrow at four-thirty. She’ll show up at your shop so you don’t have to drive over to her house. She said book half an hour at the most for her.”

I sat back, a weight sliding off my shoulders. I hadn’t realized just how taxed I was with the worry that I wouldn’t pass the test. But Nightshade had accepted me. I was in.

“I did it. I’m a part of the Dark Moon Society.” I closed my eyes. I ached, I was exhausted, and I wanted to sleep. “I’ve lost every ounce of energy I had left. I think I need to get to bed.” I could feel the edges of an exhaustion migraine coming on. I seldom got them, but if I was overtired and totally wiped out, the blinding headaches would descend. I went through a period of migraines every few days in the first few months after Dan died.

Crystal reached across the table and took the slice of pizza out of my hand. “Okay, get to bed. Astra, if you’ll make sure she gets covered up, I’ll clean the kitchen for you.”

“Thank you, dear,” Astra said. She took my hand and led me into my bedroom. I was too tired to even speak. Astra pulled down my covers like when I was a child, and I sat on the edge of the bed, shrugging out of my robe and kicking off my slippers. As I dropped onto my pillow, sliding my feet into bed, she pulled the covers up and kissed me on the forehead.

“Good job tonight,” she whispered. “Now, sleep.”

I nodded, too tired to even kiss her back. “Night, Auntie,” I said, feeling like a little girl again.

As she headed out, turning off the light and closing the door, I thought I might be too tired to nod off, but in no time, the world around me blurred, and I dropped into a dreamless sleep, my mind and heart at rest.

* * *

By morning, I felt like myself again, though meeting the Crow Man had left me reeling. I didn’t know what to do about it—or if there was anything to do. Maybe Nightshade could help me figure it all out.

I dressed carefully. In January, I had gone on a shopping spree for clothes, and I was taking better care of myself. For the first time in a couple years, I cared what I looked like when I went out. I had always done my makeup—I enjoyed that—but now, I wanted to pull myself together more, to present myself to my clients in a more professional light.

Today, I decided on a cobalt blue circle skirt, with an ice blue cowl-neck sweater, and a black patent leather belt. I hated pantyhose, so I didn't bother, but slid into a pair of ballerina flats, then brushed my hair back into an almost-poufy ponytail and slid on a gold bow hair tie. It was larger than life, but it looked good. Finally, I finished my makeup and headed downstairs.

Astra was making breakfast. She looked up as I entered the room. "How are you feeling?"

I leaned up on my toes to kiss her on the cheek. "Good, actually. I'm surprised, given how out of it and tired I was last night, but I slept like the dead. What's for breakfast?"

My aunt loved to cook. While I could cook, it wasn't something I went out of my way for, and so I was perfectly happy letting her take over the stove. I was happy to do the dishes and clean the kitchen, though half the time, Astra did those before I could get to them.

"I thought that on such a rainy morning, I'd make hashbrowns to go with our eggs and sausages. Sound good?"

I nodded, turning on the espresso machine. "Latte?"

"Please. Vanilla, two shots." She flipped the hashbrowns—tiny chunks of red potatoes, covered in olive oil, paprika, lemon pepper, and dill—and set out two plates

on the counter. “How many sausage links?”

“How many you got for me?” I laughed. I loved sausages and anything to do with lunch meats like pastrami and salami and the cheeses that so often accompanied them.

“Six. That enough?”

I nodded. “Yes, that’s fine.” As I pulled the shots for our lattes, adding vanilla flavoring to hers, and vanilla and cherry to mine, I ran through the morning’s schedule in my mind.

At ten, I had a client coming in for a tarot reading, and another at noon. Then, Nightshade was due to show up at four-thirty, and at six, I had my exorcism class. Tomorrow evening, I was consulting with a vampire, who wanted my matchmaking services. A traditional vampire, the blood-sucking, blah-blah-blah kind. I’d never met one before, but I was considering wearing silver beneath my sweater, and I had already determined that he was the Midnight Point contact for the Pacific Northwest Vampire Collective.

Rogue vampires were rare, but they could prove deadly and I wasn’t ready to either live for a gazillion years, or to be drained and tossed out in the dumpster like yesterday’s garbage.

The Northwest Vampire Collective kept an eye on any rogues they heard of, and they also kept rolls of vampires who officially lived in the area. While the organization’s home base was in Moonshadow Bay, run by a vampire named Val Slater, every city in the area had a contact. And in Midnight Point, that contact was named Zandre.

I’d done my research and was reassured that Zandre was on the rolls, that not only was he the city rep for the NWVC, but he also ran one of the few nightclubs in the

area, and that he primarily used bottled blood, rather than bloodwhores. In other words, he was one of the vampires who worked within society than against it.

And now he wanted my help.

Even though vampires made me nervous, I had only managed to secure one other client since I'd opened my doors last month, at least as a matchmaker. Even then, Brenda Kline had met her match in a roundabout way, though it tied into her being my client so she gladly gave me credit for matching her, and I gratefully took her recommendation.

I finished making our lattes and carried the tall mugs over to the kitchen nook, which was actually a booth, just like in a diner. Astra brought over our food and settled down opposite me. I pushed her cup across the table to her. I eyed my plate.

"I'm hungry," I said, sniffing. The aromas rising from the plate made my stomach rumble.

"So am I," Astra said. She paused, then added, "I hope you didn't mind me telling you to keep silent about your experience last night. You can talk about it later, but until you've discussed it with the high priestess, it's something you need to keep to yourself. And Crystal, since she hasn't gone through her quest yet, needs to go in without any preconceived ideas."

"I can understand that," I said. "But I can't wait to tell you what happened." I speared a sausage link with my fork and bit it in half. The flavor exploded in my mouth and I let out a happy sigh. "I love food."

Astra laughed. "So do I. All the women in our family do. Although my parents were sticklers about proper etiquette. They cared more about the décor than the food. Their idea of Sunday dinner was two thin slices of roast, one scoop of mashed potatoes and

gravy, a spoonful of roasted vegetables, and a roll. Then a sliver of cake for dessert. All served at the dining room table with full crystal, placemats, and true silverware. There's nothing wrong with that—dinners were a beautiful affair. But eating can be fun and enjoyable, not just a formal gathering.”

Astra seldom mentioned her parents. I'd never met my grandparents, although when I was young, every year they sent me a ten-dollar bill with a generic card on my birthday. But there was no other contact. No calls, no checking in to see how I was doing, especially after my parents died.

“Do you think they care that I was born?” I asked, feeling very much like a child asking a taboo question.

“I think... I think they cared, but they were so angry at your mother for marrying Johann. And then, when your parents were killed, they blamed everything on your father. Well, and on her. If she hadn't married him, she would have come home and behaved and still be alive ...that sort of thing. I remember when I told them about the crash.” She rested her fork on her dish, sobering.

“What did they say?” I asked. I'd been seven when they died and my aunts took me in.

“Do you really want to know?” Astra asked. “Think about your answer.”

I sighed. It was going to be bad, that much was apparent. “Yeah, I do want to know.”

Astra licked her lips. “Well, Sara and I flipped a coin for who was going to tell them. We knew it would be bad. I lost, so I called them that afternoon. I asked them both to come on the phone and they did. I told them that Marika and Johann had been killed in a plane crash while they were on their way to the UK for a second honeymoon.”

She paused, sighing. “Your grandfather just stayed silent. Your grandmother, however, said, I guess that’s what she gets for taking up with a vagabond. Well, she made her bed. Now she’s died in it. I was crying and my father told me to pipe down.”

I dropped my fork. “He said what ? What the hell? His daughter had just died?—”

“I know, I know,” Astra said. “I never said my parents were good people. My mother, at that point, asked whether they’d be expected to take you in. I told her that Marika appointed me your official guardian in her will. And a good thing that was, too, otherwise you might have grown up with my parents. And that wouldn’t be good for anybody, all the way ’round.”

I finished my breakfast, then tapped my lips with my napkin. “I’m so glad my parents thought ahead. I don’t think I could have managed growing up with Grandma and Grandpa. They were so angry at my parents, they would have transferred that to me, as well.”

“I think they would have. Anyway, you see why I never go home. Sara never did, either. I still talk to my sister Cassandra at times, but she’s not the most pleasant person. I miss Sara, though. When you’re twins, even fraternal ones, there’s a special link that grows between you. At least, there was in our case.” She pushed back her plate. “I’ll do the dishes. You run on to work. I fed Miss P. when I fed Dahlia, so she’s fine.”

“No wonder she’s snoozing,” I said, glancing over at one of the cat trees we had. Miss P. was conked out on the top perch. “Okay, I’m almost sorry I asked, but I guess it’s better to know what kind of people you’re dealing with. I’d better get moving. I’ll see you later, probably in the afternoon, before I meet with Nightshade. I’ll grab a burger or something before class.”

“Goodbye, dear. Drive safe and don’t let your grandparents get you down. They’re inconsequential at this point,” she said, waving as I headed for the living room.

CHAPTER THREE

Midnight Point had just finished the Imbolc Festival, which celebrated reading, writing, art, music, and healers. It occurred to me that I should run a Valentine's Day special, given my focus was on love. I still had the rest of my morning latte, so I decided to drop over to the Mocha Express come afternoon. Besides, the lines were long and I didn't like crashing to the front, even though Crystal never minded.

I parked my new Evergreen Vega in front of the shop and slid out of the SUV. Insurance had come through without much of a problem after the accident. Though it hurt to see the depreciation that only a couple years brought. But it was enough to where I could easily add a few thousand for the new car.

The SUV was on the smaller side, but it had plenty of room for passengers and to haul things, and most important, it had AWD—all-wheel drive. It made it easier to navigate on ice and snow, or when it was raining, the latter of which happened most of the year here.

I'd named my new car Suzy, after Suzanne Vega. I'd grown up listening to her and other women singers, thanks to my aunts.

"You stay put," I told Suzy, patting her on the driver's door. She was beautiful, I thought, a gorgeous royal blue color that straddled the line between blue and purple. I'd put reflective stickers on the back and sides, so that in the dark it was obvious that something was on the road.

As I unlocked my shop door, Devon peeked out from Ever After, the bridal shop next

door owned by Kevin Sands, a puma shifter with a good eye for fashion.

“Hey, Maisy! How’s it going?”

I grinned at her, juggling my travel mug and purse as I pushed open the door. “It goes, it goes. How are you doing?”

Devon had been in serious danger when she came to me for a reading, but now that danger was gone and she was back on the road to happiness.

“I’m good. You want a cupcake? We have cupcakes in the store today!” She held up a gorgeous pink frosted cupcake with tiny pearl candies on it.

“Thanks, but I had a full breakfast. I’ll hit Crystal’s in a couple hours.” I waved to her and darted inside as big fat raindrops began to splatter on the sidewalk.

As I shut the door, the quiet hush of my shop made me smile. It was painted in shades of mauve with sage and ecru trim, and the chairs matched the dusty rose of the walls, while my desk was a soft white. The other furniture matched my desk. All in all, Married At First Bite gave off a soft, cushioning feel.

I hung my jacket on the coatrack, slid my purse into my desk drawer, and turned on the Open sign. Then I lit a stick of rose-scented incense and settled in at my desk. I had no matchmaking clients yet—Brenda had been my first and only—but Zandre might break my dry streak. The tarot readings had been saving my ass, as far as keeping the shop afloat. I was a good card reader and people were spreading the word.

I’d had at least two to three readings a day, if not more. It wasn’t what I’d hoped for, but I did enjoy helping people, and most of my readings were about relationships, so they were tangentially related to my line of work.

A glance at the clock told me it was nearing ten, and outside I began to see more people on the street. It was break time, and people were out getting their coffee and snacks.

The bells on the door rang and I looked over to see a tall woman enter the shop. She had flaming red hair that coiled down her back. She was wearing a blue caftan, under a black leather jacket, and her tote bag had so much bling on it that she looked like a walking advertisement for a Bedazzler.

“Hi, I’m Maisy Tripwater,” I said, standing.

She paused, looking around. “I’m Cara Cork. Where should I sit?”

I pointed her to a round table that sat to one side of the shop. “There will be fine. Would you care for some sparkling water or tea?” I served both, though I preferred coffee. But tea seemed to calm people down in ways that coffee didn’t.

“Water, thank you.” She settled at the table and placed her purse on the floor beside her. “I’m looking forward to this. It’s been a long time since I’ve had my cards read.”

I brought her back a bottle of sparkling water and a glass with ice in it. “Here you go. Well, I’m happy to read for you.” I flipped the lock on the door and put up my Reading in Progress sign, then returned to the table. “Well, Ms. Cork?—”

“Cara, please.”

“Cara, what kind of reading do you want?” I asked.

She hesitated, then said, “I want to know how to deal with a false friend. I know she stole my boyfriend, but she’s also been spreading rumors about me and I think she keyed my car. Let’s call her Mary? Anyway, I want to know how to shut her up and

stop her from bothering me.”

I frowned. “Well, let’s see what I can find out.” I held the cards and then handed them to her. “Think about your problem, then shuffle them four times and cut twice. Phrase your question to them clearly.”

She picked up the cards and held them for a moment before shuffling and cutting them. She handed them back to me, and I laid out a spread. It had some interesting cards, ones that told me Ms. Cara Cork wasn’t telling me the full story.

“I make it a point to be blunt with my readings so there aren’t any misunderstandings,” I said. “I’m seeing a few odd things here that makes me think there’s a lot more to this than just some woman who has decided you’re problematic in her life.” I glanced at Cara.

She blushed, faintly but enough to tell me that she was hiding something. “I’m not sure what you mean,” she said.

So she was going to play it coy. “Okay, well, let’s start it with this: Mary knew your boyfriend for quite a while, didn’t she?” In my mind, I caught a flash of a little girl and boy playing in the mud together.

Cara blinked. “Um...yes, I think she knew him before I did.”

“In fact, they were in a relationship for quite some time,” I said, glancing at the two of cups. “They were in love.”

As if slowly deflating, Cara shrank back in her chair. “Yeah, they were.”

I hated calling my clients on their bullshit, but I was willing to do it when necessary. “So, how long were they together before you came along?”

Cara let out a little squeak. “They weren’t getting along. They’d been married for three years. I wasn’t the one who started the affair—” She stopped, frowning at me.

“So, she didn’t steal your boyfriend. You stole her husband, and then he went back to her. Am I right?” I looked down at the cards, then up at her.

“All right, all right. Yes, he was married. They were arguing, or so he told me. We started seeing each other and he kept promising he was going to leave her. Then, after two years, last week he broke up with me and told me he’s going to work on his marriage. He must have told her, or she found out somehow, because, last week, I found my car keyed. And now she’s telling everybody in our mutual friend group that I’m a whore.” Cara leaned forward, grimacing. “I suppose you don’t want to read for me now?”

I let out a sigh, trying to keep my judgmental side under control. “Cara, I’m not going to kick you out. I’ll read the cards for you, but you have to be upfront with me. Okay?”

Cara side-eyed the door but stayed seated. “Okay. I still think she keyed my car, and I’m worried that she might be targeting me now, because I found a package in the mailbox yesterday that had this in it.” She opened her purse and brought out a plastic bag. Inside was what I immediately recognized as a charm. As she lifted it out, I shuddered. The energy around the thing was angry—and dangerous.

“Set it on the table,” I said.

As she did, I leaned in for a closer look. I had no intention of touching the thing until I knew what it was for. The charm was a pair of crossed sticks, wound together by some yarn in the center. A string hung off the center, with several beads on them, along with a pewter charm of a mask. The smell reminded me of spice and tobacco and pepper. Hmm...protective herbs. But there was nothing that felt protective about

this.

I slowly held my hand over it and closed my eyes. There, under the fragrance of the herbs, there was another scent that seemed familiar to me. I inhaled deeply, focusing on the layers of fragrance. And then, I knew why it smelled so familiar.

“This has War Oil in it.”

“What’s that mean?” Cara asked.

“Used in this way, War Oil will attract negative things and entities to you. It can be used to protect, or to go after someone. It all depends on the other aspects of the charm.” I began to sift through the layers of the charm and began to see just how powerful the witch was who created the talisman. “Is Mary witchblood?”

“No,” Cara said. “She’s like me...we’re human.” She gave me a Bambi look. Deer-in-the-headlights afraid. Despite her no-nonsense demeanor, Cara was scared out of her wits.

“Whoever sent you this is a powerful witch. Leave this with me—you don’t want it around, anyway. I’ll see if I can find out who made it and maybe I can trace it back to who sent it to you. Meanwhile, you might want to apologize. I don’t guarantee it will help, but it’s not going to hurt.” I returned to the reading. There were so many threads here that it was hard to read.

“You’re bound up in chaos right now,” I continued. “The situation is so muddled that I don’t know how you can expect to sort it out without getting away from both your boyfriend and Mary. You need a period of time where you can gain some clarity, and you absolutely have to let her calm down. I don’t know if she hired the witch to make this charm, but she’s angry at you to the point of where I wouldn’t put it past her.”

“She should be mad at him,” Cara mumbled. “He’s the one who stepped out on her.”

“I agree,” I said, noticing the surprised eyebrow lift. “But the question also must be asked: did you know he was married? If so, you’re also part to blame.”

The last of her sullen look drained away and she just looked sad and lost. “Not at first. He told me they were separated. I found out about four months in that he was still married. By then, I was in love.”

“You’re really lonely, aren’t you? And this relationship hasn’t given you what you need.”

She shrugged. “You never get everything you want. But you’re right. I’m lonely. I guess I never really believed he would leave her for me, like he said he would. But hope can blind you. And it was nice to have someone to love me.”

“I’m sorry to say this, but do you really believe that he loves you? If he really did want to make a life with you, he’d be divorced and with you. From what I see here, he’s a selfish man, and he wants it all—his wife and his lover. And he’s too cowardly to make a choice.” Sometimes, it took the truth to really get through to someone.

Tears started to trickle down her cheeks. “What am I going to do? I’ve wasted two years on him, and we humans don’t live nearly as long as those of you who are Otherkin. And now, she’s angry at me, and some witch is hexing me, and...” She leaned forward, burying her face in her hands. “I don’t know what to do, Maisy.”

I let out a long sigh. “You want my advice?”

She nodded, peeking out from behind her hands. Her mascara was running, and the pain in her eyes hit me hard. Failed love always hurt to see.

“Here’s what you do. First, you tell him you’re done and don’t give him a chance to argue. Second, you apologize to Mary. Third, we’ll try to figure out who’s hexing you and put a stop to it. I’ll need a few days, probably. Can you take some time off of work?”

Cara shrugged. “I think I can. I’ve got a couple weeks coming.”

“Then I want you to take a week, and I want you to go to Seattle, or some other place with plenty of people around. Book a hotel, go visit museums, explore the city. Treat yourself to dinner. Take a friend—not a guy, unless he’s gay—with you, and relax. You need to breathe for a little bit. You’re too close to this.”

I folded the cards. “Meanwhile, I’ll see what I can find out about this charm. I advise your friend drive. I think being away from this charm may help protect you, but I don’t know for sure. Make certain to leave me your number so I can get hold of you, if I need to.”

Cara straightened. “All right. What do I owe you?”

I took her card and ran it, then—as she headed for the door—I lightly placed my hand on her shoulder. “You’ll be all right. In a while, this will be a blip in your life.”

“You think so?” she asked, glancing at me.

“I do,” I said, wishing I felt as confident as I sounded.

CHAPTER FOUR

Cara left, promising to follow my advice. I wasn't sure how I felt. I didn't like cheaters, but it sounded like her boyfriend had conned her into a relationship. Should she have left after she found out he was married? Absolutely. But love made people do funny things, and not always ha-ha funny. I stared at the charm, then cautiously slid it back into the plastic bag and tucked it behind the counter.

As I cleansed the space to prepare for my next reading, I got a text from Crystal.

hey, come over. i made caramel blondies and you'll love them. how's it going?

I needed more coffee before the next reading, so I grabbed my wallet and darted next door. Crystal usually gave me free coffee, but I always offered to pay. It was ten before eleven when I peeked through the doors of the Mocha Express. Karina was wiping down the counter, and though the shop was busy as usual, there wasn't a line. I looked around for Crystal and was about to ask Karina where she was when Crystal popped out from the back.

"Hey, you made it!"

"I've got ten minutes," I said. "I need a double caramel latte, and I want one of your brownies."

"How's your morning been so far?" she asked.

"I can't talk about it here, but...it was a doozy." I pulled out a ten from my wallet.

Crystal started to wave it away, but I said, “No, let Karina handle it. Keep the change,” I added to the younger woman.

“So,” Crystal said. “Nightshade contacted me today. She’s set a time for my quest. I admit, I’m a little nervous after how dragged out you looked.”

“I wish I could tell you what happened to me. After you go through your quest, I’ll be able to. But...I guess I can say this. I was scared, but Reese was nearby. What happened to me was extremely magical. Now, I wouldn’t change a thing that happened. I think.” I smiled at her. “You’ll do fine. When do you go out?”

“Saturday night.”

“Then Astra and I’ll wait for you. Come over to our house afterward and we’ll make sure you’re fed and have a warm bed to fall into.” I glanced at my phone. “I’ve got to get back,” I said, as Karina handed me my latte and the bag with the brownie in it. “Love you!” I blew her a kiss and hurried out the door.

“Love you, too,” Crystal said.

I hurried back to my shop. While my next reading wasn’t due for another forty-five minutes, I wanted some time to write up a couple ads for my page on the TouchLine website. I’d finally bit the bullet and started a business page. Of course, with algorithms being what they were, I knew better than to expect a deluge of business. You had to pay to play these days.

As I pulled a notepad to me—I loved old-fashioned pen and paper—and began to jot down ideas, the bells on my door chimed. I glanced up to see the mailman.

Terry was an older man, around sixty, who worked for the post office. He was pleasant enough, and he always had a smile for me. But today, he silently handed me

the mail and turned away.

“Terry, are you all right?” Something was off, I could sense it.

He paused, but he still faced the door. After a moment, he said, “Yeah, I suppose.”

“Terry, I’ve seen you almost every day for the past month, and you always have a cheerful ‘Good morning’ for me. I’m just a little worried.”

He paused again, then said, “My husband is sick. He’s in the hospital. We didn’t even know anything was wrong until he started getting nasty bouts of coughing. Turns out, he has lung cancer. He smoked for years before we met, and even though he stopped, it seems to have taken its toll on him.” He looked so bereft that I steered him over to a chair.

“Sit down. Talk to me.”

As he set his mailbag on the floor and sat down, I brought him a bottle of sparkling water.

“Here, drink this.” Worried, I handed him the bottle. Something was seriously wrong.

He took a long sip, then leaned back. “He went in for a checkup a week ago. He has stage four lung cancer. Directly related to the thirty years he spent smoking up a storm.”

My heart went out to him. Terry was a sweet guy. “I’m so sorry. If you need to talk, I’m here to listen,” I said, not wanting to pry, and yet realizing he might need to talk over things. I had no idea what kind of a support system—how many friends, or family members—he had, but I wanted him to feel like somebody cared.

“Thanks,” he said. “I’m a bear shifter. I wasn’t exactly expelled when I came out, but I finally resigned from the Clan. It was made abundantly obvious they didn’t want me around, influencing the young. You know, even the wolf shifter Packs are coming into the modern age. Slowly, but they are changing. Bear shifters are some of the oldest shifter groups and you’d think we’d learn how to adapt, given we’ve existed since...well...the days of the cave bears. But I suppose that we’re so grounded in the past, it’s hard to let go.”

“We do have to adapt,” I said. “Do you need anything?”

He shrugged, then deflated. “Honestly, I’m doing my best to be there for Lin. He doesn’t have long, and I want to spend as much time with him as possible. I used up all my paid leave already, taking him to doctor appointments, staying home with him when chemo made him so terribly sick—chemo’s rough on shifters, especially bear shifters. Since I’m the breadwinner, and we need my insurance...it’s just been difficult. I don’t like asking for help but...”

I nodded, jotting down some notes. “Let me see what I can do, Terry. I can’t promise anything, but I’ll do whatever I can. Give me your number, please.”

After a moment, Terry gave me his information, and I detected a faint sliver of hope in his eyes. “Thank you, and whatever happens, may the gods bless you for your kindness.”

“It’s not pity, don’t think that,” I said. “I’m just trying to be a good neighbor, a good friend, and someone who helps make her town a better place to live.”

* * *

Before my next appointment arrived, I called Astra.

“Who do I talk to about starting...I don’t know—something to help my mailman?”

“What are you talking about?” Astra asked.

I told her what had happened. “I want to make things a bit easier for Terry. He seemed so forlorn, Auntie. He needs support.”

“I know Terry. He’s been around for a long time. If he needs help, people will come through. He’s had just about every mail route in town in the time he’s worked for the post office.” She paused, then added, “Let me spearhead this. I can get it moving.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it, and I know Terry will, too.” I hung up, relieved. Over the past few weeks since I’d pledged myself to Aphrodite, it seemed like my emotions had ramped up. I felt things more keenly, and at times, I was having a hard time keeping it together.

As my second client of the day arrived, I tried to shake off my concerns and faced him with a smile. “Hello, I’m Maisy Tripwater. Welcome to Married At First Bite. Please have a seat,” I said, motioning to the chair opposite mine.

The man sat down. He was long, lanky, well-dressed, and had an air of authority about him. His hair was neck-length, sort of in an early Beatles style. There was also something I couldn’t quite pinpoint—he felt...

Like he’s faced death...

The thought jarred me and I straightened.

He took out a notebook and set it on the table, along with a pen. “I’m John Birchwell. I’d like a reading,” he said.

“What can I do for you? What are you looking to find out? I use the cards or my crystal ball, or both, depending on the question.” When he’d called, he hadn’t actually mentioned the reason for the reading.

John shifted, smoothly crossing his legs. He folded his hands on his lap, reminding me of an old-fashioned English professor. “Ms. Tripwater, I want to find out if my late wife is all right. She died last year.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said, my heart sinking. It was hard to read for bereaved spouses, because I tended to identify with them too closely. I cleared my throat. “Why don’t you tell me why you’re concerned?”

He rubbed his chin, and it was then that I saw the weariness in his eyes. “I’m having trouble sleeping and eating. I’ve lost ten pounds the past week. I’m definitely not on a diet, but I just can’t seem to work up an appetite. I’ve only managed two to three hours of sleep each night the past week. I keep dreaming that my wife is trapped somewhere. I hear her screaming for me to help her, but I can’t find her and I wake up in a panic. It’s so bad that I don’t want to go to sleep, I’m so afraid of my dreams.”

I picked up my cards and held them for a moment, then handed them to him. “Shuffle four times, knock on the back of the deck three times, then hand them to me.”

As I waited, he did as I asked. After he gave them back to me, I began to lay them out, focusing on what his dreams were trying to tell him. The cards began to form a pattern, though I wasn’t sure what it was yet. But I could feel the connection between them strengthening, weaving a pathway for me to follow.

I sat back, eyeing them. After a moment, I said, “She was sick, wasn’t she? Or...she got sick, really quickly.”

He nodded. “She died while I was away on a business trip. It was quick—she had a

hidden allergy. We never knew she was allergic to shellfish. I don't eat it because I'm Jewish, and she didn't eat it because of me. I told her she could, but she wanted to keep the kitchen free of it, since I eat kosher meals. But while I was gone, she went out to dinner with a friend and I told her to enjoy herself, to try something she usually doesn't try. I never thought it would end up like this."

I could see where this was going, and it wasn't pretty.

"It was a seafood restaurant, but instead of ordering fish like she would if we went out together, she decided to treat herself to lobster. She only ever ate it once in her life, I think, and it was fine." His cool demeanor had vacated the building. "She took two bites of the lobster and her throat swelled up. Nobody had an epinephrine pen, or even Benadryl. They called the medics the moment they realized something was going horribly wrong, but by the time they got there, she was dead. The EMTs tried to revive her, but it was too late. She died on the restaurant floor, surrounded by strangers."

He rubbed his head, closing his eyes.

Right then, I knew two things: there was absolutely no pretense here. He was mourning his wife, mired so deep in his grief that he had to look up to see bottom. I'd been there, I knew that look, inside out. I wanted to reach out, to take his hand and make it better, but nothing I could do would help in that manner. Grief was grief; you had to walk through it.

"Why do you blame yourself?" I didn't even bother asking if he felt like he was to blame. That fear was already on his face.

"I encouraged her to step out of her box. She was all set to order the salmon mousse. She loves—loved—salmon. I felt like I've been keeping her from eating foods she might love, due to my own beliefs. And she changed her mind. She told me she might

as well, if I didn't mind." His expression crumpled.

I stared at the cards. His anxiety and guilt were totally triggering his dreams. "John, take a deep breath. I want you to listen to me. I can answer your question right now." I picked up the High Priestess card. "Your wife went through the Veil. She transitioned easily, and she's already journeying on to her next phase of existence."

He held my gaze, fear warring with hope. "How...are you sure? Then why am I having these dreams?"

"Because of your own guilt and fear. You did not kill your wife. She's not haunting you. She's absolutely fine, and she wants you to be free of these fears." Even as the words came out of my mouth, I knew they were the truth.

Apparently, they rang true and touched something inside of John. The tension began to drain out of his shoulders, but then, loss filled the void that his fear had occupied, and he began to cry.

I could feel his conflicting emotions, like a ripple in the ocean had turned into a tidal wave. And that made me understand something else. John had been covering up his grief with guilt. Guilt and fear were easier for him to face than the fact that she was gone. Without the guilt, without the fear, all he had left was his loss.

"You haven't let yourself grieve, have you?"

"I... I don't deal with loss well. I've spent the past year filling every second of my day till I haven't been able to think. I work twelve hours a day. I volunteer at the pet shelters on weekends, I coach my neighborhood Little League. My next-door neighbor's elderly, and I make sure he's taken care of. I..." He paused, then rested his elbows on the table, cupping his head in his hands. "I'm not really living, am I?"

“All those are good things, but you’re deflecting, and the longer you deflect the grief, the worse your anxiety and fear will grow. Do you understand?” I wasn’t sure whether I was helping, but I just let the words form because they wanted to come out.

He nodded. “I miss her. I miss her so much.”

“And you’re angry at her, too. You’re angry because she chose to eat lobster.”

He winced. “I’m a horrible person. How can I blame her?”

“Because we always look for someone or something to blame in tragedy. It’s too difficult to accept that sometimes, life just happens. Sometimes, people fail us. Or they die on us and leave us to face the future alone. I understand. I’m a widow.”

He looked so wounded that I decided professionalism could suck rocks. I circled the table and gave him a gentle hug. “It will be okay. Now that you’re facing your emotions, you can work through them. You’ll always miss her, but you won’t be running from life anymore. I recommend you find a good therapist to help you through this,” I said. “I have a list of local therapists I can give you, if you like. They all have good reputations.”

I had put together a list of therapists when I realized that sometimes the people coming to me for readings would need more help than I could offer.

“Thank you,” he said. “I’d like that.”

We sat and talked for a while longer, until I was sure he was fit to drive. He left, the list in hand, reassured that his wife was all right, and that he hadn’t killed her. If only all questions in life could be answered with a reading, and a glimpse into the heart.

CHAPTER FIVE

After John left, I felt wrung out. I returned to my desk and stared at the receipt for his reading, wondering just how many of these sad tales I could handle. It seemed like every other reading involved someone looking for peace of mind. I wasn't sure I was up for the job.

I glanced around the shop.

Even though I knew it was pie-in-the-sky, I had envisioned a line of clients eager for love, all hoping to start a new adventure in their lives.

In reality, I'd had one client for my matchmaking services, and then, Zandre scheduled. In the space of a month, I'd gone from being excited and enthusiastic to feeling like I was failing. I knew it was early to feel that way. All businesses took time to build. But I kind of felt like a giant going out of business sign was hanging over my head.

A glance at the clock showed that it was one-fifteen, and I decided to take a break. I didn't feel like sitting here in an empty shop until Nightshade arrived.

I slung my purse over my shoulder and headed out, locking the door behind me. Once outside, the rain made me even more depressed. I loved the rain, but my spirits were about as gloomy as the sky. I thought about heading over to the Mocha Express to drown my sorrows in caffeine, but I didn't want to bring Crystal down, and there was no way I could disguise how I felt. So, I slid into my new car, fastened my seatbelt, and decided to go for a drive.

* * *

Midnight Point—the island—wasn't that big, but it had a sizable area of woodlands surrounding the town. I decided to drive up to Moonrise Preserve. A nature preserve, it was filled with thickets, walkways, some wetlands, and a large community berry picking spot—you paid a certain amount per pound of blueberries that you picked. It was only about a fifteen-minute drive from town, but by the time I got there, the rain had stopped and the sun had come out. Grateful for small blessings, I parked in the lot, put my wallet, phone, and keys in my pocket, slid my purse under the seat, and locked the car.

There were only two other cars in the lot, and I took a careful look at them. Even though Midnight Point seemed fairly safe, I had developed habits in Seattle that I wasn't about to let go of. Safety first, especially for women.

The reception booth was closed except for the restrooms, given it wasn't anywhere near berry season. Self-guided tour booklets were available on a magazine rack on the wall, and I took one. Moonrise Preserve had been around when I was little, but the last time I was here was when I was fourteen. A number of things had changed, but I had pleasant memories of picking berries under a warm July sun.

I glanced at the pamphlet. There were four main trails through the preserve. One was a half-hour walking loop, with a labyrinth in the middle. That took another fifteen or twenty minutes. The other three hikes ran from ten to fifteen minutes.

I glanced at the sky. The clouds were churning around the edges, though the sun might manage to hold out for another half hour. I decided on the fifteen-minute hike, called the Fern Valley Path. It led through the wetlands, which included a small pond.

“Okay, let's see if this helps me make sense of my thoughts,” I whispered to myself as I set foot on the wooden walkway and headed into the thicket of marshy bogland.

As I wandered along the slatted walkway, which was raised just above the marshy bog, I paused and closed my eyes, letting the crisp breeze wash over me. It was chilly, but it felt cleansing, and I let out a breath and relaxed.

The silence was suddenly filled with noises that I hadn't even noticed. The whirring of spring bugs, the sound of the wind, the ripple of little pools in the wetlands...each sound soothed my heart a little more. Finally, I opened my eyes and continued on, running my fingers gently along the wooden railing.

My thoughts returning to my disappointment, I wondered what I had expected, really? That I'd ride into town, make a big splash, create wedding after wedding? Even though I felt reluctant to admit it, the truth was that I wanted to matter. I wanted to make a difference in people's lives.

"You're impatient," I whispered. "You expect too much, too fast." But I quieted down as I noticed a woman coming my way from the opposite direction.

As she neared where I was standing, I first noticed that she was dressed in a yellow gingham sundress with a pair of floral rain boots on, and a matching rain jacket and bonnet. She looked like a ray of spring in the middle of the gloom, and her long copper hair gleamed, perfectly straight. She looked like she was in her mid-thirties, and she had a tote bag over her shoulder. She paused as she saw me and smiled, her face blooming.

"Hello," she said, her voice so lyrical she sounded like she was singing. "Isn't it a beautiful day?"

I hadn't been thinking that it was so pretty, but the moment she said it, I looked around and yes, it did seem like a lovely day—rainclouds and all.

"I guess it is," I said.

She leaned against the railing. "I come here a lot. I love walking through the trails."

"It is peaceful. I haven't been here in years," I said, my shoulders relaxing for the first time in a while. "I'm Maisy...Maisy Tripwater."

"Well, hello, Maisy Tripwater," she said. "I'm Ginger Lily." She looked at me, then reached in her pocket and pulled out an orange. "Walking out here always makes me hungry. Would you like to share my orange?" She began peeling it, tossing the peels out in the middle of the marsh. "Food for the animals," she added.

I smiled. Her enthusiasm was infectious. "Well...thank you. I wouldn't mind a slice." My stomach rumbled. "I guess I'm hungry, too."

She handed me half of the orange. "Please, take it."

I accepted, watching as she bit into her half. I took a bite and closed my eyes. It was one of the sweetest, tastiest oranges I'd had in years. "This is so good. Where did you get it?"

Ginger winked. "The store. So, you're one of the few to brave the weather for a walk here."

"I've had a lot to think about lately," I said, suddenly feeling like I could open up to her. I didn't talk about my private life much, and certainly not with strangers, but she didn't feel like a stranger at all. "I just opened a business and it's not doing as well as I hoped."

"I'm sorry you're disappointed. How long since you opened it?"

"A month...well, three weeks. I know that sounds ridiculous, but I'm impatient, I guess." I paused, then added, "You don't need to hear me whining. I'm sorry. You're

right, it's a beautiful day, so we should enjoy it."

Ginger paused, then said, "You have to feel what you feel. That's the only way you can work through it."

I suddenly realized that I was telling a stranger my personal business. I blushed. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to dump my worries on you."

She smiled. "I'm used to it. I'm Fae, and I'm what's known as a listener . We draw out strong emotions from others just by our proximity."

I froze. She was one of the Fae ? I scrambled, trying to remember if I'd said "Thank you" to her—a massive mistake both humans and Otherkin alike made.

Ginger must have seen the fear in my eyes because she placed a light hand on my arm, then withdrew it. "Don't worry. You didn't thank me for the orange. Besides, since I live among humans, I've taken an oath to not hold those who thank me to debt."

The Fae considered a thanks as a binding contract, indicating that you owed them a debt because they had done something kind for you. To live among society, the government required the Fae to swear to an oath that they would never hold anyone to a contract simply for a "thank you." A very few accepted those terms, like Bealissa, who was a member of the city council, a liaison between the Fae and the people of Midnight Point.

Relaxing, I gave her a hesitant smile. "I've never met a member of the Fae until last month, when I met Bealissa." I paused, stopping myself before I asked if Ginger knew her. It was just rude to assume that all members of a minority group knew each other.

“We don’t usually interact with society, but I like being on the forefront of things, and eventually, we’re all going to have to work together. Since I’m a nontraditionalist within my people, I decided to take the first step and help pave the way.” She shrugged, still smiling. “I like you. I can feel emotions, and I can see auras.”

“I can feel emotions, too. I’m a priestess of Aphrodite, and it’s really exacerbated that ability. I’m a matchmaker.” I told her about my business. “That’s why I’ve been so down in the dumps. I’ve had a lot of readings, but only one client so far. She found her match because of me, but it was in an offhand way. Not through my efforts at all. I do have another client coming in tomorrow night, but...”

Ginger clapped her hands. She was incredibly perky, but I didn’t find it annoying. She seemed genuinely happy. “Oh, don’t quit. Don’t be upset. It takes time to build the business you want. And businesses have to grow and evolve, like children. If you just wanted to make money fast, you wouldn’t be helping the people who need your help. They need to find their way to you. And a priestess of Aphrodite? That’s perfect!”

I made a snap decision right there. “Would you like to get a cup of coffee and some lunch? I’m hungry.”

She glanced at the sky. “I think that would be lovely. Where do you want to meet?”

“What kind of food do you like?” I had no idea if she was vegetarian, a health-food nut, or what. I didn’t want to offend her by suggesting a place that might go against her grain.

She thought for a moment. “How about Chicken Jim’s?”

Chicken Jim’s was a local chicken joint. They had an eat-in area and made the best fried chicken in town. I had been there once or twice since I returned to Midnight

Point, and I hadn't been disappointed. They made crap coffee, though.

"I'm going to stop at an espresso stand first, but yes. How about we meet there in twenty minutes?" I asked.

She nodded. "True, their coffee sucks. All right. I'll see you there in twenty minutes or so."

As we headed back to the parking lot, it occurred to me that sometimes a good walk was just what you needed, and you never knew where it would lead.

* * *

Ginger was waiting in the restaurant when I pulled in. She had a large iced coffee in hand, and she waved as I walked through the door. I headed over to the booth and slid in opposite her, carrying my own triple-shot mocha. A number of the customers were looking at her. That was probably a common occurrence. It was hard to not notice her—she practically glowed.

"Do you mind that they stare at you?"

A few of the men were staring with open lust, but most of the gawkers simply watched her, and I detected a hint of wistfulness in their looks.

Ginger shrugged. "It's part of life. The Fae always stand out. And given my nature, I appeal to people who are lonely, or who need a bright spot in their day. That's what I do, actually. I call it listening therapy . People book time with me to talk. Now and then I'll suggest that they see a therapist, and they sign a waiver that stipulates if they tell me they committed a crime, I can—and probably will—tell the police. But most people just want someone to talk to, especially if they don't want to burden their friends or family."

“A paid friend?”

“A paid companion, I suppose. I do have several regular clients, but the majority come in once or twice, and when they’ve got their feelings off their chests, they move on.” She paused as the waitress came up. You could either eat in, or order takeout.

“I’ll have the three-piece chicken and tots,” I said.

“A fried chicken sandwich,” Ginger said. “Heavy on the tomatoes and light on the sauce.”

The waitress nodded. “Drinks—” She stopped as she noticed our coffee cups, then grinned. “I keep telling the boss we need to get a better coffee maker,” she said, laughing. “Water?”

I nodded. “Please.”

As she moved away, I turned back to Ginger. “So, how do you make a living if people only come in once or twice?”

“I also sell vegetables, eggs, and honey at the farmers market. Vegetables in the spring and summer, honey year round, eggs year round. I have a small homestead on the edge of town, with an acre. I keep beehives, and my vegetable patch is a set of terraced beds. I mostly grow tomatoes and herbs. I also have several apple trees and I sell apples in the autumn. It’s a simple living, but it works.”

“That sounds nice,” I said. “A lot of work, though.”

“It is a lot of work, but I’m happy with my life.” She took a sip of her coffee. “You love matching up people, don’t you?”

I nodded. “I actually don’t mind the readings I give, either, but so many of the people coming in are looking for something to help them through trauma. Somehow, I attract those who need emotional support.”

“In a way, you’re a little like me. I’ll bet you anything that it’s your connection to Aphrodite that’s setting you up for them. Maybe you should ask her about all of this. About why you don’t have more clients looking for love.” She leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table. “Tell you what, we can help each other. I can recommend some of my clients visit you, if I think they need a reading or if they’re looking for someone with whom to share their life.”

Perking up, I nodded. “And I can recommend they visit you, if they seem to need someone to talk to. I like that. Do you have any business cards?”

She opened her purse and brought out a beautiful case, then opened it and handed me a stack of ten cards. “I can get you more, if this works out. And you?”

I took the cards, which had a border of hydrangeas, with her name, phone, and the tag line of I’m here to listen on it. “These are lovely,” I said, opening my own purse. In contrast, my business card holder was a smooth silver with embossed corners. I handed her a stack of my own cards. They were a pale pink, with green floral edges that came together in the top center to form a heart made of vines.

At that moment, the waitress brought our food and water. She deposited it on the table, along with the check. “If you need anything else, just let me know,” she said.

We dove into our food, and began the process of getting to know one another, with all the requisite questions about interests, favorite foods, books, and shows, and all those other personal facts that wove together to create a new friendship.

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CHAPTER SIX

We spent about an hour on lunch before Ginger reluctantly glanced at her phone.

“I have a client coming in a while. I’d better get home and gather eggs before they arrive. I’m so glad we met,” she said. “I’ll drop in at your shop in a day or so and take a look.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I enjoyed this afternoon a lot. And I’ll take your advice—I’ll ask Aphrodite for her input. I’m still so new to all this priestess/pledged to the gods stuff that I’m not sure how everything works.”

“You’ll figure it out,” she said. “Okay, lunch is on me, this time. Next time, you can pay,” she added as I started to protest.

“Sounds good, but I’m leaving the tip.” I tossed a ten on the table. “Have a great session.”

As we left the restaurant, I realized I was more relaxed than I had been in a while. Ginger Lily definitely had a way of calming the spirits.

* * *

I dropped home to freshen up and play with Miss P. for a few minutes. By now, it was three-fifteen, and when I opened the door, Astra was there, at the dining room table, working on her laptop. She looked up as I came in the door.

“Hey, how’s your day been?”

“Actually, it started out kind of rough, but I met a new friend this afternoon and that turned the day around,” I said, hanging up my jacket and dropping my purse on the bench below the coat hooks. “I seem to be meeting all the Fae in town,” I added.

“Fae? What do you mean?”

“Well, last month I met Bealissa, and now I met another one of the Fae who’s chosen a life in town, rather than out in the wild. Her name is Ginger Lily, and she’s...interesting.”

Astra took off her glasses—she’d just been prescribed glasses for reading—and leaned back. “I don’t think I’ve heard of her.”

I told her about the meeting, and about Ginger Lily. “She’s really nice, actually, and just being around her makes me feel good. I don’t want to take advantage of that—I’m no psychic leech—but we did hit it off and she was the one who suggested we go out for lunch. We decided we might be able to send clients to each other.”

“Well, good. Just be cautious, Maisy. The Fae can be tricky. I’m not saying she is, but just keep your head about you.”

“I’m going to meditate for a few minutes. I want to be in a good space when Nightshade gets to my shop, and I need to ask Aphrodite something. It’s been a long day and I’ve still got the meeting with Nightshade, and then my exorcism class to go.” I gave her a quick kiss and headed to my office, where I’d set up a small altar to Aphrodite.

As I settled myself on the settee in front of the altar, I held up my athame and cast a simple circle. For meditation, and other simple acts, I cast the circle in silence, then

made an acknowledgment to the elements, in the four directions.

As the magic settled around me, I sat back and took three deep breaths, slowly lowering myself into trance. When I had slid into the first level—where I was still conscious, but definitely in trance—I focused on opening the path to her.

“Lady Aphrodite, Lady of my Heart. I need advice. You know what I’m about to say—I feel like I don’t make the difference I want to. I don’t understand why I had so many clients in Seattle, but here I’ve only had one. I’m drawing people with heart-wrenching situations into my life for readings. Please, help me understand.”

A moment later, a faint mist swirled off of the statue I’d bought to represent Aphrodite. Bronze, it was an image of a curvaceous woman, draped in Grecian robes, with long hair and with a pair of doves at her feet. The mist swirled up and around me, and it felt full of warmth and beauty and compassion.

All matters of the heart are mine, and all matters of the heart are, therefore, yours. Sorrow goes hand in hand with love, as does joy. To find joy, people need to face their sorrows and learn from them. You can’t ignore sorrow. You must heal it for joy to grow. Even among your matches, there will be sorrows and difficulties to surmount. You’re not here to make the most matches, you’re here to help people navigate both the joys and sorrows that make up their lives. Making matches are merely one part of that. Do you understand?

I let out a slow breath.

You’re not here to make the most matches, you’re here to help people navigate both the joys and sorrows that make up their lives. Making matches are merely one part of that.

In that moment, I began to see that a long road stretched in front of me, and that I

wasn't in a race, but a journey.

"I think I see," I said. "When I give the readings, I'm helping others find their peace, if not a little joy? Are you saying that I'm here to help bring peace, to bring love and joy to people's hearts? To help them make long-term changes, not quick jury-rigged solutions?"

Sorrow and joy, love and loneliness...they're all interconnected. As far as matching people up, some couples are simply meant to be. Others are to be for a limited time. It's not for you to decide who makes the longest connection.

As her words settled in my mind, I felt even more unsure. At my old job, I had to make a quota, and I did that, spectacularly successful. So successfully that it led to me being out of a job. But I was no longer part of the business, and the future suddenly seemed so open that it made me nervous.

The readings did help those in need. My empathy allowed me to give others emotional support, and so far, I had helped others find safety, find peace of mind and heart and resolve issues before they had to face losses that were inevitable. I was helping people...and even though it was hard on me, it added some joy and peace to the world.

"Lady, how do I cope with the difference between what I thought I'd be doing and what I am? How do I cope with the sorrow? How do I let it go?"

You will learn how to adapt, and you'll see your way through this confusing time. And you will learn how to listen without taking on the emotions. It will take practice, but you have mentors who can help you. You only have to ask. Now be at peace, be patient, and attend to your life.

And with that, Aphrodite withdrew, leaving me calm and collected.

* * *

I freshened my makeup, kissed Miss P. on the head, and headed out the door after letting my aunt know I was leaving.

As I arrived at my shop, it was four-ten, and I opened the door. Instead of being mired down like I had been in the morning, now I felt cautiously optimistic. Just connecting with Aphrodite's energy lifted my spirits, and meeting Ginger Lily had also helped.

There were five messages waiting for me from clients who wanted readings. I took down all the numbers and was about to start making calls, but a glance at the clock showed me that Nightshade should be here any minute. I tidied up my desk and set the list of clients to call to the side.

Promptly at four-thirty, the door opened and Nightshade walked through. Although she was older she looked timeless, with a graceful beauty. Her silver hair swirled into a chignon, with tiny curls wisping down on each side of her face. She had pale green eyes that sometimes looked gold, and she had an elegant sense to her, dressing like an old-time movie star, in palazzo pants and long embroidered dressing jackets. She reminded me of a Greta Garbo or Bette Davis type, and the picture would have been complete with one of those old-time long-handled cigarette holders, but thankfully she didn't smoke.

"Maisy, so good to see you," she said, looking around. "So, this is your shop? Very nice." She paused, then added, "It's missing something," she said. "But you'll find out what soon enough. I'd tell you but I don't sense anything detailed."

Everybody seemed to have an opinion about my shop. I offered her a chair by my desk. "You wanted to talk to me?"

“Yes, about your quest. The Crow Man came to me and told me what happened. You passed with flying colors, so we’ll be initiating you into the Dark Moon Society come Saturday night.” Nightshade leaned forward. “Few ever meet the Crow Man during their quests. That you did means you’re going to be an important part of the Dark Moon Society.”

“He scared the hell out of me,” I said. “He asked me to pledge myself against the?”

“The Covenant of Chaos. Yes, I know. All of us who join the Crown Magika swear an oath to fight the forces of chaos. But when the Crow Man steps in, that means we have a special part to play in the battle. I met him during my initiation, and I follow the Morrígan. All right, you seem fit enough.” She was about to stand.

That was it? I didn’t know what I’d been expecting, but I felt like I’d gotten off easily.

“I need to ask you a question,” I said. “Aphrodite told me that I need to learn how to listen without taking on the emotions of others. I’ve been feeling overwhelmed.” I told her about the readings I’d been doing, and how they were affecting my moods. “It feels like they dampen my joy,” I added. “I want to help, but I don’t want to walk around in perpetual sadness.”

“We can work on that,” Nightshade said. “It’s not as hard as you think. At the regular meeting next month, we can help you. Meanwhile, be sure to cast a circle every night, cleanse your chakras at least twice a week, and use sage spray or cleansing spray daily. Keep your shop warded. Teaching you to learn to interact with others without taking on their emotions would be a good refresher for everyone, as well.”

I knew that I wouldn’t get an answer, but I had to ask. “What about Crystal?”

“She’ll be watched over on her quest.” She paused, then said, “I have little doubt that

she'll pass. Things can happen, but I'd be surprised. Don't let your worries consume you. I will see you Saturday night. Your aunt will help you find a dress." She stood and headed for the door. "Your shop is beautiful. You'll make your success here," she added. "Even if it's not the way you think."

I waved as she exited the shop, then texted Crystal. "Coffee?"

She texted back. "Always. Come over."

Feeling renewed, and yet apprehensive, I picked up my purse, locked the door behind me, and stopped in at the Mocha Express before getting ready for class.

* * *

So many memories from my childhood surrounded the Midnight Manor Academy, and while not all of them were good, for the most part I'd really enjoyed my school days. Now, returning as an adult, I couldn't help but look around and remember times spent there as a child.

My mother had enrolled me when I was six, and my aunts had made sure to keep me in the academy until the day I turned eighteen. Once in a while, I'd wondered what it would be like to attend the mainstream high schools, but my classes had been interesting, the teachers had been strict but fair, and Crystal and I had navigated our way through growing up.

Stuart Waterline had gone to Midnight Point High, but we met at a football game when we were both in our sophomore years. It had been crush at first sight, and my fifteen-year-old self had fallen hard for the handsome shifter. Stuart had played on the high school baseball team, so by spring, I was attending every game he was in, cheering him on even though I had no interest in baseball. I'd learned the lingo, developed a penchant for true crime shows, and faced the embarrassing talk with my

aunts about birth control and self-respect when it came to sex.

I had to give it to Astra and Sara, they had handled it well. Astra took me to the doctor for my first gynecological exam and my stash of birth control pills—the ones that worked for witchblood. I'd also been given a stern warning that sex and men weren't worth more than my self-respect. My hormones might have been strong, but my aunts made sure my sense of self was stronger. Astra also assured me that if Stuart ever crossed the line into any form of coercion or abuse they would put him six feet under.

Midnight Manor Academy's campus took up a little over five hundred acres on the east side of the island. The campus was one hundred and fifty years old and had been established twenty-four years after Port Townsend became a city, the same year that Midnight Point was founded. I wasn't sure if any of the current inhabitants had been here at the beginning, but it wouldn't surprise me.

The campus was mostly patches of thickets and fields, but there were six main buildings.

Albertson Hall was for the elementary students, including grades one through six. Derrickson Hall included grades seven through nine, and Barbary Hall was for students in high school—grades ten through twelve. Mayer Hall served the community classes.

The other two buildings included the Community Hall, with a large auditorium, a theater, the administration offices, and the cafeteria. The Rec Center, with a swimming pool, indoor track, and other amenities for physical education was the last big building. There were some minor, smaller, buildings scattered around campus—magic and science labs, a pottery studio, and a greenhouse where the earth witches put in volunteer time in the gardens. The gardens supplied the cafeteria with most of their fresh vegetables throughout the spring and the summer, and the

greenhouse did the same during late autumn and winter.

All in all, the campus was a tangle of wild nature and manicured beauty.

I parked in the lot near Mayer Hall and slinging my tote bag containing my notebook, laptop, and e-reader over my shoulder, I set out briskly, trying to avoid being caught in the downpour waiting to happen. An army of gray clouds loomed threateningly overhead.

I was nearly at the door when Alexa—one of my classmates—waved to me.

“Hey, you ready for the quiz?” She caught hold of the door and held it open till I caught up with her.

“I don’t know. I just hope it’s written and not an actual test. I’ve had one hell of a week.” I shook my head. “I haven’t had much time to study.”

“Professor Themasa isn’t exactly forgiving, I’ve noticed.” She giggled, rolling her eyes.

Alexa was about ten years younger than I was, far more perky and almost annoyingly positive. But it was a genuine positivity that never seemed forced or affected. She was one of those women who really believed that everything would work out for the best, but when things went south, she was right there to comfort those who were hurting.

“You’re right about that,” I said with a laugh. “Hopefully she won’t call on me if there’s a verbal component to the test.”

We were a few minutes early. As we entered the room, I noticed that Professor Themasa hadn’t arrived yet.

“How’s your day been?” Alexa asked, taking a seat. I grabbed the chair next to her—most community classes were held at long tables instead of individual desks.

“Long but boring. Tomorrow night, I have a meeting with a potential client,” I said. “He can’t come in during the daylight hours.”

“You’re meeting a vampire ?” she asked, her eyes wide. “I wish I could.”

“Be careful what you wish for,” I said, but I grinned. “To be honest, I’m curious, too. I don’t know if I’ve ever met one—I mean, how do we know, unless they reveal their nature? All I know is that I’m planning to be really careful to avoid making him feel uncomfortable.”

“Him ?” Alexa raised her eyebrows. “You have a male vampire who’s looking for love? I don’t know why, but that surprises me.”

“Maybe it’s the stereotype? They’re always seen as playboy types—” I paused as the professor entered the room. “Okay, here we go. Good luck on the test.”

“Class, for this test, I’m asking you to space yourselves a chair apart. Quickly, now.” Professor Themasa tapped her wand on her desk.

Everybody scrambled to spread out. The professor was daunting, and nobody wanted to be on her bad side. She was fair but strict, and the first night, she’d shown us a video of her performing an exorcism to banish a Haunt—a ghost who was angry and able to manipulate physical objects. She packed so much power that it made the entire class take a step back. But I had to admit, she was a good teacher and I had already learned a lot in the three weeks that I’d been coming to class.

Alexa moved a chair away, and I stayed where I was. As the professor handed out our quiz papers, I set my bag on the floor next to me and readied my pen, hoping I’d

managed to study enough.

CHAPTER SEVEN

After handing in my paper, and chatting a little more with Alexa, I headed home, relieved to be done for the day. It had been a long one, and I was worried about the test. I thought I'd passed, but I wouldn't know until next week.

Astra was on her stationary bike when I unlocked the door and slipped inside. She was watching a TV show called A Study of Natural Beauty .

“What’s the episode about this week?” I asked, tossing my book bag on the sofa and shrugging off my jacket. I sat in the rocking chair and slipped my hands under my shirt, unhooking my bra and sliding it off through the armholes. “Oh man, that feels good. Underwire is my friend, but around this time of day, it becomes my enemy.”

Astra snorted and paused the program. “I hear that. That’s why I wear a sports bra to work out. This week they’re visiting the Painted Desert. It’s gorgeous, but I’m not sure I’d be comfortable there. The desert is wide open and windswept in a way that no other place is.”

“True that,” I said, yawning and leaning back. “I totally forgot to eat dinner.”

“We’re out of leftovers, so either you order pizza or other takeout, or cook fresh,” she said. “I just made some ramen for dinner.”

“That sounds good,” I said, perking up. I loved ramen. “I think I’ll do the same.”

“We have plenty of things to add to it?—”

“Nope. You know I’m a purist. I want my ramen with broth, and nothing else in it. But I’ll find something on the side.” I headed in the kitchen. “How long do you have left?”

“Ten minutes,” she said as I passed by. “I’ve managed twenty minutes so far, and in ten, I’ll have done five miles.”

I poured a cup and a half of water in a pan and set it to boil. I liked my broth reduced and saltier. Then, pulling out a package of ham-flavored ramen, I gave it a couple whacks before opening, to break up the noodles. We had ham, so while the water was coming to a boil, I cut a thick slice off of it, setting it on a bread and butter plate. I lowered the heat and used a fork to help break up the noodles before adding the seasoning packet, then poured it all into a wide bowl and carried it out to the dining table.

Astra had finished her biking by then. She wiped her forehead with a towel and yawned. “I needed that. The older I get, the more I realize how important it is to keep as mobile as I can. How did class go?”

“We had a quiz. I’m not expecting an ‘A’ given how little study I managed to put in, but we’ll see.” I began eating my soup, suddenly feeling the weight of the day on my shoulders. “I’m tired, Auntie. I’m feeling better than this morning, emotionally, but I just feel tired.”

“Last night’s vision quest had to be exhausting, plus everything else you’ve been dealing with lately. What did Nightshade have to say?”

“Oh, that’s right,” I said, remembering. “She wants me to wear some sort of ritual gear for Saturday night. I’m going to be initiated into the Dark Moon Society then, and she said you could help me find something to wear.” I paused, then added, “Saturday night, Crystal goes through her initiation.”

“She should do fine,” Astra said. “Please don’t worry about her.”

I nodded. “That’s essentially what Nightshade told me. What should I wear?”

“Do you have time tomorrow? We can go shopping.”

“The only thing on my schedule for tomorrow is Zandre, tomorrow night at nine. So, yeah, I can. I’ll take the afternoon off. Is there a place in town that will have the appropriate regalia that I’ll need?” It wasn’t exactly standard to find ritual dress in most department stores, not even in a shadow town.

“There are several magical shops around that carry regalia. We’ll go there. But you’d be surprised what you can find in the right stores, even if they’re mainstream.” Astra yawned. “I think I’ll turn in. You ready for bed, or are you going to stay up for a while?”

I finished my soup. “Nope, I’m definitely ready for bed.” I carried my dishes into the kitchen, then gave Astra a kiss. “Night, Auntie.”

“Night, sweet girl. Sleep well.” With Dahlia at her heels, she shut the door behind her as I headed into my bedroom.

Miss P. was there already, sprawled out on my bed. I stripped and pulled on my nightshirt, then sprawled across the bed with her.

“Hey, fuzzbutt, how’s my baby girl?” I snuggled her, burying my face in her fur. She smelled dusty, in a cozy sort of way, and began to purr, a deep, sonorous rumble that helped me relax. I took a few moments to brush my teeth and wash my face, then slid under the covers. With Miss P. curling up next to my head on my pillow, I fell into a deep sleep and didn’t dream once.

* * *

Next day I decided what the hell, I'd take the whole day off. I didn't have any appointments till Zandre, so I stuck a note on my door stating I'd be back the following day, then joined Astra for brunch. We decided to eat at the Pacific Blue, a diner on Forsythia Street. Their food was some of the best diner food I'd ever tasted.

Astra ordered a ham and cheese omelet with a side of pancakes, while I ordered a Belgian waffle, sausage, and fried eggs. As we waited for our food, I looked outside, watching the pedestrians pass by the diner. "Do you have any tips for when I meet with Zandre tonight?"

"If you wear silver, hide it. It's rude to attend a meeting decked out in silver when you know a vamp is going to be there. Second, I strongly suggest you wear silver to the meeting."

I laughed. "I'll always be your little girl, won't I?"

"You're the only daughter I'll ever have," she said, smiling. "Just tuck a necklace beneath your shirt. Even with silver, they can glamour you, but I doubt if you'll have much problem with that. I did a little research on Zandre when you first mentioned him, and given he's Midnight Point's representative to the Northwest Vampire Collection, he has to be cautious." She laughed. "I remember when I met my first vampire. Well, the first that I knew of. You can't always go by looks, although there's always something that stands out about them."

"I feel like my horizons are broadening out now that I'm back in Midnight Point," I said. "First I meet two Fae, then I meet a vampire. I'm becoming worldly!"

Astra laughed. "I suppose you could put it that way—" She stopped as my phone chimed.

I glanced at the lock screen notification. “Oh, speak of the devil, Ginger just texted me.” I opened my phone.

hey, I really enjoyed meeting you. would you like to go out to dinner together on Sunday evening?

I pulled my pocket planner out of my purse and glanced at the week. sure, i’d like that. where do you want to eat, and when?

how about abernathy’s? they have a variety of food and they’re not too pricey. say seven?

sounds good to me, I texted back. putting it on my calendar now.

“What does she want?” Astra asked.

“She just asked me to dinner Sunday night. I said yes. I’d like to get to know her a bit better. The Fae have always intrigued me, and I feel like she’s a connection I’m going to value.”

The waitress brought our food then, and we settled in to eat. We chatted away, about Miss P. and Dahlia, about the kitchen remodel we were planning, about a little bit of everything, until we were nearly finished with our brunch.

“So, where are these magical shops you’ve been talking about?” I asked. Even in the two and a half months I’d been home, I hadn’t managed to reacquaint myself fully with the town.

“The first is down near the docks. Come on, I’ll get the check.”

“Let me get the tip, then?”

She nodded. “Sounds good.”

As she paid the bill, I left a generous tip on the table. Times were tough, and waitressing wasn’t the easiest way to earn a living.

* * *

The drive down to the docks was easy enough, and parking was plentiful. Most people were at work, or they didn’t fancy being down at the pier on a blustery day. And blustery it was. February often saw snow in Western Washington, or stormy, rainy days. We’d had the snow in January and the forecast said we were probably through with it for the winter, but the rain and chill just kept coming.

“I’m looking forward to spring,” I said. “My favorite season is autumn, but this has been a long winter, and it started in November for me.”

“How much do you miss your old job?” Astra asked.

“I don’t, not really. In fact, when I think about it, I’m kind of relieved. They were a bunch of assholes, and I hated having to dim my light. But the downside is that I got used to making so many matches there that I feel rather useless here. And now, Aphrodite’s saying I may not be walking fully in the right direction, so I don’t know what to think.”

“Do you believe she’s right?” My aunt put the car in park, and we unfastened our seatbelts.

As I slung my purse over my shoulder, I frowned, wanting to answer honestly. “Yes, and no. I suppose. I don’t know. The part of me that wants to see those successes pile up, well, that side of me feels like I’m failing. I feel like I’ve slacked off. I know, though, that here—in Midnight Point—I can’t just hustle like I used to. Life doesn’t

work like that here.”

“True enough, and that’s a valuable lesson to learn. For what it’s worth, Maisy, I’m proud of you. I see you struggling with this, but in the end, what matters is the quality of what you’ve done, not sheer volume. You could make a dozen matches in a week but if over half of them fall apart, then they really don’t count.”

I laughed. “With divorce rates what they are, I guess I’m doing pretty good. I checked in on some of my previous clients from my old job, and they’re all still together. I have like...a 99 percent track record, which is excellent.”

“Excellent? It’s almost perfect. I doubt if most matchmakers can claim that.”

The strip mall down by the ferry was laid out in a long row of shops in a building tucked under the hill, the concrete walls built into the face of the cliff like a rammed earth house or a hobbit hole. They held a diverse group of offerings.

There was a pot shop—A Little Help From My Friends; a pizza place—Just A Slice; a bar—Papa Mojito’s; a gift shop for Otherkin—Baby’s First Fang; and then the magic shop—Ona Sera’s Roots. The shops were all colorful and?—

“Ona Sera? She’s the woman you wanted me to meet last month, isn’t she?”

“Yes, she owns this shop.” Astra led me over to the brightly lit magic shop.

As we entered, I felt the subtle twinge of magic surrounding me. It was gentle, but powerful, and I had the feeling that—at full force—whoever had cast the wards was an incredibly powerful witch.

The Strega weren’t exactly Fam-Trad, born to a family lineage, but rather a branch of the witchblood who had evolved with their own talents in magic. The Voudoun

practitioners were the same—they had their own magical structure. Not all of the outlier witchblood clans answered to the Court Magika, but neither did they break the rules. At least, most of them didn't.

The woman behind the counter could have been forty or one hundred and forty. The moment I laid eyes on her, I understood that she was one of those women who confounded time—battling it with genetics and with her own form of magic.

She was short and thin, wearing a long skirt of deep forest green that flowed to her ankles, beneath which I could see a pair of suede boots. Her top reminded me of a thermal underwear tank top, mustard-colored, and she wore a brown suede belt. Her brown hair was caught back in thin braids that dangled down her back, and her skin had an olive undertone that brought to mind the people of the Mediterranean.

As her eyes lit up and she headed our way, I found myself stepping back. There was an intensity about her that made me feel nervous.

But she stopped by Astra and spread her arms. “Mama Astra, give us a hug!”

Astra embraced her, towering over her by several inches. “Ona Sera, you're back!”

“Of course I'm back. I can't stay on vacation forever,” Ona Sera said. “And you've brought company! Is this your niece?”

“Yes, this is my niece, Maisy. Maisy, meet Ona Sera,” Astra said pulling away with a smile on her face.

“Maisy, you look just like your aunt told me you would. A pretty thing you are.”

Before I could mutter a hello, Ona Sera had pulled me into a bear hug, then let go just as quickly. For such a slight woman, she was incredibly strong.

“Well, then, what’s the occasion for the visit?”

Grateful she hadn’t asked how I liked being back in Midnight Point, I deferred to my aunt. It seemed like everybody I met who found out that I had once lived in town wanted to know how I felt it had changed and did I like being home and why did I return, along with a dozen other questions I didn’t fancy answering.

“Maisy’s joining the Dark Moon Society this weekend. We need appropriate regalia for her.” Astra sounded as proud as she had when I had won the state spelling bee at age thirteen. I hadn’t continued in my pursuit of the perfect vocabulary—the spelling bee world was fiercely competitive—but I still loved playing with words.

“Well then, let’s see what we have.” Ona Sera led us over to the area of the store with clothing racks. There were magical gowns and cloaks galore, in all colors and sizes, along with what looked like Ren Faire garb.

But Astra knew what she wanted. Well—wanted for me , and she headed directly for the rack of long, black gowns. She thumbed through them, finally pulling out a gown that looked like a sundress. Chiffon, it had a fitted corset-type bodice, cap sleeves, and a flowing skirt.

“This will work well. Do you like it?” She held it up for me to look at.

It was pretty, though out of my usual comfort zone. But I noticed the detail on it. The bodice was embossed with black-on-black roses. The skirt had garters that could be used to shorten it by gathering it up in scallops. The dress had a side zipper, making it easy to get on and off. And as I examined it, I realized the stitching was exquisite—straight, even, and pressed to a smooth finish.

“This is extremely well made,” I said, holding the hem as I examined it. “It’s really pretty. Does this come in my size?”

Ona Sera took the dress from Astra, then flipped through the dresses on the rack, finally pulling one out. “Right here, and it’s a petite, so it’s not going to drag on the ground. Would you like to try it on?”

I nodded, so she turned me toward the dressing rooms and gave me a little push. “The room on the left has the best lighting,” she said.

Surprised by the generous size of the fitting room, I stripped. I’d dressed for clothes shopping: a pair of gauchos, an easy-off tank, and slip-on flats. I cautiously stepped into the dress. It seemed the easiest way to get it on. As I zipped the side, then adjusted my boobs and stood back to look at myself, I wasn’t prepared for the image in the mirror.

Whether it was the dress, or just me and the way my mindset was changing, when I saw my reflection, I gasped. For the first time in...perhaps ever ...I truly felt like I could see my own beauty. I was glowing with magic.

I pressed my hand to my chest, my eyes welling up. The dress signified something . I knew that, though I wasn’t sure yet exactly what it meant to me. But in this dress, I felt like I was magic incarnate. In this dress, I felt worthy of being Aphrodite’s priestess. It was as though I could see into my own nature, and for the first time, I wasn’t dissatisfied.

I opened the dressing room door and stepped out. “What do you think?”

My question came out almost shyly, but as Astra and Ona Sera looked at me, they both gasped. Auntie stood there, tears in her eyes as well.

“You’re so beautiful. That dress might have been made for you,” she said.

Ona Sera beamed. “A true match.”

I leaned against the corner of the wall. “Only two other times have clothes made me feel this way. The first was my wedding dress, and it made me feel like a bride. I actually felt radiant in that dress. And then, my dress for pledging to Aphrodite. That dress made me feel...worthy. This dress...it makes me feel like I do embody magic, like I do deserve to join the Dark Moon Society.”

“I know they say clothes don’t make the man,” Ona Sera said, “but there’s something to be said for the way certain outfits can make you feel about yourself. It’s not the outfits themselves that bring those magical feelings...it’s the way they fit on you. The way they help peel off the masks and expose your inner nature.”

“Makeup is the same way,” I said. “I love playing with it, because it’s like...choosing your mood for the day. What emotion or part of myself do I feel like putting face-forward today?”

“True enough,” Ona Sera said. “I take it you want this dress?”

I nodded. “Yes, but what kind of shoes should I wear with it, Auntie? I’m not certain of the dress code.”

“Most meetings, we wear a black dress or pantsuit—whatever is comfortable, clean, and tidy. This dress will be your formal ritual gown for most events. You’re never to wear it for just any mundane party or holiday.”

“Got it. Reserve the dress for high holidays,” I said, nodding.

“As far as shoes, something you can walk through a field in, if necessary. A pair of comfortable flats, nonskid, that are all black as well.”

Ona Sera sighed. “That, I cannot help you with. I have some shoes but they don’t fit the bill. They’re more for the Ren Faire crowd. Anything else?”

“Maisy’s going to need a new dagger, one for Society rituals. She has her own, of course, for her personal workings. But she’ll need one for Society events.” Astra was looking at the athames in a long glass case.

I took off the dress, then joined her as Ona Sera began to wrap it up in a big white box. The array of daggers was startling—she had at least thirty options. I quickly scanned the blades, but none of them caught my eye.

“I like them, they’re pretty, but none of them are calling to me,” I said.

“Then we’ll wait. You can’t just pick a random blade for this.” She paused, then—as Ona Sera finished wrapping the dress—added, “I need some more Protection Powder, along with some Spring Clean spray.”

Ona Sera retrieved both from her shelves. “Is that all you need?”

Astra nodded. “How much?”

“You are not paying for my dress,” I said, pulling out my wallet. “In fact, I’m getting this, so if you need anything else, add it now.”

Astra gave me a long look, then put away her credit card. “Well, I could use another set of directional candles, as well as some Blessing Powder.”

“You’ve got it,” Ona Sera said, adding the items to the pile. She paused, then glanced at me. “Keep your warding up. And don’t trust that everything is as it seems on the surface. Don’t just assume you know someone at their core, just because they’re dear to you. And watch the judgment. We all judge, but don’t destroy something dear because you are unwilling to accept differences. Just a little extra advice.”

The way she said it made me shiver. It was like one of those truths that came out of

the blue, struck like lightning, then vanished as quickly as it had come. I thanked her, paid for our purchases, and then followed my aunt out of the store.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The day passed uneventfully. Crystal texted that she was down sick with a cold, and I offered to drop by with some chicken soup, but she said she was fine and she didn't want me to catch it. I helped Astra go through a list of local contractors to consult about the kitchen remodel, and then I decided to tackle my office—Astra's former sewing room—and ended up rearranging all the furniture, sorting through my books and office supplies, and catching up on several shows I'd missed because of classes.

I also tackled my homework, which was mostly a lot of reading on theories of how various forms of exorcism worked, along with a chapter for my cryptozoology class. By the time I finished, it was dinnertime. Astra was out with a friend, so I made myself a roast beef sandwich, then settled in the living room.

Dahlia came bouncing up, gave me a loud bark, then turned and raced away. Miss P. jumped off the sofa and chased her. A moment later, the inevitable tussle started and then, five minutes after that, by the time I finished my sandwich, they were curled up together, snoring.

At eight, I decided the black gauchos I was wearing would work, and added a green turtleneck sweater, a black belt, and a pair of knee-high leather boots. Despite Auntie's warnings, I decided against the pendant. It seemed rude. I'd just show as little skin as possible. I had no idea what set off vampires, but I wasn't giving him any indication that I might be interested in seeing or feeling his fangs.

"I'm stereotyping and I know it," I muttered to myself, feeling vaguely embarrassed. "Remember Ona Sera's advice."

But vampires were dangerous, so regardless of his position in society, I wasn't taking any unnecessary chances. As I stood back, I thought I looked both professional yet casual enough. I took Dahlia out for her pee-time, then with both her and Miss P. comfortably preoccupied with their dinners, I locked the door and headed for my office.

* * *

Once there, I tidied up again, gathered the paperwork I'd need, and settled back with a game on my phone while I waited for Zandre.

Promptly at nine o'clock, he walked through the door. I could feel the difference in energy immediately. It wasn't that I couldn't breathe, but I felt out of breath, as though his presence just sucked the air right out of the room, and I couldn't draw my gaze away.

He was tall—well, tall for me.

Around five-eleven, Zandre had long wavy black hair, drawn back in a sleek ponytail. His eyes were jet black, ringed with crimson—the surefire sign that he was a vampire. His skin was smooth, like fine alabaster, and he had chiseled features—a long Roman nose, ridged cheekbones, and bowed lips. He was absolutely beautiful, reminding me of some gothic prince.

I tried to pull my gaze away, to pay attention to what was going on, but it was difficult. I finally found my tongue and stood, reaching out to shake hands.

“You must be Zandre,” I said, shivering at his touch. His hands were ice cold, reminding me that this man was actually one of the undead. He had been through the Veil and returned, not as one of the Unliving, but as an actual vampire. “I'm Maisy Tripwater. Welcome to Married At First Bite.”

He smiled, the corners of his lips turning ever-so-slightly upward. As he opened his mouth to speak, I caught sight of his fangs. They were down, and the sight of them immediately reminded me that he was a predator.

“Hello, Ms. Tripwater. Thank you for seeing me at this time. Obviously, I cannot travel about during the daylight hours.” He looked around. “You have a lovely and welcoming shop.”

“Thank you. So, how about you tell me why you’re here. Every client has a different story about why they seek out my services.” I sat down, taking up my pen. I liked taking notes by hand.

He paused, then cleared his throat. “Two hundred years ago, I was the son of a banker. This was before I became a vampire. I was madly in love with a woman named Eugenia. She was my everything. Shortly after we married, she came into the bank where I worked for my father. She wanted to talk about dinner or something of that sort. Anyway, right then, a group of bank robbers burst in, and they killed her in front of me. They also shot my brother. I was hit by a bullet, but I played dead and the men left.”

I caught my breath. “What a horrible thing to happen. I’m so sorry.”

“Time heals, I suppose, but in the case of Eugenia, it hasn’t. She’s still on my mind. Not a day goes by that I don’t think of her. Our love...it was meant to last.”

“So...do you want me to contact her spirit?”

He shook his head. “No. I know that she’s reincarnated, and I know that she now resides here, in Midnight Point. She may not remember me, but I believe she’s come back so that we can be together. I’d like you to approach her for me.”

I sat back, uncomfortable. I wasn't in the habit of running down past-life loves, especially when I doubted the woman in question would remember her past life as clearly as Zandre seemed to. It seemed stalkerish.

"I'm not sure if I can do that, especially if you have your sights fixed on one person in particular. Have you two met?"

He shook his head. "No, but if she would just talk to me, I'm sure she'd remember me."

An uncharitable thought ran through my head that yes, she'd remember him from then on, but not in the way he hoped. I tapped my pen on my notebook.

"Why don't you give me her name and let me look into this. Meanwhile, just in case it doesn't work out, I need you to fill out some forms for me. If she's not the actual person you think she is, I might still be able to find you the woman you need." I didn't want to argue with him, but I was here to match him with the right person, not the person he assumed he should be with.

Zandre gave me a long look, then said, "All right. What do I do?"

"First, I need a nonrefundable fee of five hundred, then we'll get started. If you make it to the altar, I charge an additional thousand dollars."

He pulled out a credit card and silently watched me run it through my scanner. After I gave him his receipt, I sat him in front of my spare laptop to fill out my extensive questionnaire. After he finished, he returned to my desk.

"All right, what's this woman's name, the one you're convinced is your reincarnated love?" I asked. I'd look into it—stranger things had happened—but I was leery of his request. Especially since he was a vampire. But at least he had come to me, and not

approached her himself.

“Denise Rober. She’s a teacher over at Shifter Creek Preschool Academy.”

He handed me his phone, opened to the local online news site. It had a story on the preschool, and a picture of her. A dog shifter, she looked to be in her mid-thirties, so at least she wasn’t some teenager. She was tall, athletic, and had long brown hair. There was nothing particularly striking about her. Nothing that caught my eye, at least.

“How do you know she’s the reincarnation of Eugenia? Did a psychic tell you? Is there something that connects Denise with Eugenia, like...a common ancestor or something? I need all the information that you can give me.”

I wanted to see where he was coming from. It was important to know how his mind worked, so I could wean him off the idea that his only option was this woman. She could be married, she could be gay, she could hate vampires, she could be anything but interested in Zandre.

He hemmed and hawed for a moment, then finally said, “I saw that picture, and I knew that it was her. I know it sounds crazy, but the moment I saw her, I knew.”

I frowned. How to best work this so he didn’t go away angry, and so that he didn’t try to take matters into his own hands?

“Zandre, what will you do if she’s married? Maybe even gay? You have no idea of what her life’s like?—”

He stared at the ceiling. “I don’t know about that, but I doubt she’s married. I’ve never seen her with a guy.”

I groaned. “Tell me you haven’t gone stalking her.”

“I looked into her background, yes. I haven’t sent her any gifts or anything...well...I did, but it was anonymous. I donated five thousand dollars to the school’s lunch program. They’re hurting for cash to help their low-income students.”

He looked so earnest, it was hard to dump him in the “potential troublemaker” pile.

“You know, I’d like to say something without sounding too rude.”

“Please, just be direct,” he said. “I don’t mind blunt.”

“Good. Zandre, you’re going to get yourself in trouble if you keep following her. You have to be ready to accept she may not be interested in you, she may not be available, and she may not even believe that she’s connected to you in any way.” I leaned back in my chair. “You have a lot to lose if you make a stupid move. You’re the town’s representative to the Northwest Vampire Collective. You can’t be caught skulking around a stranger’s ass, so to speak.”

He stared at me, unblinking. “And you care because...?”

“Because my clients are looking for happiness. I do everything I can to help them. And that sometimes includes being a hard ass and shaking them free from their delusions.”

“Delusions... You’re a witch . Don’t you believe in reincarnation?”

“Of course I do, but...I also believe that grief can make us believe all sorts of things. I will check into Denise, but I don’t think she’s your fated mate. I get none of the usual tingles I get when I put two people together.” I sighed. “I wish it were this easy. But Zandre, let me do this my way. Don’t go after her yourself. Promise me?”

He sighed. “You seem to know my plans before I do. You’re good, I’ll give you that.”

“I’ve been trained to anticipate potential romantic fuckups. Anyway, as far as me finding you the perfect match, I can’t guarantee anything, but I’ll have a far better chance of doing so than the average matchmaker or dating site.” I shrugged. “Are you game? If not, I’ll return your fee right now. But if you want me to help you, you need to agree to try it my way.”

Zandre shifted, and that was the first time I noticed him fidgeting at all. He had an incredible ability to freeze, to sit like a statue. It was unnerving. He leaned forward, just enough to show that he was really listening.

“All right. Let’s give it a few months. I’ll stay away from Denise. But regardless of the fact that you think otherwise, she’s Eugenia . She’s come back to find me, even if she doesn’t realize it just yet. And I think you’ll see the truth as you look into her past. There has to be something in the back of her memory about me. I know there does.”

I wanted to shake him, to say Wake up, you’re in denial but it was going to take more than that to convince him that Denise Rober wasn’t his reincarnated love. These were the cases I hated working on—where someone was hung up on someone from the past. I had a hunch that Zandre wasn’t going to let go of his belief that Denise Rober was his long-lost love, returned to pick up their romance again.

“Well, I guess we’ll have to see. Now, if you’ll indulge me, tell me about the kind of woman you’re looking for. Are you...” This was going to be a sensitive question. “Are you looking for another vampire?”

He eyed me carefully, then said, “It doesn’t matter to me. Human, shifter... witch ...I don’t care. The only kind of woman I’m not interested in is Fae. I don’t trust them,

and they don't like vampires."

I paused again. "You do realize that any other woman besides one who's a vampire will never match your lifespan. Are you willing to lose someone again? I know I'm being blunt, but you said you preferred that."

It was Zandre's turn to pause. Finally, he said, "Some soulmates stay with us through lifetimes. I happen to believe that if she's my true match, she'll return to me. Like?—"

"Don't say it," I said. "Remember, we aren't talking about Denise now."

"Right. Okay, then anyone but one of the Fae, anywhere from twenty-five to forty. Athletic, not a smoker, she can't eat or use garlic, open minded and not afraid of blood." He paused, glancing over at me.

I did my best to not react. "Right. Not squeamish."

"I want her to be well-educated. If I can't talk to another woman, I don't want to be around her. I need someone who's got a good head on her shoulders. Beauty fades, brains are forever. I'm not saying I don't want beauty, but it's not the primary focus. I haven't been a hormonal teenager for over two hundred years, Maisy."

At that moment, I heard the loneliness in his voice. I'd never thought about it, but it must be a lonely life, especially when you were facing years that would not end until you walked into the sun, or until you decided to end it by fire, or—in a more gruesome sense—some nutjob self-proclaimed vampire slayer got to you.

"I understand," I said. "I truly do. You want a companion."

"Yes, I want a companion. Find her for me, Maisy. Because I trust you, and I'd hate

to think that I've misplaced my trust." With that, he stood and reached out.

I suppressed a shudder and shook his hand. "As long as you work with me, Zandre, we can do our best to make this happen." And with that, I escorted him out and quickly locked the door. It took me ten minutes to stop shaking.

CHAPTER NINE

The next morning, I found myself staring at my computer. Astra was making breakfast, and I was ready for work. As I scanned Zandre's questionnaire, my stomach knotted again.

"Auntie, I need your advice. I think Zandre threatened me last night. Subtly, but it felt like a threat." I had tossed and turned all night.

Yes, I want a companion. Find her for me, Maisy. Because I trust you, and I'd hate to think that I've misplaced my trust.

The words had been said smoothly enough, but they had set my alarms going. When I had managed to get to sleep, I had felt a vague sense of dread filtering through my dreams.

Astra put down the turner she'd been using to flip the eggs. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm not sure. But Zandre...I wish I'd just said no and turned him away. He worries me, and I think that he might be dangerous. At least when it comes to one woman in particular." I told her everything that Zandre had told me. I usually kept my consultations private, but I still felt like he might make a stupid move when it came to Denise Rober.

"You need to talk to her, as soon as possible."

“What about Zandre? Is there anybody I should talk to about this?” I wasn’t sure what would happen if I went to the police. What was there to report? A vampire who was obsessed with a woman he was convinced was his late wife from a couple hundred years ago? If he’d been any normal man, the cops wouldn’t do anything. Not until he took some sort of action.

“Talk to her. If on the off chance she does have feelings for him, or if she shows an interest, then maybe he’s right. We can’t discount the possibility, no matter how small. If not, then you see how he reacts.” Astra turned back to the eggs. “Damn, they’re overcooked.”

“I don’t care, as long as they aren’t burnt. All right, I’ll contact her and see what she says. I just worry because with him a vampire, and her a dog shifter, he has a lot more strength and power than she has. Auntie, my alarm bells are going off like crazy.”

“All the more reason for you to touch base with her.” Astra slid the eggs onto two plates, then added toast and bacon. “Breakfast is ready. I already fed Dahlia and Miss P.” She carried our plates over to the nook while I made our breakfast lattes.

I pulled out my tablet and sat down at the table, bringing up the number of the Shifter Creek Preschool Academy, then unlocked my phone and punched in the number. A couple rings later, someone answered.

“Shifter Creek Preschool Academy, Lana speaking. How may I help you?”

“Hi,” I said. “I’m trying to get in touch with a teacher there. Denise Rober. Is she available?”

“She’s in class right now. May I take a message?” Lana asked.

I thought for a moment. “Actually, yes. My name is Maisy Tripwater, and I really

need to talk to Ms. Rober. Tell her...it's just important. It's about someone she may have once known." I left my number, asking Lana to relay the message as soon as possible, then hung up. "I hope she calls back."

"I do, too, love. Maybe you should talk to Stuart, privately. Not on record. Get his advice?" She took a bite of her eggs and grimaced. "These are like rubber. I can remake them if you like."

"No, I'm fine," I said. "And that's actually a good idea. I'm just afraid that if I don't take appropriate measures, something will happen."

Astra stared at me, frowning. "You seem hypersensitive to the situation. I'm not saying that's a bad thing, but...did anything ever happen to you, to make you this concerned? Is it a vampire thing? Or..."

I knew what she was asking. I shook my head.

"Not to me, not directly. But I had a friend in Seattle. Leslie was stalked by a guy who had convinced himself she was in love with him. She didn't know he was alive, to be honest—not more than to say 'hey, how are you' on the bus...that sort of thing, until the guy started showing up where she worked, and running into her in the grocery store, the movie theater—you name it, he'd show up there when she did."

"Did she talk to the police?" Astra asked.

"No, she didn't. She did tell Dan and me about it, and we tried to convince her to contact the police, but she refused. Leslie thought he'd just lose interest. She didn't want to make a scene, and she thought he'd move on."

"I take it he didn't."

“No, he didn’t. When she started going out with somebody else, the stalker—his name was Cliff—broke into her apartment and he raped her, beat her into unconsciousness, and left her for dead. I found her. We were supposed to go shopping together, and I dropped by to her apartment to pick her up. I found the door ajar, and I went in. She was on the floor, covered in bruises and blood. The medics managed to save her, but maybe it could have been prevented. If Dan and I had gone to the police for her, or if we just pushed her harder...”

“Did they catch this Cliff?” Astra asked.

I shook my head. “The cops broke into his apartment and found him dead. He’d shot himself and left a long, rambling note about how she’d driven him to suicide by not loving him. All sorts of victim blaming. At least he spared the city the cost of a trial and keeping him alive behind bars. But Leslie...she withdrew after that. She stopped talking to most of her friends, including us.”

The memory still stung.

“So, you feel responsible?” Astra asked.

“It’s not that simple. Dan and I did what we could, but where’s the point where doing the right thing ends, and letting others make their own choices begins? Should we have gone to the cops? Did we do the right thing by accepting her refusal? I know the final responsibility ends at Cliff’s feet, but could we have stopped him from harming her? It’s one big ball of wax that I don’t fully understand.”

I frowned, finishing my latte. “So, likening this case to that one, what if I do nothing and Zandre attacks her? What if she refuses him, and he...say...turns her into a vampire?”

“What if you do what you can, and then accept that there are dozens of potential

endings to this situation, and every single move made by each person involved alters the outcome?" Astra picked up her dishes and carried them to the sink.

I followed, with mine. "True enough."

My phone rang, then, interrupting our conversation. I picked it up and saw that the incoming call was from the preschool. "This is probably Denise." I answered, returning to the booth.

"Hello? Maisy Tripwater here."

"Hi, this is Denise Rober. I received a message to call this number?" She sounded curious, but wary.

"Oh, yes. Listen, is there a chance you could meet me for lunch? I have a delicate situation to discuss with you and I don't feel like doing so over the phone would work. It's regarding a man named Zandre, who thinks you may know him."

She paused, then said, "I've never heard of anybody by that name. Just who are you?"

"I own a matchmaking and psychic reading service—Married At First Bite. Zandre is a client of mine. He seems to think there's some connection between the two of you, and I feel like I need to talk to you about this, before he decides to take matters into his own hands." I felt like I was walking a tightrope.

Another pause.

Then she said, "Can you meet me here, at the preschool? I'm on playground duty during lunch, but we can talk then, if you don't mind keeping watch over a bunch of rowdy shifter kids with me."

“That’s fine. Tell me where to meet you, and I’ll come at...what time is your lunch?”

“Eleven-thirty. Meet me on the playground. I have to go—my break’s over.”

“I’ll see you then,” I said, jotting down the time as she hung up.

“Well, for better or worse, at least I’m warning her about this. Though I have the feeling that Zandre’s going to be extremely disappointed by the outcome. I just hope his disappointment doesn’t trigger him to do something foolish.”

“Amen to that,” my aunt said. “Amen to that.”

* * *

By eleven-thirty, I was standing by the jungle gym on the playground of the Shifter Creek Preschool Academy. The school was private, located on an acre of land near the Waterman Shopping Center, the biggest mall on the island.

The school was single-story, and most of the acre was covered with lush grass, with only a few trees here and there. The entire campus was fenced, and there was a designated area for parents to pick up their children. The parking lot was off to the side.

I watched as the doors to the school opened and a host of tiny beings raced out. They were followed by two adults, one of whom I recognized as Denise from her picture. She glanced around the yard, then saw me and waved. I waved back, as she jogged over to meet me.

“Are you Maisy Tripwater?” she asked.

I nodded. “Yes, and you’re Denise? Thank you so much for meeting me. I know this

all sounds odd, but I really need to talk to you. Is there a place we can sit?"

"Sure, just let me tell my colleague that I'm going to be occupied for a few minutes, so she can watch the kids on her own." She crossed to the other woman, who was talking to a little girl who was holding a broken flower and crying. Then, a moment later, Denise returned.

She led me over to one of the picnic tables in an area shaded by a big oak tree. There were a number of the tables, but the kids were mostly racing around the grass.

"The school seems nice," I said. "Are they all shifters?" I nodded to the children.

"For the most part, yes. We occasionally have an outlier, but the school is primarily focused on helping shifters fit into society from an early age. We help them control their animal side."

I didn't know much about shifters when they were young, but it sounded important.

"So, what's this all about?" Denise asked. "I don't have too long—Nancy needs my help watching the kids."

"I understand, and I appreciate you giving me some time. So, as I told you, I own a matchmaking service?—"

Denise cut me off. "I'm not in the market, if you're drumming up business."

"No, that's not it at all," I said, but that answered the big question for me. "Here's the thing. I have a new client who...well...there's no easy way to put this, but he's convinced you're the reincarnation of his late wife, and that you've come back to be with him again. He was madly in love with her, and she was killed."

Denise stared at me, blinking slowly. “How old is this guy? Is he a shifter? Because otherwise, I’m probably a lot older than he is.”

I sighed. “That’s the thing. He’s a vampire. He’s well over two hundred. His wife was killed in a bank robbery in the 1800s. Her name was Eugenia. He saw your picture in the paper and he’s convinced that she reincarnated as you. And that...”

“That I’ve come back to be with him again?” Denise’s eyes widened, and she looked absolutely horrified. “No, absolutely not. In the first place, I’m married, and my wife wouldn’t take kindly to me falling for a man. In the second place, I’m gay. In the third, I’d never, not in a million years, fall for a vampire.”

“That answers that. I tried to tell him to let go of the idea, but he’s the kind of man who doesn’t seem like he wants to accept anything unless he’s faced with it head-on. I told him I’d talk to you and find out the truth.” I shrugged, feeling uncomfortable. “I tried to get him to let it go, but...”

“But...he’s a man, and a vampire at that. Stubborn asshole. How dare he just assume that I’m...that I...” She began to sputter.

“Listen, for what it’s worth, I think by me getting a definitive no from you, he’ll probably back off. But just in case, I want to talk to the sheriff and just fill him in on what’s going on. Do you have any objections to me talking to Stuart?”

Denise thought for a moment, then said, “No, I don’t. In fact, I’d rather you did. Please, keep me updated on what happens. I’ve dealt with too many men who didn’t want to take no for an answer, or who believed that I just needed to get laid by the right guy. That if I opened my legs to them, all my gayness would fly away just like magic.”

I pulled out my phone. “Do you mind if I record you telling Zandre that you aren’t

interested, and that you're not who he thinks you are? I don't know if he's going to believe that I actually talked to you without some proof."

"Be my guest," Denise said. She straightened, then looked straight into the camera of my phone as I hit the record button.

"Denise, will you please tell my client what you told me?"

She had dropped any semblance of a smile. In a flat voice, she said, "I'm not your late wife. I'm gay, and I'm married. I'm sorry, but you've mistaken me for someone else. I'm not interested, and you'll have to find your lost love somewhere else."

I ended the recording. "I'll still have a talk with the sheriff, just to make certain we've covered every base. I usually keep all my clients private, but this time I just felt that I needed to intervene—the longer he goes on believing that you're back here for him, the messier it's bound to get."

"You're right, and you did a good thing. Thank you," Denise said. "Give me your card, in case any of my friends are ever looking for a dating service."

I handed her my card. "Thanks, Denise, and I'll let you know what the sheriff says."

As I waved to her and watched her slowly walk back toward the field of playing children, I decided my next stop would be at Stuart's office. Hopefully, Zandre would gracefully accept Denise's video and give up the idea that she was Eugenia. But I wanted backup, just in case he didn't.

CHAPTER TEN

Stuart was at his desk when I knocked on the door. He was waiting for me—the dispatcher had pinged him that I was in the building and wanting to see him.

He stood, looking lean and tall in his uniform, and so very official. “Maisy, what a pleasure. Have a seat, please.” He motioned to the chair opposite his desk.

Stuart’s office was small, a little cluttered, but it looked very utilitarian. Everything was positioned for the best use of the space, and there seemed nothing to interrupt the flow of business. The only thing that seemed remotely out of place were the three pictures on his desk. One was of a woman about his age, the second was a picture of Moonrise Waterfall—a waterfall in the Moonrise Preserve. It was tucked up in the corner of a high, narrow hike, accessible only by foot, and it was one of our pride and joys on the island. The third picture was a picture of a woman with two children. I recognized the woman as Stuart’s sister.

“Are those your nephews?” I asked, pointing at the photo.

“How did you guess?”

“I remember your sister and what she looked like,” I said. “So, I’m assuming those are her kids? They look like twins.”

“They are—identical twins. The boys are seven now. She and Jeff—her husband—live over on the peninsula now.”

“Did they move to Whisper Hollow?” I asked, shuddering.

“No, actually. They live in a cabin in the forest, closer to Port Angeles. He’s a park ranger, and they live close to his post.” Stuart leaned back, smiling. “Those boys sure keep her on her toes.”

“I bet they do,” I said. “Listen, Stuart, I have a dilemma I need to talk over with you.”

He leaned forward. “Whatever I can do to help, Maisy. What’s wrong?”

I laid everything out for him, down to showing him the video that Denise had recorded for me. “I’m not sure whether there’s anything to worry about. That’s why I came to you. I’ve been in a situation before where I chose not to contact the police and a friend was seriously injured. She had told me not to talk to the cops, but now...Denise gave me permission to come to you. I think she’s concerned too, especially since this involves a vampire.”

Stuart let out a sigh. “This isn’t the best timing. Vampires are up in arms—or should I say, up in fangs—over the groups attempting to strip them of their rights. But I’m glad you came to me. I’d be worried too, if I were Denise. Let me take a full report, and I’ll keep it off the record, until we know whether there’s more to worry about. If Zandre accepts the situation, then good enough. If not, then we’ll be able to get the ball rolling.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I guess that’s about it. Thank you for listening, Stuart.” I gathered up my purse and tablet.

“Let me know what Zandre says. We are walking a thin line here, given he’s connected to the governing body of the Pacific Northwest Vampire Collective. But regardless of that fact, I’d feel a lot easier if you told me he’s found his soulmate and has forgotten about...” He glanced at his notes. “Denise Rober.”

I was halfway to the door when a thought struck me. “Hey,” I said, turning. “I’d like to invite you and your girlfriend over to dinner some time.”

“I’ll talk to her and get back to you,” Stuart said. “See you later.”

As I sat in my car, wondering what to do next, a ping sounded from my phone. I checked it and saw that a message had forwarded from my shop’s number. It was a client who wanted to book a reading for late afternoon. I texted back a reply, scheduling a three o’clock appointment. Then, deciding I could use another hit of caffeine and a brownie, I headed for the nearest espresso stand.

* * *

My afternoon reading showed up five minutes early, looking eager. He was human, and he was carrying a notebook. He was somewhere near college age, and he had that intense intellectual feel to him that some college boys had.

“Hi, I’m Derrick,” he said, shaking my hand before sitting down. “I’m so looking forward to this. It’s my birthday present to myself.”

I grinned. “I’m Maisy, and happy birthday! I hope that the reading lives up to your expectations. So, have you ever had your cards read before?”

“I have, but it’s been awhile.”

“So what can I do for you?” I picked up my cards and began to shuffle them.

“I’d like to know what to expect during the coming year. A birthday reading, so to speak.” He opened his notebook.

I handed him the cards and asked him to shuffle five times. As I began to lay out the

cards, I found myself pulled into the reading—which, thankfully, showed a pretty good year in store for Derrick—and I forgot all about Zandre and Denise for the hour.

* * *

I was just packing up my purse to head home when I got a call from Astra.

“Did you see the breaking news?” she asked.

“No. I’ve been answering emails for the past couple of hours. What’s going on?”

“The woman you were talking about—Denise Rober?”

“What about her? I talked to her this morning.”

“Well,” my aunt said, “she’s dead.”

I froze. “How could that be? I talked to her this morning, shortly before noon. How could she be dead?”

“She was hit by a car, saving a little girl from the preschool. The girl ran out into the street in front of a car that was speeding through the area, and Denise managed to toss the girl out of the way but she couldn’t move fast enough. The car hit her, breaking her neck. She died instantly, the coroner said.”

I slowly lowered myself back into my chair. “I can’t believe it. She was so... Who was the driver?”

“Some drunken teenager taking a joy ride in his father’s sports car. The kid had drunk a bottle of whiskey, then decided to go for a spin. He’s fifteen, doesn’t even have his license yet. He was thrown from the car during the accident but he wasn’t hurt. That

figures...the drunk ones always walk away and leave their victims dead or maimed.”

My aunt was part of a group lobbying to change the drunk driver laws to include stronger punishments. I didn’t blame her.

“Oh, man. I liked Denise. She’s...she was...” I stopped, suddenly thinking about Dan. My gut clenched and I bent my head, trying to breathe through the sudden trigger. This is about Denise, I thought. Focus on Denise . A moment later, I pulled out of the looming anxiety attack, breathing normally again.

Truth was, I didn’t know what Denise was like, except that I liked her, and then I thought about her wife. “Accident, or do they think he did it deliberately?”

“It was no accident, given the kid had a choice to drink and drive. He could have chosen to call a cab or a friend, but as far as whether he intentionally killed her, I’d say no.”

I realized that Zandre couldn’t be out in the daylight. And truly, he would have had no reason to target Denise, since I hadn’t talked to him yet about her note.

As I armed the security codes and locked the door, it suddenly hit me—Denise was dead. I’d had one conversation with her, and suddenly, she was out of my life forever. We weren’t friends, but she’d been nice, and I’d liked her, and now...she was needlessly gone.

I pressed my lips together as I headed for my car. If the little girl hadn’t gone running into the street, if somebody else had caught the kid before she left the sidewalk, if Denise had managed to roll out of the way a split second earlier...

Everything was so transient. And each moment offered a multitude of paths going forward. One step, and we forever altered our future. And every step was that one

step. Every choice we made, every choice others made, it was all mutable, and there were thousands of potential futures. Some loomed more likely, but there were outliers that could come blowing through. And that's what I felt had happened with Denise. She was looking at a bright future, a long life with her wife and family. And the dominos had stacked in such a way that she was an unlikely target.

As I pulled out of my parking space, I was hyperaware of the pedestrians around me. I didn't ever want to be the reason for someone else losing their fragile hold on this thing we called life.

* * *

I stopped at the Fish House and ordered a bowl of clam chowder, an order of fish and chips, and decided to eat there, rather than in my car. By the time I was eating, the sun had set, and I decided to call Zandre. I wasn't sure what to expect, but I wanted to make sure he was aware of what happened.

He answered on the second ring. "Maisy, hello."

"Hey. Listen, I have to tell you something. It's rather upsetting, so I suggest you sit down."

There was a brief silence on the other end, then he said, "I take it you talked to Denise?"

"I did. I'm sorry, but I'm just going to rip off the bandage. Denise is gay, married, and had no clue about who you are, or what you're talking about." I paused, taking a breath before I dropped the bigger bomb.

"I see," he said.

“Zandre, there’s more, and you’re going to find this out sooner or later. Earlier this afternoon, a few hours after I met with her, she saw a child run into the street in front of a car. She followed. She managed to save the little kid, but she couldn’t get out of the way in time. The car hit her. She’s dead.”

“Dead?”

I couldn’t read how he felt. “Yes, I’m sorry. The accident broke her neck, and she died instantly.”

Again, there was silence.

“Zandre, are you there?” The lack of his breathing was disconcerting. Vampires didn’t breathe, or if they did, it was so slowly that nobody noticed. And right now, he was still as the grave itself.

“She’s dead,” he finally said. “And so this is it.”

“I’m so sorry. There’s not much I can say…”

“Well, you’re right about that. There’s nothing really to say. I let her slip away. I’ve lost her.” He sounded so beat down that I almost felt sorry for him, except he was being melodramatic, in my eyes.

“Zandre, you never really had her. You were in love with a fantasy. With a concept . I’m truly sorry about Denise—she was a nice lady. But you’re going to have to let go of the idea that she was here for you. If you truly want happiness, I can most likely find you a mate, but I can’t if you aren’t willing to open up to someone else.”

More silence.

After a moment, Zandre said, “You’re right. I know it. I suppose I missed Eugenia so much that I talked myself into the idea that she would return for me. We promised we’d be together forever. This was before I was turned.” He paused, then added, “You don’t know what it means, to face an immortal future. Oh, I can make a choice to walk into the sun, but seriously, people relish the idea of living forever, until they actually find that they are. A series of unending days, weeks, years, centuries...it’s terrifying.”

I could feel the barriers slipping, and the real Zandre peeking out. “It must be. I don’t know if I could handle it.”

“Most vampires I know who are over a thousand...they change. They’re no longer human—or whatever they were to begin with. They become something else, distant from emotion. Either they’re exceptionally philosophical, or they’re ruthless. I don’t want to become either one, although by that point, who knows what I’ll be feeling. Having a partner can keep you in touch with your humanity.”

“That’s why you prefer a nonvampire?” I’d wondered about that.

“Right. Losing them hurts, but even pain is better than numbness.” He cleared his throat. “All right, let’s find my mate, Maisy. And thank you—you’ve made me seriously think about my life and what I want.” He sounded much warmer now, than he had at the beginning of the conversation. “I’m glad I decided to sign up for your service.”

And, surprising myself, I said, “I’m glad you did, too.”

* * *

After eating dinner, I headed to class. Tonight was cryptozoology, and I was finding it incredibly interesting. In fact, so much that I planned on taking a second class next

semester, although the teacher kind of put me off. I wasn't sure why, but he annoyed me.

I hadn't heard of most of the creatures discussed, though some from urban legend were stock stories that everybody knew about but few people really encountered.

As I slid into a chair at one of the long tables and opened my laptop to take notes, the teacher—Jason Willows—was setting up his computer's projection screen. The school had the latest in technology, and what had once been an overhead projector when I was young was now a computer program that projected onto a screen at the front of the class.

“Tonight, we're going to talk about wild spaces. These are both wild spaces ruled by the Fae and interdimensional portals that can be found all over the world. They're natural portals, not created, and every shadow town has at least one or two of them. Tonight, we're going to discuss one found right here in Midnight Point, and on Sunday, we'll be taking a field trip there.”

He clicked on the screen, bringing up a picture of a chain-link fence barring off some overgrown property. “This is Hollow Hill, and you can see that the city has cordoned off the area. I have permission to lead you inside.”

I froze. Hollow Hill was well known, though most people avoided it like the plague. I thought that it might be haunted, though I'd never looked into it that much—especially since I hadn't been around town for a long time.

All I knew was that it was a dangerous place. When I was a child, my aunts had threatened me with a whipping if I even set foot near it. I'd obeyed, given they seldom gave out threats of corporal punishment, and when they did, I knew they were serious.

“Hollow Hill was a portal long before settlers came to the area, and a number of people over the years have vanished, never to be seen again. We’re going to discuss where those people might have gone, other phenomena seen around the area, and then on Sunday, we’ll go take a look for ourselves.”

As Jason Willows continued to discuss what we knew about the local ecology and what effect that might have on the wild place, my mind wandered.

I found myself tuning him out as my mind turned toward Saturday night and my initiation into the Dark Moon Society. By the time class was over, I realized I had taken barely any notes and had only gotten the gist of instructions about the field trip. Deciding I’d just have to bite the bullet and talk to him later, I quickly gathered my books and laptop and left the school.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Saturday morning, I slept in, waking at half past nine to find Miss P. and Dahlia on my bed, tussling on the bottom.

“How did you get up here?” I asked the dog. She was so small that she could fit through the cat door, but there was no way she could jump up on my bed. My aunt kept a carpeted ramp by the side of her bed so the Pom could make it up and down.

Then I noticed that I’d forgotten to move the ottoman, and it was just low enough for Dahlia to jump on, and just close enough to the bed for her to scramble across.

The pair of them flashed me a guilty look, then went back to playing. I yawned and stretched, wanting to stay under the covers where it was warm and cozy. But my phone sounded and I glanced at my text messages. Crystal had just texted me.

tonight’s the night i go on my quest. wish me luck. and good luck on your initiation. i’m supposed to spend the day in meditation, like you did, or i’d suggest getting together for lunch. i probably won’t make it over after my quest, because i know you’re going through your initiation tonight and i’ll probably be too tired afterward. see you tomorrow?

you’re right, i don’t know how late tonight will go, I texted back. i have a dinner meeting tomorrow, but maybe we can meet for coffee? and text me tomorrow morning to let me know how the quest went. although i don’t think we can talk about them until after we’re both initiated. I snapped a picture of Dahlia and Miss P. and sent it to her. it’s goofball city on my bed this morning.

mine too, Crystal texted back, sending a picture of her German shepherd rolling around on her back on the kitchen floor. azzy is being a doofus.

We texted a little longer—I told her about Denise and Zandre, and she warned me to be cautious—and then I finally decided it was time to get up. I would be dressing for ritual later, but until then, I decided to wear a knee-length brown corduroy skirt and a mustard-colored turtleneck, and I paired them with a gold belt and a pair of knee-high brown suede boots. I pulled my hair back into a braid, then did my makeup and added a pair of gold hoops and a citrine pendant.

Astra was sketching out something when I walked into the kitchen. I glanced over her shoulder and saw that she was diagramming the kitchen makeover.

“Ooo...getting the ball rolling, are we?”

She nodded. “I think I found our contractor. I’m going to draw these up and then talk to him this afternoon. He’ll create the final blueprints, then create it in a 3D model on his computer so I can see what it will look like.”

“It’s so cool how they can do that nowadays,” I said. “When I was younger, they couldn’t manage anything like this.” I headed for the espresso machine. “Latte?”

“I’ve already caffeinated for the morning. You go ahead. I didn’t feel like cooking, so breakfast is a cereal affair, unless you want to whip something up.”

I shook my head and opened the fridge. “I’ll make myself a turkey sandwich. That sounds good.” I quickly pulled a triple shot, then added milk, ice, and a shot of vanilla coffee syrup, then I slathered two slices of bread in butter and ketchup—I wasn’t a big fan of mustard or mayo—added some deli turkey, a couple slices of provolone, and then sliced tomato on top. I didn’t care for lettuce in my sandwiches, either.

I cut the sandwich in half, placed it on a small plate, and carried my breakfast to the table. “Did you feed?—”

“They’ve both been fed, yes. Honestly, Miss P. is getting heavier. I picked her up today to set her on the floor—she was trying to help herself to my cereal—and it felt like I was holding a couple bags of potatoes.”

“And she’s still young, by Maine Coon standards. I think she won’t reach full-grown adulthood till she’s several years old. Oh, I found the pair of them on my bed this morning, wrestling. Dahlia managed to launch herself there by clambering up on the ottoman and leaping across to the bed.”

“She’s picking up things from Miss P.,” Astra said. “How did class go last night? I was sound asleep by the time you got home, I think. I don’t remember hearing you come in.”

“I know,” I said. “I peeked in your room to say good night, but you were out like a light. Class was good. We’re going on a field trip out to Hollow Hill tomorrow.” I paused, then added, “It was quite the day yesterday.”

“Hollow Hill? Are you sure you want to do that? The Fae come and go through there.”

“Jason—our teacher—seems to think it’s safe,” I said.

“I’d think twice about going. Honestly, it’s not a safe thing to do,” Astra said. “Think about it before you go.”

As she finished sketching out her plans, I told her about Zandre and Denise and what had happened. “I think I finally got him to realize that she’s not his soulmate, and she never was.”

“I hope so. Though there’s not much he can do now, even if he did think she was meant for him. You can’t turn someone into a vampire if they’re already dead.” Auntie sat back, pushing the sketchpad away from her. “Are you ready for your initiation tonight?”

I nodded. “I think so. But I don’t know what’s coming, so I don’t know that I could ever be fully prepared.”

“It won’t be anything as extreme as your quest was—at least not in the same way. But today, think long and hard because once you pledge to the Society, the only way you can leave is to be expelled. And that’s only for good reason.”

“I will,” I said. “I think I’ll go down to the farmers market today. The early spring vegetables are coming in, along with some of the late winter crops.”

“If you see any honey, get some. We’re almost out,” Astra said. “I’m volunteering to sit with Lalinda Thomas. She’s in the hospital with a broken hip.”

My aunt volunteered with several organizations, including Meals on Wheels, a group made up of older women. They took meals to the housebound, and they visited other older women in the community who didn’t have family or friends around. Every weekend, she spent a couple hours helping to make their clients lives brighter.

I didn’t recognize the name, but I said, “Well, tell her I said hi. In fact, here’s fifteen dollars. Why don’t you take her some flowers?”

Astra accepted the money. “I will, and I’ll tell her they’re from my niece.” She held up the drawings. “Okay, I’m off. I’m going to drop these at the contractor, then get started on my errands. I’ll see you this afternoon,” she added.

I waved as she left. After I finished my breakfast, I rinsed the dishes that were in the

sink and placed them in the dishwasher. Then I watered the plants—Auntie had a lot of them—moved the sheets from the washer to the dryer and started another load of laundry, ran the vacuum over the hardwoods, and finally, armed the security code and locked the door as I headed out for the farmers market.

* * *

The morning was clear and breezy, with the faint shimmer of sun gleaming down on the rain saturated grass and trees. The road had dried overnight, so it wasn't slick, except where the puddles had formed from all the rain we'd had the past week, and I even opened my car window for a few minutes to air out the inside. Five minutes, though, and I was ready to close it again and turn on the heat. Even though it was clear, it was still only forty-two degrees and that was too cold to let the air flow through.

The farmers market was bustling, though, even with the chill in the air, and several stalls were offering spring lettuce and early carrots. They had to have started them in greenhouses, I thought. No way could they be growing outside when we were still getting nights that dipped down near freezing.

Pulling my portable basket on wheels behind me, I didn't linger at any one stall but bought some salad greens and greenhouse tomatoes before stopping at the honey stand. As I saw who the vendor was, I started to laugh. Ginger Lily was standing behind the counter.

“Hey, Ginger!”

She grinned. “Well, well, fancy seeing you here.”

“I forgot that you sold goods here,” I said. “Well, we need a couple of quarts of honey, so load me up.”

Ginger's hair was pulled back in a curling ponytail, held by a green gingham ribbon. "What kind? I have wildflower, blackberry, clover, and larkspur honey."

I frowned. "What's the difference?"

She handed me four tongue depressors. "Taste," she said, pointing to the sample jars.

I tried a sample of each. The wildflower tasted sweetest, and it reminded me of deep summer and picnics. Blackberry had a warm taste to it, a little more herby. Clover was dusty, in an odd way, and the larkspur tasted like late summer.

"I think a jar of the wildflower, and a jar of the blackberry," I said.

As she rang them up, she asked, "So, is dinner still on for tomorrow?"

I nodded. "It's on my calendar."

"You would be surprised by how many people blow me off," she said, her voice sounding the opposite of her smile. "They agree to get together, then just never bother contacting me again."

"You think it's because you're..." I glanced around, unsure as to how many people might be listening. I didn't want to out her as Fae unless she was good with it.

"Fae? People know. I don't make a secret of it. I've discovered that when you hide things, people sense it and then they wonder what you're hiding. Even if you tell them later on, they still don't know if they can trust you because you hid things in the first place."

She shrugged. "Apparently, I'm good enough to buy honey from, but not good enough to hang out with. But hey, those who don't want to hang out with me because

they're afraid of what I am, well...I'm not losing anything positive, am I?"

"True. What's the use of having toxic people in your life? Well, I'm looking forward to dinner, so I'll see you then." I handed her my credit card as I looked over the selection of cookies, bars, and pies she was selling. "You also bake? These look good."

"I use my own honey," she said, grinning. "Have a cookie."

I bit into one of the honey-raisin, sighing as it melted in my mouth with a golden, honeyed taste. "I now have two friends who are wonderful bakers. Give me a dozen of these cookies, and one of your apple pies, please."

As Ginger bagged up my order, I looked around at the other stands. "Anything else here that you'd recommend?"

"Twila, three stalls down, sells the best fudge I've ever tasted. She also sells gourmet popping corn. It's worth the price. And in the aisle behind me, you'll find a baker whose bread is worth twice what he charges. His name is Domingo. Try his sourdough—it's so good." She handed me my bags.

I carefully fit the honey toward the bottom of the cart, and the bag with the pie and cookies in it on top of the salad greens. "Well, I'd better get on with my shopping. I'll pick up some of the sourdough. I think I should skip the fudge for now. See you tomorrow."

"Right, see you then," she said, her smile broadening.

I waved to her, wandering off as I pulled the shopping cart behind me. As I passed the fudge vendor, I decided I couldn't go by without trying a sample, and after one bite of the maple fudge, I found myself buying a three-flavor set: maple, peanut

butter, and chocolate. Then I found Domingo, the bread maker, and left with not only a loaf of sourdough, but also a dozen rolls and a loaf of French bread. I meandered through the rest of the market, adding a couple pounds of sausages along with a rack of lamb, and two rib eyes.

Finished with my shopping, I stored my packages in the backseat, then stopped by a post box to drop off a couple of cards Astra had asked me to post, then stopped in at the coffee stand for another latte. Finally, I headed back home, where I put away the groceries. Finally, I could spend some time in meditation before my initiation.

* * *

At five-thirty, I started dressing. I'd spent an hour meditating on whether this was the right direction, and everything in my gut told me I was on the right path. Regardless of what came out of it, this was what I needed to do.

I was finished with my shower and just starting to dress when my phone rang. Frowning—everybody close to me knew that tonight I was undergoing initiation and didn't have the time or focus to talk—I glanced at the caller ID.

Zandre.

What the hell? I'd warned him it might take a week or so before I had any news for him. Irritated, but curious, I answered.

"Hey, what's up?"

"Hi, is this Maisy?"

I rolled my eyes. It was my phone. Who did he expect to answer?

“Yes. Hey, I’m really busy tonight?—”

“That’s all right. I won’t take more than a minute. I wanted to ask you something.” He sounded awfully pleasant, compared to his demeanor the last time we’d talked.

“What’s up?” I asked, half-expecting him to cancel the deal. But when he spoke, I realized my intuition wasn’t running on all cylinders.

“Maisy, I wondered if you’d like to go out to dinner with me? Not tonight, but soon—maybe Monday evening?”

I froze. He couldn’t be asking me out on a date, could he? Brushing it off, because it seemed highly unlikely, I cleared my throat.

“You know, you don’t have to take me out to thank me for taking you on as a client,” I said, keeping my words light.

But his answer once again made me question myself.

“It’s not a thank you. It’s...well, I was thinking. I enjoy talking to you, and you’re a smart, congenial woman. So, what do you say?”

I stared at my phone, not knowing what to say. He was a vampire, and I didn’t want to make him mad, especially after that crack he had made. Not to mention the fact that I really needed to focus on the initiation coming up. Panicking, I scrambled.

“Listen, I’m late to a really important event. Can I call you later? Tomorrow evening? It would really help.” I tried to sound nonchalant, but inside, my alarm bells were screeching like crazy.

He paused, then said, “Of course. Have a good evening. I’ll talk to you tomorrow

night.”

As I set my phone down, I knew that I’d better have a really good excuse by tomorrow night, and once again, I wished I’d never accepted him as a client.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I didn't know what to do. Should I tell my aunt, or ask for the initiation to be postponed? I couldn't call Crystal because she'd be getting ready for her own vision quest. After a moment, I decided to wait. I'd talk to Astra tomorrow morning. In the meantime, I sat down on the bed and once again lowered myself into trance.

I took three deep breaths and cleared my thoughts, then built a barricade, keeping everything from the outside out, including my worry over Zandre. When I felt settled again, I finished dressing.

The dress made me feel exceptional—it was the fanciest dress I'd ever owned, beyond my wedding dress. I pulled my hair back on the sides, clipping the strands in the back with a silver barrette, then slid on a pair of witchy granny boots that were pre-laced, with zippers on the sides. When I finished dressing, I did my makeup, then gathered a few of my magical items into a bag and headed downstairs.

Astra was waiting for me. She looked over at me and her jaw dropped. "That dress is so perfect."

"I know—I love it. What else do I need to bring with me tonight? I have my dagger, a couple of my favorite crystals...and I'm wearing my Aphrodite necklace."

"Leave your personal athame at home," Astra said. "You don't ever want to chance losing it. You'll find a dagger to use in the Dark Moon Society, and while that will also be magical, if you lose it, it's not like losing a part of your magical self. You won't need it tonight, anyway."

I took the dagger out of my bag and set it on the counter. “All right.”

“You can also leave your crystals at home, for tonight. This evening’s all about drawing you into the Society. There will be times to take your personal gear, but tonight it’s not necessary.”

I glanced at the time on my phone. Crystal had sent me a quick text that she was headed out for her quest, and to wish her luck. I didn’t bother answering, not wanting to interrupt her.

“When do we leave?”

“Now,” Astra said.

As we headed for the meeting, I tried to keep the events with Zandre out of my thoughts, but deep down, I could still feel the worry, hiding there, among my other thoughts.

* * *

The Dark Moon Society met at a small cabin on the outskirts of town, on a one-acre parcel of land. The Society owned the cabin, and the secretary for the coven lived there in exchange for keeping watch over the land and the ritual space. A ring of standing stones had been erected, to mark the eight sections of the year, and the eight pillars of the circle were aligned with eight of our sacred trees: oak, holly, willow, apple, cedar, rowan, yew, hazel, and elder. The trees stood in back of the stones, watching over the quarters and cross-quarters, sentinels for the rituals.

The circle of stones was large, but not so large that the Society hadn’t figured out a way to keep the rain out when need be. A large circular awning had been created that attached to hooks hewed into the back of the stones, and for particularly nasty

weather, clip-on rainproof sides formed a tent to protect the participants as much as possible.

A firepit was in the center. As I stood there, watching the flames lick the sides of the large metal cylinder, crackling away, the chill of the outer world began to fade. There was more than just the heat from the bonfire warming up the inside of the tent—but I had no idea what else was at work. Was it magic? It seemed a lot to expect a spell to act as a large-scale heater, but maybe I didn't understand the full extent of what our magic could do.

As the other women gathered, the only ones I recognized were Nightshade and Astra. I silently counted heads. Eleven other women, including my aunt and the high priestess. I knew this wasn't the full extent of the Dark Moon Society, but it appeared to be the magical core.

A few of the covens run by the Order of the Moon had male participants—and male members of the witchblood were as common as women, but there was something special about the energy of women gathering together that made other groups pale in comparison.

My thoughts were interrupted by Nightshade, who—after a moment—whistled and held up her hands.

“Welcome, Sisters of the Dark Moon. As you know, tonight we're welcoming our newest member—Maisy Tripwater. She passed her magical quest and tonight we'll initiate her.”

A cheer went up from the others, including Astra. She winked at me, as if to say, “See, you're welcome here.”

I blushed a little, then cleared my throat and said, “Thank you for welcoming me. I'm

excited to be here and looking forward to working with you in the future.”

It felt a little contrived, but really, there wasn’t much else that I could say.

Nightshade flashed me a warm smile. “We’re happy you’re with us. Since it’s a chilly night, let’s get down to it, shall we?”

I nodded, having no idea what to expect.

The others started to move into position, Nightshade in the center by the firepit, with Astra at her side. Eight of the others each took their place by one of the eight stone pillars. And the last—a youngish woman with shining blond hair—moved over to my side.

“I’m Nedra, and I’ll be your guide,” she said. “Please place your hands behind your back.”

I glanced at Astra, who nodded.

As I did, Nedra bound them loosely with a rope. Then she held up a blindfold. I nodded for her to do whatever it was she needed to do. She slid it over my eyes, and I couldn’t see a thing.

“Please, do as I say. We won’t hurt you.” Her voice was low in my ear.

“All right,” I whispered back.

The next moment, Nightshade’s voice echoed out, and I realized she was casting the Circle. I stood still, keeping silent.

Circle of power, I cast thee first, in the maiden’s name, in song and verse.

Circle of power, I cast thee twice, in the mother's name, we pay the price.

Circle of power, I cast thee thrice, in the crone's name, under her advice.

The energy began to form, creeping through my body, through the air, touching every molecule and atom, enlivening everything in its path as it swept through, a wave of power, a wave of magic.

Spirits of the North, Spirits of Earth, please heed my call and bring us strength.

Spirits of the East, Spirits of Air, please heed my call and bring us thought.

Spirits of the South, Spirits of Fire, please heed my call and bring us passion.

Spirits of the West, Spirits of Water, please heed my call and bring us balance.

Earth and Air, and Fire, and Water, We, magic's daughters, weave the spell.

Even though the invocation was a simple one, the force behind it rocked me and threw me off balance. Nedra reached out to steady me.

Nightshade and the Dark Moon Society were powerhouses. If they could manage this much magic for an initiation, then what could they do when they were working one of the older, more powerful spells?

My thoughts were interrupted when Nightshade began to speak.

“We are here tonight to welcome a new sister into our coven—to bind her to the Dark Moon Society, by word and by oath, for as long as the magic of this life lasts. Bring forth the supplicant.”

Nedra took hold of my forearm, leading me by her side. We had begun against the north pillar, that much I remembered, and now we walked in what felt like a zigzag manner. I quieted my thoughts and focused on the feel of the movement until I realized we were spiraling inward, first going deosil—clockwise, and then turning widdershins—counterclockwise, and I followed the pattern of the labyrinth in my mind until we reached a point where Nedra patted my arm for me to stop.

We were in front of the firepit. I could feel the warmth of the flames flickering on my face. Nedra gently led me a few steps farther and I could sense someone standing in front of us. By the perfume, I surmised it must be Nightshade. She wore a hyacinth-scented fragrance.

“Nedra, Sister of the Dark Moon, why have you come before me?”

Nedra cleared her throat. “I bring to you, Lady Nightshade, a woman who wishes to join our ranks and our covenant.”

Another pause, then Nightshade said, “Let the supplicant state her name.”

That was my cue. “Maisy Ellen Tripwater.”

“Maisy Ellen Tripwater, you stand before me, seeking entrance to our covenant. I give you this chance: if you have changed your mind, tell me, and I will set you free, unbound by any oath.”

“I haven’t changed my mind,” I said.

“Then listen well, to the words of the Witch Queen Heliesa, to these rites that have been passed down through generations and centuries of the Court Magika.” Nightshade fell silent, but that moment, a woman spoke, loud and clear. I knew approximately which way I was facing, and the voice came from the north.

“Hear now the Troth of Nine, the binding oath that all who wear the mantle of the Order of the Moon must pledge. First: I pledge my life to the Order, my loyalty, my honor. Once I am in the Order of the Moon, none save the Queen and her envoys may cast me out, and I pledge to honor this oath for the rest of my life.”

Next came a voice from the northeast—they were moving around the circle. “Second: I pledge to honor the Order of the Moon by my actions. I shall break no rules of the Court Magika, unless given leave by the Witch Queen Heliesa.”

From the east: “Third, I pledge to honor the Order of the Moon by my words. I will tell no secrets, I will keep silence when necessary, and will think before I speak, lest my words cast a cloud over the Order.”

The woman in the southeast corner was next. “Fourth: I will honor my fellow members, for there is no divisiveness within the Order of the Moon, nor room for hatred and combativeness.”

South came next. “Fifth: I will be present for all meetings, unless illness or special circumstances warrant my absence. I will notify the High Priestess if and when I cannot attend the meetings.”

After that, from the southwest came: “I will put in the work required, I will cast the spells, chant the chants, till the garden, stir the cauldron. I will not shirk my work unless previously excused.”

As I listened, I realized I had glazed over, sliding into a deep trance. The words were spoken like a catechism, and the even-tempered delivery helped me let go of my thoughts and fully take in what was being said to me. The blindfold helped too, heightening my listening.

The woman to the west said, “I promise to honor my gods, the gods of the Dark

Moon Society, and the gods of the earth.”

And northwest spoke up: “I promise to honor the Queen, for she is our leader and she is the heart of magic incarnate within this world.”

Finally, when all eight had spoken, I recognized my aunt’s voice.

“Maisy Ellen Tripwater, do you pledge to these oaths, and above all, to honor yourself and keep to actions within this world that makes you true to yourself?”

“I do,” I said, feeling the weight of what I was pledging to descend on my shoulders.

Oaths among the witchblood weren’t just a string of words or a fair-weather promise. Oaths were binding, honor was integral, and when we made a promise, we did our best to keep it. Oh, sometimes you couldn’t avoid breaking a promise—but when that happened, we were honest about not being able to meet the expectation. And oaths made under the sight of the gods were soul-binding, which was why so many of witchblood never vowed “till death” in marriage vows.

“As long as love shall last” was a vow we could meet, and most of us felt it made us work harder on the relationship, since there wasn’t the expectation that we were locked in. But oaths to societies and to witchblood organizations, those could require lifelong loyalty.

“Will you uphold all the rules and expectations of the Dark Moon Society and the Order of the Moon, as long as you shall live?”

“I will,” I said, relaxing as I felt Aphrodite’s presence surround me, gently buoying me up. I was doing the right thing. This was what I was meant to do.

“Are you ready to enter our order, as a full member of the Dark Moon Society, with

your oath to stand with us?”

I thought for a moment, but I already knew the answer. “I am.”

“Then remove the blindfold.”

Nedra quickly lifted the blindfold. I found myself standing in front of Nightshade, and her sword was pointed directly at me, the tip barely touching my heart.

“Maisy Ellen Tripwater, it is better to fall on the tip of my sword than to enter the Dark Moon Society unwilling, or with deceit in your heart. This is your last chance to turn and walk away. I ask again, are you ready to enter our order, as a full member of the Dark Moon Society, with your oath to stand with us?”

“I am,” I said, the ritual energy soaking in fully. I felt honored to be chosen, willing to do my part, and in my heart, I felt like my family was expanding.

“Then kiss the blade of the Priestess, and be welcome among us.” Nightshade turned the sword away from me, holding it in both her hands. She held it out, at a level where I could gently bend my head and kiss the cold metal.

I placed my lips on the gleaming blade, and all around me, the magic swirled and rose, and a great sense of joy rushed through me.

“Welcome, Sister.” Nightshade handed the sword to Astra and stepped forward, hugging me and kissing my forehead. She turned to Nedra. “Present her to the others.”

Nedra, beaming, said, “Yes, Lady.” She gave me a hug. “Welcome. Let me introduce you to the others.”

She led me around the ring, stopping at each pillar to introduce me to the woman watching over it. As each one hugged me, greeting me warmly, the energy began to dance, and a smile washed over me. I felt free, strong, and part of a society as old as magic itself.

After the introductions, we filed into the cabin for the party, where the table was filled with pastries, fruit salad, crackers and cheeses, deli meat, and there were two pizzas ready to go in the oven. For drinks, there was sparkling cider, sodas, and lemonade—we all had to drive, so booze wasn't a good option.

As I chatted with the others, I realized they knew far more about me than I knew about them. But everyone seemed nice, and there were two women there in particular that I gravitated to. One was a woman around my age, named Breony Earthdaughter, who was an earth witch, and the other was a woman in her fifties named Familia Sparks, who was a fire witch.

As the evening wore on, they each gave me a gift from their altar—a custom, apparently—and my aunt handed me a box.

“This was your mother's,” she said.

I opened it. There, nestled in velvet, was a dagger. It had a bronze blade, and the hilt felt familiar and comforting. As I touched it, I realized the hilt was carved from apple wood, almost white as bone, and it had detailed etchings on it of apples and leaves, twining around hearts.

I looked at Astra, a question in my eyes.

“Your mother was a matchmaker of sorts, and she was gifted by Aphrodite with the ability to bring people together, both in love and in friendship. She found this athame when she was young, in a thrift shop of all places, and bonded with it immediately. I

thought perhaps you might want it, but I was guided to save it for a special occasion.”

Overcome by emotion—the dagger was a part of my mother, a part I missed every day but seldom gave much thought to—I set the blade down on the table and fell into my aunt’s arms.

“Thank you...I needed this.”

“Your mother would have been a member of the Dark Moon Society eventually,” Nightshade said. “Had she lived, she would have been one of us. But now, you are, and so you carry on the tradition she would have started.”

I turned to the high priestess. “Thank you for accepting me. I’ll do my best to uphold the standards of the organization.”

“You wouldn’t be standing here with us if we didn’t think you would,” Nightshade said. “Now, box up your dagger, take it home and keep it safe on your altar. And in the meantime, eat and get to know your new circle. Because the sisters of the Dark Moon are truly that—family.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

We got home around midnight. While we ate, Nightshade led us in a couple of personality games that helped me understand my fellow coven members better. And I had clicked with both Familia and Breony. I had nine new numbers in my phone—I already had Nightshade’s, and of course, I lived with Astra. I felt an odd sense of satisfaction, like I’d been accepted into something that I didn’t even know I needed.

“So, I’d ask if you were happy that you went through the initiation, but I think I can tell. So, do you want to talk about tonight, or do you just want to process?” Astra was good at recognizing that sometimes, it took time to think.

“I want to talk about something that happened earlier tonight, before the initiation,” I said. “But first, I want to go change my clothes.”

“Are you hungry?” Astra asked.

I laughed. “After the spread they had there? No, but some cocoa would be nice.”

“Go on. I’ll make some hot chocolate as soon as I change, too.”

We headed toward our bedrooms. I found Miss P. sprawled on my bed. She rolled over on her back when I entered the room and turned on the light. Stretching her paws up, she let out a squeak. I ruffled her belly, gently—she liked belly rubs—then carefully stepped out of my dress and hung it in the back of the closet. I slid into a pair of pajama shorts and a sleep shirt, then brushed my hair back into a loose ponytail, removed my makeup, and headed back to the kitchen.

Astra was in her PJs, and she was measuring cocoa, sugar, and milk into a pan. We had premixed hot cocoa in the cupboard, but somehow we never got around to using the packets. Homemade cocoa always tasted better.

As she whisked away, I found a pair of candy-cane mugs we had—they were white and red striped—and pulled out the whipped cream from the fridge. We did buy canned whipped cream—we didn't use it often enough to keep the homemade whip from spoiling. As I settled in at the kitchen nook, I yawned.

"So, what is it you wanted to tell me?" Astra said, bringing the kettle to a simmer.

"This afternoon—shortly before we left for the ritual—I got a call from Zandre. I think it was around five-thirty."

"Has he let go of the dead girl yet?"

I sighed. "Yeah, I think he has. But in the process, he's decided he wants to take me out to dinner."

Astra froze, whisk in hand. "What?"

"Yeah, that was my reaction, too. I told him I'd have to talk to him tomorrow, but Auntie, what do I do? I don't want to date a vampire. I'm not interested in dating a vampire. And given how obsessive Zandre gets, I don't want him fixated on me." It was always better to fly under the radar when it came to vamps.

Astra poured the cocoa into our mugs and carried them over to the table. "So, do you think he'll be reasonable when you tell him you don't want to go out with him?"

"I'm not sure," I said. "He was so obsessed over Denise. Maybe I should just tell him that there's a rule among matchmakers, that we are not allowed to date our clients."

He's smart, I don't know if he would believe me, but I suppose I can give it a try."

"Is that actually an industry standard? Can he look it up to find out if you're lying? I only ask because he seems like an extremely intelligent person. He has to be in order to be the city's representative to the Northwest Vampire Collective. And if he found out you were lying, how would he react?"

"I'm not certain, to tell you the truth, in terms of how he would react. As to whether it's an industry rule, not exactly. It's not against any law, but ethically? Matchmakers don't look highly on other matchmakers who feed from the pool, so to speak. It wouldn't be good for business. I suppose I should just tell him the truth, and hope he accepts it. After all, what can he do to me?" I paused, then added, "Don't answer that."

We drank our cocoa and went to bed. That night, I dreamed about shadows in the dark, following me, and glowing red eyes from the hidden corners of the room.

* * *

Morning came and I dressed for the woods, then called Crystal as I headed downstairs.

She answered mid-yawn. "Hey, Maisy, how did initiation go?"

"Good, actually. I was surprised by how formal it was. And you? How did your quest go?"

"I think I did well," she said, a smile in her voice. "I should know later today whether I got in. I think...I learned a lot about myself last night," she added. "I'm glad I went through it, regardless of Nightshade's decision."

“That’s the way I felt,” I said. “I’m pretty sure it’s going to take a few months for both the quest and the initiation to settle in. My subconscious processes on its own schedule and I can’t rush it.”

“What are you up to today?”

I glanced at the clock. “I have to meet my cryptozoology class in about an hour. We’re going on a field trip to Hollow Hill.”

“What the hell are you going to do out on Hollow Hill? I wouldn’t go there if you paid me to.” Crystal let out a sigh. “Don’t go, Maisy.”

“I have no idea why we’re going, but I assume we’re going to look for...I have no clue, to be honest.” With both Astra and Crystal reacting so strongly to the idea, I was starting to question my decision.

“Better you than me. What about the rest of the day?”

“Tonight I’m having dinner with Ginger Lily. What do you say about meeting for coffee this afternoon?”

“I’d like that,” Crystal said. “Two-thirty? My place will be swarmed, so what say we meet at Café Galleta? It’s a new coffee shop that went in at Linden Park Mall?”

Linden Park Mall was a mall in name only. Oh, there were a collection of about ten shops under one roof, but most of them weren’t a big pull for customers. If I remembered right, Chamber’s UnderTakings was there—a mortuary—as well as a thrift shop, a butcher’s shop, a florist’s, and a used bookstore. Linden Park also had a gun shop, a tavern, and an army recruiting station lined up next to each other—not exactly the best grouping, in my opinion.

“Sure, why not? At least they’re guaranteed customers who want to sober up, or who need to think before finalizing funeral plans.”

“Don’t forget the bookshop—readers love to browse with a coffee in hand.” Crystal laughed. “All right, I’ll see you there at two-thirty.”

“Later, then!” As I padded into the kitchen, I felt tired, but my mind was racing. It felt like the ritual had supercharged my thoughts.

Astra wasn’t up yet, so I fed Dahlia and Miss P., both of whom were prancing around my feet, then I made myself some coffee and toasted an English muffin. When it was hot, I buttered it, laid a piece of cheese on both sides, then added a pre-cooked sausage patty, and popped the sandwich in the microwave for a few seconds. As I pulled it out—wrapping it with a napkin—I scribbled a note for Astra and propped it on the table, and slung my purse and tote bag over my shoulder. Coffee and muffin in hand, I headed for my car.

* * *

Hollow Hill was more of a cliff overlooking the area where the water from the strait filtered into both Puget Sound and the beginnings of the Salish Sea. There was a narrow drive that led to a camping ground right below the crest, then a hike to the top, where a thicket spread over part of stony top. I had no idea why it was called Hollow Hill. If I’d learned when I was younger, I’d forgotten the info during the intervening years.

I’d thought about the field trip, given both my aunt and best friend were dead set against the idea, but I saw things through and when I promised to be there, I showed up. But I promised myself that—if something seemed off—I’d leave.

As I ascended the steep grade toward the campground, there were a couple cars in

front of me, and at least two behind me. I couldn't see who was in them, but figured they were part of the class. There were about a dozen people in the class, total, and I knew at least four had said they wouldn't be able to make it.

By the time we reached the turnoff into the campground, I'd finished my sandwich and most of my coffee, and I was starting to feel uneasy. The area was pretty, but then again, the entire peninsula was gorgeous. But pretty didn't mean safe, and Hollow Hill had a reputation that was supposedly well-earned.

I eased into a parking spot next to another car and stowed my purse under my seat. I tossed my keys into my tote bag, which contained my phone, a notebook, pens, and my tablet, along with gloves, earmuffs, a couple protein bars, and a bottle of water, and swung out of my car, into the bracing chill.

The skies were clear, but it was cold—around forty-two degrees—and I pulled my gloves out of my tote bag and slid them on, grateful I'd remembered to bring them. I was wearing a suede jacket and zipped it up, and I put on my earmuffs.

“Hey Maisy, how goes it?”

I glanced to my right. There stood Kyle, a tall, dark-haired witch who was more brains than brawn, but he washed up pretty nice. He wore gold-rimmed John Lennon glasses, his hair was down to his shoulders and pulled back in a ponytail, and he was wearing a black leather jacket, black jeans, and a pair of Doc Martens. I thought he was around forty or so, and he had the bluest eyes I'd ever seen.

“It goes,” I said. I shivered. “I've never been here before, at least that I remember. Have you?”

“Once or twice, but I didn't go prowling around much. The energy feels thick here, you know? Like it's trying to choke you.” He pointed across the parking lot, to a

trailhead. “The prof said to meet over there.”

“I’m glad you were listening. Apparently, my head was in the clouds and I missed that.” I flashed him a smile. Kyle and I had talked a couple times, but until now, I’d never noticed how much his eyes sparkled, or how throaty his voice was.

“Walk with me?” he asked, turning toward the trailhead.

I joined him. It was a large parking lot, but I realized why. Not only was it for the campers, but there were spots where people could hook up their RVs.

“So, what do you do for a living?” Kyle asked.

“I’m a matchmaker,” I said. “I own Married At First Bite, a new shop downtown. I also give tarot and psychic readings, and if need be, I can investigate hauntings or cleanse houses.”

“I’d love to own my own business,” Kyle said. “Right now, I’m working security at the Lace & Bow.”

“I don’t think I’ve heard of that,” I said.

“The Lace & Bow is a leather club in Port Townsend,” he said, tensing up. He must be waiting for my reaction.

“Tavern?”

“Fetish bar,” he said, shaking his head. “They serve booze, but it’s more of a club, to be honest, with burlesque shows on weekends, and spotlight nights during the week. I’m head of security, which means I make sure the bouncers are where they need to be, that they do their job and not needlessly rough anybody up. I also keep a tight

watch on the magical age verification system. We don't dare let minors into the club or you know people will get up in arms about it."

"People get bent over the simplest things," I said. "Seriously, though, that must be an interesting job."

It wasn't one I'd want, and I had never set foot in a fetish bar in my life, but at least it sounded interesting. It did make me wonder, though, about Kyle himself. Was he just there for the paycheck, or was he into everything they offered? Hell, you don't even know what they offer, woman, I thought. So stop with that train of thought before you completely derail yourself.

"I suppose," he answered, shrugging. "I guess it's like being a camera guy on a porn set. Once you've seen one bondage show, you've seen them all. Oh, it's a talented group they have there, but it's not fully my flavor. I'm about to open my own business soon—an IT business."

Part of me wanted to ask if he was vanilla, or just a mixed swirl of flavors, but we came to where the professor was waiting.

Jason Willows, the teacher, was leaning against the sign that marked the trailhead. As Kyle and I joined the small throng, Jason began to count aloud, pointing to each one of us.

"We're missing one student out of those of you who said you could make it. We'll wait for another five minutes, but the minute she gets here, we'll head out. If she doesn't show in ten minutes, we'll forge on. I don't want to leave anybody straggling behind, not in this area of the woods, but we can't wait all day."

He glanced up at the sky. "We're due for a clear morning and afternoon, so hopefully we won't get rained out, though around here, you never know. Just wait fifteen

minutes and the weather changes again.”

One of the other students raised her hand. “Professor Willows, what are we looking for today?” Some of the students stood on ceremony with Jason, mostly the youngest ones.

“As I told you the other night, we’re looking into wild places today. These are the areas where worlds intersect, where portals form.” He frowned, looking around. “Does anybody know if Lizbet is going to join us today? Did she talk to any of you?”

Nobody volunteered any info. Even after just a few sessions, I instinctively recognized her as the problem child of the group. She was the one who wanted to know if we’d be tested on everything the teacher said. She was squeamish, hated going outdoors, and I would be surprised to see her here today. I’d figured that she would skip the trip. It counted as part of the grade, but Jason offered other ways to make up the work.

A few moments later, Jason grew tired of waiting. “All right, we’re leaving. I’ll tape a note to my windshield that we’re already into the hike and it’s too late for her to join us. She could, of course, but I don’t want any of you wandering alone in the woods here. Not on my account. I’ll be back in a moment, so if you have to use the facilities, please do so now. We’re going to be walking for about half an hour before we come to the Hollow Hill. Also, pick a forest buddy. I don’t want anybody drifting off on their own.”

As he returned to his car to leave the message, I looked at Kyle. “Want to be my forest buddy?” I asked.

Kyle grinned. “My pleasure,” he said.

A minute later, Jason returned and, walking two by two up the narrow trail, we

headed out, into the wild.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The trailhead was nestled in the thick of a copse, the tall timber mingling with thick undergrowth. Berry bushes abounded, including huckleberries, blackberries, salmon berries, and thimbleberries. Ferns—waist high—covered the ground. In a few months, the skunk cabbages would be out, along with the wildflowers that grew within the Pacific Northwest’s biome. The trail itself was wide enough for two people to walk side by side.

The professor didn’t say much, letting us enjoy the walk without trying to point out everything around us. I appreciated that. It gave me time to think, and to get to know Kyle a little bit more.

“I’m not much of a hiker,” he said. “But this is nice. I normally wouldn’t take time out to do this.”

“I like being out in nature,” I said. “My aunt loves to work in the garden, and when I was little, I helped out a lot.”

“Do your parents live in town?” he asked.

I almost tripped over a root that protruded out of the ground. Kyle caught my arm and steadied me. The moment he touched my arm, even through my sleeve, I felt a tingle race up my skin.

Blushing, I said, “Thank you.” I wasn’t sure why I felt awkward, but I did. “My parents died when I was seven and I went to live with my aunts. But yes, I was born

in Midnight Point. Okay, we'd better catch up. Jason's pulling ahead."

"Jason Willows is a good teacher, but he's not really grounded in other people's realities," Kyle said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Look," he said, nodding ahead.

Jason was out in front, at least ten feet ahead of the fastest student. He seemed so focused on the trail ahead of him, I doubted if he noticed the rest of us were having a hard time catching up. In fact, as I glanced behind us, I saw that Tiffany, a witch in her sixties, was struggling. She looked winded.

"I see what you mean. Wait for me. I'll be back." I sped up, increasing my pace till I passed a couple other students and reached Jason's side. "Professor Willows?"

Startled, he looked at me like I'd assaulted him, then he smiled. "Oh, Maisy, what can I do for you?"

"I don't know if you've noticed, but a couple of the students are having trouble keeping up. You didn't want anybody wandering off on their own, right? I mean...Tiffany is not as fast as you are. And as a matter of fact, neither am I." I said it gently, hoping he wouldn't get bent out of shape by my criticism.

"Oh." He looked surprised, as though he hadn't even thought of slowing down for the others. "I'm sorry, thank you for letting me know."

He turned around, waiting for everybody to catch up. Tiffany flashed me a relieved look. I smiled at her, as she leaned on her walking stick. Jason followed my gaze and worried his lip.

“I didn’t realize I was pushing all of you so much. I apologize. We’ll take a break for a few minutes and then be on our way. We don’t actually have too far to go. Hollow Hill isn’t far from here. Though we will be heading off trail, the slope is gentle and we won’t have to crawl up any ravines.” He pointed ahead, toward a stake that had a sign on it reading “HH” with an arrow aimed toward the woods. “We turn off there.”

“Do you think I’ll be able to make it?” Tiffany asked.

Once again, Jason blushed. “All right, I’ll admit something. I didn’t take into account whether people would be able to manage it. I’ve taught seventh grade for years, before taking on community classes. I’m used to young kids who...”

“Can move?” Tiffany asked, raising her eyebrows.

“Right.” Jason sighed. “How are you feeling?”

“I thought we’d be able to drive most of the way to the wild place. To be honest, I’m not that interested in hiking for a couple hours into a place that might be chancy,” Tiffany said. “If you don’t mind, and if it won’t affect my standing in the class, I’d rather turn back.”

“I don’t want you walking to the parking lot alone,” Jason said.

“I’ll go with her. It’s cold and I’d rather be home on my sofa,” another member of the class said. A few others mumbled their agreement.

In the end, Kyle, two other members of the class, and I were left as the others headed back to the parking lot. I turned to Jason.

“So, should we go on? Over half the class has left.”

“I think so, if you’re game,” he said.

“That’s why we’re here, whether there are just five of us, or the whole class. Let’s get a move on.”

Jason turned off the trail and plunged into the undergrowth.

As Kyle, Nena, Lonny, and I followed him, it was as though a silence fell on our shoulders, and without the others around talking, the energy of the thicket surrounded us. We weren’t climbing a ravine, nor were we in such dense woodland that it felt like we were cut off from everything, but somehow, it felt like we were isolated. The parking lot was a mere ten to fifteen minutes away, but we were alone, and all around, a force was watching us, listening to us, waiting for us.

Spooked, I drew closer to Kyle. By his stance and expression, I could tell he was feeling the same way I was. When he reached out for my hand, I took it, the firmness of his grasp helping me ground and center.

The sun broke through the clouds and I welcomed the brightness. As I focused on the rays of light piercing the canopy, I heard my own breathing and realized I was taking shallow gulps of air. I stopped, and Kyle stopped with me. Taking a deep breath of air, I held it for a count of four, then slowly exhaled. The second time, Kyle joined me, and then we took one more deep breath. As the air whistled out through my mouth, I monitored myself and once again, felt grounded and present. My nerves were still on high alarm, but I wasn’t sliding into panic.

I nodded at Kyle when he looked at me, and we moved on, catching up to the others.

“Is the forest getting to you?” Jason asked.

“Yeah,” I said, not wanting to admit it.

“That’s common around here. It means we’re getting close to Hollow Hill.”

“Is it steep?” I asked.

“Is what steep?”

“The hill—Hollow Hill,” I said.

Jason blinked, then cleared his throat and turned to us. “I thought you knew. Hollow Hill isn’t a hill at all. That’s just its name. Hollow Hill is a...well...I can’t explain it. You’ll just have to see for yourself. We’re almost there.”

“It’s a good thing Tiffany didn’t come with us,” I said. “I don’t think she would have managed the walk, even though she seems in relatively good condition. The energy here is thick. It’s like walking through sludge.”

“You’re right, it is like sludge. That’s because the energy coming off of the Hollow is incredibly powerful.” Jason motioned for us to follow him again. “When we get there, I want your promise that you won’t do anything without consulting me first.”

We all promised, though his words made me nervous. “Is someone watching us?” I asked.

“I feel them too,” Kyle said.

“Not some one . Some thing .” But Jason wouldn’t say anything else, even though we cajoled him.

Another five minutes and he stopped. We’d come to a thick part of the copse. The undergrowth had mushroomed, and where it had been crowded before, here, it was so thick that it was hard to tell if anything was in it. And as the wall of foliage stretched

in front of us, a mist rolled out from between the grasses and sedges, like steam through a strainer.

“Come,” Jason said, heading for the one opening that I could see in the wall of leaves, bushes, and grass.

As I approached the path leading in, a strong wave of fear washed over me and I backed away.

“I don’t want to go in there,” I said. “Nope...not going in.”

“It’s all right, Maisy. I’m here,” Kyle said.

“I don’t care if the entire goddamn military is here, I don’t want anything to do with whatever it is that’s in there,” I said, feeling my fear turning into panic. I seldom ever had panic attacks. What the hell was going on?

“It’s the protective nature of the Hollow,” Jason said. “That’s how it deflects anybody who might disturb it.”

“These wild places,” Kyle said. “Are we talking portal areas, or...”

“My aunt says this is where the Fae come and go. She was surprised you were bringing us here,” I said, deciding to get to the bottom of things. “Won’t the Fae be upset if we disturb them?”

Jason hesitated. “There are other portals we could travel to, but the trip would take more than a day, and the danger is greater. As I said, I received permission from the city to bring you here—there’s a fence ahead and I have the key. When we reach there, if you still want to leave, we’ll turn and go.”

The others glanced at me. Everybody looked nervous.

Finally, I shrugged. “We might as well go as far as the fence, I suppose.” Not wanting to be the deciding factor for everyone, I once again told myself that if, when we reached the perimeter and I still felt like leaving, I would.

Jason frowned, but said nothing. Instead, he turned and began pushing forward again, through the thickening undergrowth.

Kyle leaned down to whisper in my ear. “Are you sure you want to continue? I’m curious, but I also have the sense that we shouldn’t be here.”

I thought about it again, weighing our options. Finally, deciding that I should trust the teacher to do his job, I nodded. The school wouldn’t have hired him if they hadn’t done a background check.

“Let’s go,” I whispered back. “I may just be hypersensitive. A lot has been going on in my life and I’m not sure if my hesitation has to do with Hollow Hill, or just life in general.”

Kyle took my hand. “I hope you don’t mind— it makes me feel less nervous.”

“I don’t mind,” I said. Truth was, I didn’t mind at all. I was rapidly growing to like Kyle, and holding hands with him was actually comforting.

We worked our way past the line where the panic had set in, and now—all around me—it felt like we were being watched. Everywhere I looked, I thought I could see someone, and then they would vanish. They weren’t ghosts, either. I wasn’t sure exactly what was out here in the woodlands, but I trusted my instincts.

“Have you ever heard of the Woodlings?” Nena asked. “Do you think there are any

out here?”

Puzzled, I waited for the teacher to answer. The name didn't ring a bell and I wasn't exactly sure what Nena was talking about.

Jason again cleared his throat. “Yes, I'm familiar with the Woodlings. I've actually seen one. And I do believe they exist here, especially since this is a known Fae habitat.”

“What are they?” I asked. The discussion was helping me keep my mind off the energy that felt so unwelcoming.

“The Woodlings are spirits from the wood, shaped from the very wood itself, and they serve the Overkings.”

“Overkings?” I asked.

“Another word for the Fae,” Jason said. “It's what the Woodlings call them, because they are bound servants. The Woodlings are sentient creatures, and they belong both in our world and world of Fae. You'll find them whenever you are deep in the forest.”

“Servants?”

“More like slaves,” Nena said. “I know we have a few members of the Fae in our city council and in our communities, but they have such a feudal structure that I'm amazed they put up with interacting with us.”

“You're correct in that assumption,” Jason said. “They do have a feudal structure to their hierarchy. As to putting up with us, there isn't much else they can do, given the nature of our encroachment into their native territories. In a sense, it's colonialism all over again.”

“I’ve met two members of the Fae who interact with our society, and I have to say, they’re pretty nice. It feels like we’re making assumptions based on stereotypes.” I felt like I needed to stand up for my new friends. Neither Bealissa nor Ginger had seemed anything like what I had heard about members of the Fae race.

“The Fae can be nice on an individual basis,” Jason said. “Do not expect their race to mirror that. And you met two of the Fae who prefer to interact with mortals. Again, you cannot assume that is a good representative of the actual community. Should we meet any of their kin, do not thank them for anything, and do not say the word favor around them. You might inadvertently bind yourself to a lifetime of servitude.”

Now that I knew. And I fully realized that I couldn’t base my opinions off the small sector I had met. But I still felt like they were getting a bad rap.

“Don’t worry, we’re listening.” I wanted the whole subject to be done and over with. I didn’t feel like controversy today, nor did I feel like an argument. Kyle squeezed my hand and gave me a wink. “Don’t let him get to you,” he whispered. I glanced over at Nena. She had a scowl on her face, and she was openly glaring at the back of the teacher.

With every step, the sensation that we were being watched grew, and I tried to brush it away. My instincts were screaming turn back , but I had committed to seeing it through and I really didn’t want to explain myself.

A moment later we came to the fence that Jason had been talking about. On the other side, the wild had really taken over. There was no sign of any trail, and the energy that flowed out from behind the fence made my stomach tighten. I moved closer to Kyle as Jason took out a key and began to unlock the massive padlock holding the chain gate shut.

As he opened it, I had a flash that something was about to go devilishly wrong.

Jason swung the gate wide and started to step through when a loud growl echoed past us.

I jumped, stumbling back. Nena froze, but Lonny pushed her to the side as a massive bristled boar with glowing red eyes and curved tusks came rushing through, knocking Jason to the ground. I suddenly realized that it was headed directly toward me. I screamed, unable to move as it barreled down on me.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I tried to sidestep the boar, leaping to the side as it thundered toward me. I narrowly missed getting gored by its massive tusks as I landed in a patch of thorny brambles, the barbs on the thorns digging in as I rolled through them. The boar turned and veered my way again, letting out a terrifying growl. It lowered its tusks, pawing the ground and snuffling, then drove forward into the tangle of brambles.

Ignoring the pain of the thorns, I scrambled on my hands and knees, unable to get to my feet. I kept crawling as fast as I could, with the boar hot on my heels. The thorns pierced my knees and shins through my pants and hooked into my forearms. Welts rose where I scrambled over stinging nettle, but all of that was nothing in comparison to what the creature would do to me if it got hold of me.

Up ahead was a nurse log, covered with mushrooms and moss, and all I could think was that—if I could get over it—maybe the boar couldn't get me. Ignoring the screams of my classmates, I focused on the log, scrambling toward it, as Kyle raced toward me from the other side.

As I reached the fallen tree, I reached up to grab hold of a broken branch that jutted out from the top. I dragged myself up as Kyle grabbed me under the arms, helping as I braced myself against the dirt, pushing with my feet. He helped me swing over the log, and I rolled over the mossy top, catching several splinters along the way.

The next moment, something rammed into the log as the boar hit the other side and squealed. Kyle dragged me to my feet and I stumbled to the side with him as Jason aimed a wand at the boar. The next moment a ball of fire came shooting out of the tip.

“Get down!” he screamed.

I didn’t stop to think and neither did Kyle. We dropped. I cowered into a ball and covered my head with my arms. The next moment there was a loud shriek and what sounded like an explosion. Another moment, and everything went quiet.

* * *

“Maisy! Are you okay?” Kyle knelt beside me. “Are you okay?”

Jason and the others raced over to my side.

“The pig—” I caught my breath, leaning against Kyle as I tried to make sense of what had happened.

“He’s dead,” Kyle said. “In fact, there’s not much left of him. And what there is, is pretty much toast.”

“Maisy, I’m so sorry—” Jason reached down and took my other arm but I shook him off.

Kyle helped me up. I winced as the thorns dug into my flesh. “What the hell was that thing?” It hadn’t looked like any normal pig to me.

“That was a ferandal, a wild boar that comes from the dimension of the Fae. The Fae hunt it for meat, and charm it for magical protection. The boar, once charmed, will fight for the Overkings, and they use them when they go to battle.” He helped me back to the log and I sat down, exhausted and in pain.

I stared down at the body of the boar. It was as frightening in death as it had been in life. I could still feel its breath still on my heels. Those tusks could have run me

through, and now, up close, I could see the serrated edges on the outer curve of the bone.

“Are there more of them?” Kyle asked.

“It must have been waiting at the gate. Which, by the way, I’ll go lock now.” Jason shook his head. “This didn’t turn out to be the field trip I was hoping it would, and I’m very grateful that Tiffany and the others went home. I’ll think very hard before bringing you out here again.”

Kyle frowned as Jason left to go lock the gate. “Maisy, you need to stop at urgent care on the way home. We should get going.” He turned to me. “Can you walk?”

I winced. I hurt like hell, everywhere. “I think so, but it doesn’t feel good. I just want out of this place.”

I never wanted to see Hollow Hill again. All I wanted to do was get home and take a warm bath. But Kyle was right. I could feel the bramble thorns in my skin, and I needed to stop for treatment. I wouldn’t be able to find all the thorns myself and if I didn’t get them out, I could get some nasty infections if the skin healed over them.

Kyle frowned. “Tell you what. I’ll drive you to urgent care, then home. I can take a taxi back to get my car. I don’t trust that you’re okay driving.”

I thought about protesting, but I was shaky, on an adrenaline crash, hurting, and not sure where my emotions were. I knew Aphrodite had helped me manage them during the attack, otherwise I would have frozen in place and been gored, quite possibly killed.

Jason tried to apologize again, but I didn’t want to listen. I just wanted to leave.

Kyle brushed him off, helping me to my car. I handed him the keys and he helped me into the passenger's seat. As we pulled out of the parking lot, I thought that I sure as hell wasn't ever going camping up here. Way too close to Hollow Hill, and if the pig had been any indication of whatever else lay beyond that fence, I wanted no part of it.

On the drive back into town, Kyle cautiously navigated the lights, keeping the ride smooth with as few bumps as possible. He kept glancing over at me.

"I'm going to drive you directly to urgent care, and I'll wait there with you," he said.

"You can take me home. My aunt will go with me?—"

"No, the sooner you get those cuts looked at, the better. Did the ferandal hurt you at all?"

I shook my head. "No, I don't think so. If it had, I'd probably be unconscious. But I've got more thorns in me than I want to think about and those buggers hurt." As the adrenaline wore off, I leaned back against the seat, sweating from the pain. I moaned. "Gods, I'm feeling every prick of every thorn right now. They're embedded in my flesh because as I crawled over the brambles, it pushed them in."

"We're almost there," Kyle said. "Hang on."

"Oh, I'm hanging in here, I'm just...losing steam really quickly. I should call my aunt," I said. "What time is it?"

"It's eleven-thirty," he said.

I gingerly picked up my phone and texted Astra. i'm headed to urgent care. i'll be fine, but i was hurt and i need a doctor.

A moment later, Astra called me. “What the hell happened?”

I winced, trying to hold the phone so that the thorns in my arms didn’t hurt. “I got attacked by a ferandal, and while it didn’t catch me, I had to crawl through a bramble patch. I have thorns embedded in places I didn’t know existed.”

“Oh good heavens. Are you driving?”

“No, my classmate is taking me. We’re in my car, and then he’ll take a taxi back to get his.”

“Tell him that if he’ll drive you home, I’ll drive him out to his car. Let me know if there’s anything you need. Call me if you’re going to be at urgent care for a long time, or if they want to send you to the hospital.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I’ll tell Kyle.”

As I hung up, my entire body hurt. I would never have been able to drive myself. I was extremely grateful for Kyle’s help, and I wouldn’t forget it.

* * *

Ninety minutes later, Kyle and I arrived at my home. He helped me out and into the house, where Astra was anxiously waiting.

“Lunch is on the table. I made enough for you, Kyle, as a thank you for helping my niece. I hope you can stay?”

“Thanks, I have time. And it was no trouble,” Kyle said, flashing Astra a wide smile. “You should have seen her getting away from that ferandal. You would have been so proud of her.”

“I need to call Crystal,” I said. “Then...lunch would be good, though I’m exhausted.”

Kyle followed Astra into the kitchen, while I pulled out my phone. I put in a call to Crystal. I didn’t feel up to texting. She answered on the second ring.

“Hey, how did class go?”

“It didn’t. Listen, I need to cancel plans this afternoon, unless you’re willing to come over. I had an adventure that I’d really rather have skipped, and I’m...covered in bandages and on antibiotics.” The antibiotics were specially formulated for witchblood, but they were still antibiotics.

“Um, I’ll be over. Two-thirty?”

“Can we make it three-thirty? I need lunch and a little nap, if I can.”

“I’ll be there. Oh, by the way, I thought you’d like to know—I passed the test. I’m to be initiated at next Saturday’s meeting! I’m so excited,” Crystal said.

“Well, that’s one spot of bright news in a day filled with pain,” I said. “I’ll see you this afternoon. We’ll celebrate with homemade mochas and cookies. I’ll ask Astra if she’ll bake.”

“You don’t have to do that—I can bring some from my shop. I made oatmeal cranberry bars,” she said. “I know you love those.”

Happy with that thought, I said goodbye and called Ginger.

“Hey,” I said. “I feel so guilty, but I was hurt today and I can’t make dinner. I’m not blowing you off, I promise.”

“What happened?” she asked.

“I went on a field trip up to Hollow Hill and was attacked by a ferandal.”

“Hollow Hill? What the hell were you doing there?”

“Hey, it was my teacher’s idea,” I said. I told her about all the puncture wounds.

“Let’s reschedule. Your teacher’s an asshole. He should know that’s not the place to take anybody who isn’t prepared.”

We rescheduled for the next Friday, and she told me how lucky I was and that I should report my teacher.

After that, I went in the dining room for lunch. I wanted to get to know Kyle better, and to find a way to thank him. He’d been a rock for me today, and without him, I would have been in a lot worse trouble. Jason hadn’t helped until things had already gone south.

“I’m thinking of dropping cryptozoology,” I said, settling into my chair. “I don’t trust Jason any farther than I can throw him. Ginger thinks I should report him to the school for negligence.”

“You have a point. I don’t think he was prepared at all today,” Kyle said.

“What on earth happened?” Astra ladled out clam chowder and handed me a basket of dinner rolls, fresh out of the oven.

“Nothing I ever anticipated,” I said. I told her about the trip and what happened. “I’m not certain I ever want to see another pig, outside of a BLT or a ham sandwich.”

“Ferandals are dangerous,” Astra said. “I’ve seen one before, and they’re trained to kill. The Overkings use them. I won’t say the Fae, because the members of the Fae who interact with our world aren’t about to keep a ferandal around.”

“What do they use them for?” Kyle asked.

Astra stared at her plate. “For hunting down those who defy them, and those who they want to punish. The Overkings...the Fae...can be ruthless and cruel. It’s dangerous to get involved with them, and it’s dangerous to make enemies of them. I know you like the two women you’ve met, Maisy, but be cautious. While they may stick to the honor code, they probably have family who don’t.”

I nodded, taking her warning to heart. “I was going to meet Ginger for dinner, but I called her and we rescheduled.”

“How much have you had to do with the Fae?” Kyle asked my aunt.

She paused, then said, “Not much, but enough to know that I want to steer clear of them. They live by different rules than we do. That’s fine, but I don’t want to be on the receiving end of their rules.” She smiled. “So, Kyle, tell us a bit about yourself.”

He shrugged. “Well, I’m a computer tech and I’ve been working on opening up my own business. I’m about a month away from it. I’m actually a techno witch—I have a magical connection with technology. In fact, I’m going to call my business ‘Tech Mage.’ I’m an intuitive programmer—I can sense what’s wrong with a computer.”

I noticed that he was cautious not to tell Astra that he was currently working security in a fetish bar. She wouldn’t have cared, but he must have run into resistance before.

“That’s cool,” I said. “I’ve never heard of that.”

“Magic and the witchblood are evolving with the times. I was just born this way. The Aseer was surprised when she assessed me. I’m the first witch she’s assessed as one, although it’s a growing community. She said she thinks it’s because my father was heavily involved with the computer community, and he worked with computers from the time he could barely read. It seemed to infuse itself with his magic. My mother’s a mathematician, and that, too, seems ingrained within her magic.” He smiled, looking every inch the cute geek that he was.

“That’s fascinating,” I said. I was trying to think of a nonintrusive way to ask if he was married, without sounding like I was on the hunt.

Aunt Astra solved that problem. “Are you married?” she asked.

He shook his head. “No, actually. I was engaged once, but she wanted a more exciting life than I could provide. I’m more interested in curling up on the sofa with a good movie on Saturday nights, with a pizza and a bottle of wine, than I am climbing a mountain or flying down to Mexico for the weekend. Maybe I’m boring, but at least I’m honest.”

“That sounds good to me,” I said, raising my eyebrows. “Dan and I spent our weekends at the farmers market, or at the beach with a picnic, or...well...things like that. We were quiet, but happy.”

“Dan?” Kyle said. “Are you married?”

I shook my head. “I was, but Dan was killed by a drunk driver a few years back.”

“I’m so sorry,” he said, and by his tone, I truly believe that he was.

“Do you have any pets?” Astra asked.

He laughed. “No, but I love animals. I just haven’t gotten around to it yet. My ex-fiancée didn’t want pets, and I gave in because...well...you learn to compromise. But that would be a dealbreaker if I ever get engaged a second time. I may not have pets, but I want the option.”

We focused on lunch then, and as the pain reliever set in, I began to get sleepy. It was a bit after one p.m . when I finally couldn’t keep my eyes open.

“Listen, Kyle, thanks so much. I appreciate everything you did today. But I’m so tired. I’m going to take a nap. Auntie, can you drive Kyle back to his car?”

“Of course,” she said, motioning to Kyle. “We should let Maisy get some sleep. I’ll take you to your car.”

Before she left, she saw me into my bed. I set my alarm for three-fifteen, then changed into a loose sundress that didn’t bother my scratches. As I climbed into bed, ignoring the puncture marks all over my arms, knees, and shins, I thought I’d struggle getting to sleep, but before Astra and Kyle could leave, I was out, into a dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

By the time Crystal arrived, I was up, though still groggy, and the bruises had really set in. I stared in the mirror, wincing as I looked at the puncture wounds that the doctor had treated. He'd managed to extract twenty-two thorns from various parts of my body, and in addition to that, I was black and blue on my knees and elbows and I walked like I was ninety.

I opened the door, still wearing the sundress. Crystal stared at me, her eyes running up and down, and she gave me a horrified look.

"What the hell happened?" she said, pushing past me.

"I met a Fae piggy who wanted to gore me," I said.

She froze. "What did you say?"

"Yeah, the field trip? Didn't go as planned. We ran into a ferandal, a Fae boar trained to kill, I gather. It targeted me. I managed to get away from it before it could touch me, but that included scrambling through a bramble patch."

As I told her what had happened, she listened, her eyes wide.

"You could have been killed."

"Easily. I've decided to drop out of Jason's class, given he didn't think about what might happen. There's a reason the city keeps that portal behind a chain-link fence. In

fact, I wonder how many teenagers get in trouble down there every year? There's no way to close down the wild places, and it's really not the city's place to patrol them...but..."

"Shadow towns always have dangers other towns generally don't. Parents need to teach their kids how to keep safe. I know that the schools do—we all know the rules by heart, but it has to come from the home, too." Crystal grimaced, watching me gingerly sit down. "That looks so freaking painful."

"It is. I feel like a pincushion," I said, easing back against the sofa. "At least I got some sleep. It helped, but the next few days are going to be painful. Anyway, so yeah, I'm dropping the class. The teacher fucked up, Crystal. He could have gotten us seriously hurt."

"From what you told me, yes. Well, that will give you Friday nights free."

"And I can study it on my own." I paused, then said, "I have to say, the one good thing that came out of it is I met Kyle."

"Who's Kyle?" Crystal asked.

"Well..." When I woke up, I realized that I was thinking about him. He'd been so helpful and he was so interesting, and I had thoroughly enjoyed eating lunch with him. Well, as much as I could, given how much I'd been hurting.

"He's a guy from class. He helped me during the attack, and then he took me to urgent care, and then drove me back here. And yes, he's single. And...I think I might like to get to know him. He seems like someone I'd like to have for a friend."

"Just a friend? Tell me about him."

I laughed. Crystal wasn't going to let me off the hook until I told her all about him. "He works in a fetish bar as security—the Lace & Bow."

"I thought he ran his own business," Astra said from the hallway.

I jumped. "I didn't know you were listening."

"I took a little nap too, after I dropped Kyle off at his car. So, what's this about a fetish bar?" She arched her eyebrows.

Crystal was grinning, watching both of us.

"Kyle's in the process of opening up his own business. Remember? He didn't say he had already opened it. Currently, he works security at the Lace & Bow." I shrugged. "Honestly, it's work, and he's making a living."

"I didn't say there was anything wrong with it," Astra said. "If the man is pulling his own weight, if he's not leeching off a girlfriend or his parents, all the more power to him. I understand when someone is down and out—everybody needs help at some time. But I have seen a lot of people who didn't want to work. Anyway, on the way back to his car, we had a good chat, and I fully approve." She flashed me a knowing grin.

"What do you mean?" I asked, blushing.

"Of you dating."

I stared at her. I wasn't sure whether I was irritated because of her assuming I wanted to date him, or because she actually knew I wanted to go out with him. Because I did. And I wasn't used to the feeling, so I decided that I was irritated at myself.

Crystal glanced at me. “Did he ask you out?”

“No,” I said, blushing again. “He hasn’t, but I think if he did, I’d say yes.”

“Why don’t you call him and invite him out to dinner? You could say it was a thank you for him helping you,” my aunt said.

I paused. That was actually a good idea. I decided to drop the pretense of not being interested, and took a deep breath. “I should. That would be the perfect excuse, and if he didn’t want to go, it wouldn’t be so awkward or embarrassing.”

“Do it now,” Crystal said. “While you’ve got the courage.” She grabbed my phone and slapped it into my hand.

Astra laughed, but she sat down near me too. “If you do, I’ll make you strawberry shortcake tomorrow. I know how much you love it.”

I rolled my eyes. “Really?” When they both egged me on, I shrugged. “I don’t even know if I have his number!”

Astra held up her phone. “I do. He asked me to give it to you.” With a self-satisfied smile, she texted me his number. “So, call him.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake.” Grinning beneath my grumpy exterior, I entered his number in my contacts, then texted him.

hey, kyle. i thought i’d ask you out to dinner, you know—to repay you for your kindness. if you aren’t available, no problem, but it’s my treat.

I thought I’d have to wait for a while, but within a couple moments, my phone chimed and I glanced at my texts. Kyle had already replied.

i'd like that. how about tuesday night? seven? where would you like to go?

I blinked. I hadn't expected him to be so quick. how about flora's, if you like seafood? she makes great fish and chips.

sounds good. i'll pick you up, if you like. or we can meet there.

why don't we meet there? that way if i'm kept late at work, you won't have to wait. see you then!

great! take it easy till then and i hope you're healing up.

"Well, I didn't expect that," I said. "We're on for Tuesday night." I allowed myself a satisfied smile. "I really do like him."

"I know you do, and I'll tell you this," Astra said. "He talked about you all the way back to his car. About how brave you were, about how you managed to get away. About how impressed he was that you kept your head about you. He also said you're pretty," she added.

"He told you I'm pretty?" I felt like an eighth grader, finding out her secret crush thought she was cute. "How do we always end up feeling like we're teenagers again when we meet someone new?"

"I think it's encoded in our DNA," Astra said. "But what are you going to do about Zandre?"

"What about Zandre?" Crystal asked. "Is that the vampire?" She perked up, turning to me.

I groaned, rolling my eyes. "I'm not sure what the hell to do about him." I turned to

Crystal. “Turns out Zandre has let go of the idea of Denise being his soulmate. He’s now decided he’d like to take me out.”

“A vampire asked you out? Are you going?” Crystal sounded unnervingly intrigued.

“Yeah he did, and no, I don’t want to,” I said. My elation drained away as fast as it had come. “I told him I’d call him tomorrow night, since I thought I’d be going out to dinner tonight. I’m not sure how to say no to a vampire. I know that they’re supposed to be just like us, but the truth is, he can drain my blood if he gets mad enough. He can turn me into a vampire.”

“Oh, he probably won’t even think about that,” Crystal said. “Given his position in the Northwest Vampire Collective. He might be disappointed, but I doubt if he’ll do anything to you. Still...are you positive you don’t want to see what he has to say?”

I flashed her a puzzled look. I thought she’d be horrified, but she seemed almost excited.

“I hope you’re right and he’ll be okay with me saying no. As to dating him? Why do you even have to ask? No, I’m not interested,” I said. “Maybe I can play up being attacked to my advantage. I don’t usually like doing that, but sometimes you use what advantages you get.” I sighed, then glanced at Crystal. “Okay, let’s talk about you. You passed your vision quest?”

She nodded. “I did. Nightshade called me earlier today to tell me. Next week I get initiated!”

I turned to Astra. “When do we get to talk about our quests?”

“After she’s initiated. Then you can gossip all you want about what you did and experienced. I should start dinner. Crystal, are you eating with us?”

“If you don’t mind,” Crystal said. “Can I help you?”

“No, I’m good. Do you mind hamburgers and fries?”

“That sounds good,” Crystal said.

I nodded. “Yeah, that’s good.”

As Astra left the room, Crystal and I began to talk and, of course, the subject turned to Kyle.

* * *

Next morning, I was a little less stiff, though the scabs were pulling on my skin. A couple dozen holes on my skin weren’t exactly the piercings I had envisioned. But I found another sundress—they were cool against my skin and didn’t rub or chafe on the cuts—and slipped on a pair of ankle boots. It was an odd combination, especially for mid-February, but I was going for comfort. I’d turn up the heat if I was cold. I had a light cape and I decided that would be easier on my arms than stuffing them into a jacket. I kissed Astra goodbye, grabbed my purse, and headed out for work.

As I got to work, it occurred to me that unless I started getting some more readings, I wasn’t going to even be bringing in enough to cover the rent on the place. Sighing, I unlocked the door and turned on the open sign. I also turned up the heat and took off my coat, shivering in the morning chill.

I settled down at my desk and checked my answering service. There were three calls that had come in over the weekend. Hoping it wasn’t Zandre again, I sat back and punched the first one. I had decided early on that I didn’t need to forward work calls to my phone on weekends.

“Hi, Maisy? I’m Serah Jakes and I’m looking...I want...I’d like to make an appointment to talk to you about your matchmaking services.” The woman’s voice was hesitant, but that wasn’t surprising. A lot of people had trouble admitting they were unlucky in love and needed help. Serah didn’t say much about herself, so I took down her number and put a question mark by her name.

The second call was more immediate—the man on the other end sounded frightened. “Ms. Tripwater? I’m Evan Frakes and I have a ghost in my house that won’t leave my wife and me alone. Can you come check it out? I think it’s becoming dangerous and I need someone to take care of it right away.”

I took down his number and wrote “ghost exorcism” on the line beside his name.

The third message was from Jason. I don’t know why it startled me, but it did. “Hey, Maisy, I wanted to check up on how you’re doing. I’m so sorry the trip turned out to be such a bust. It was a mess and I totally screwed up. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t tell the school about this.”

I stared at the phone, frowning. Jason wasn’t really apologizing, though I had no doubt he hadn’t planned for that to happen. No, he just wanted to make sure that I didn’t tell the administration about it. Then it occurred to me that he had previously taught seventh grade at the academy. Why had he ended up teaching adult education classes? Why wasn’t he in his old job anymore?

The thought intrigued me enough that I opened my laptop and began to search on his name. It didn’t take me too long to come up with a cryptic article from several years back.

Jason Willows, of the Midnight Manor Academy, has been reassigned to continuing education classes. Willows, who taught sixth grade for five years and most recently seventh grade for two years, is being replaced by Sophie Terakan, a new member of

the Academy. Terakan will be taking over all former duties held by Willows, effective immediately.

I glanced at the name of the site. It was the PNW Magical Academy NewsLine site—a website that contained updates from all the academies in the general area. Which meant it was legit. I glanced through the other results that my search had returned, but there was little to find, until I came to a brief mention of Jason's name on a blog site.

The blog was run anonymously, and it had very few views. But what I found made an impression, one that left me unsettled.

Rumor has it that Jason Willows, a professor at the Midnight Manor Academy, has been disciplined for inappropriate verbal exchanges with one of his students, a thirteen-year-old girl. The girl states he commented on her breasts—that she was filling out into a lovely young woman.

I read on. Apparently, it came down to a he-said, she-said situation, but the school took it seriously enough to remove him from having access to the kids, yet still offered him employment in case the accusation had been misconstrued or fabricated.

I frowned. I didn't like that he was still in the school, but it was the only report made, and there was no way to prove what had happened. There were truth spells, but they were invasive and could interfere with mental health, so they couldn't be used unless there was other evidence to suggest culpability.

I thought about it for a while. Jason had made a bad decision with the field trip. Taking that without anything else, I might have given him a pass. But given the fact that he had a prior accusation still hanging over his head, and my gut feeling that not only had he actually made the comment to the girl, but that he might have made other comments that went unheard, and adding to that the fact that he put his students in

danger...well, I decided to contact the school.

Rather than call, I decided a trip to the academy was in order. Words were one thing, but the marks on my body were proof that the adventure had been more of a nightmare.

I adjusted my cape, put up a sign that I'd be back by ten-thirty and, keys in hand, headed back to my car. I didn't like snitching, but I didn't want Willows putting anybody else in danger.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Every time I set foot on the Midnight Manor Academy's campus, I felt a weird sense of awe and nostalgia. I loved my time here as a child and teenager. I'd lived in a magical environment that had set me up to be prepared for life as one of the witchblood. I knew that some people hadn't had such a luxury—January Jaxson, from over in Moonshadow Bay, hadn't attended a magical academy because of her mother. She never said it held her back, but she was suffering from a chronic illness brought on by not using her magic for so many years. One of the few times we'd met, she'd told me about it, and how hard it made life.

Now, as I walked across campus, the heels of my boots clacking against the cobblestones, I watched the young students on their way to class, remembering the fun times that Crystal and I had when we were in school.

Community Hall was a stone building, looking almost like a gothic cathedral. With the auditorium, theater, cafeteria, and administrative offices, it sprawled across the square, surrounded by well-groomed rose bushes and a grassy knoll where students could sit and eat lunch under the trees on warm days.

As I entered the building, I watched the surge of students navigating through the stone halls on their way to the school store or their next class. It was nearing eleven, and in an hour, the halls would be filled with students on their way to lunch. I headed toward the principal's office.

The secretary looked up from her desk, where she was entering data. A nameplate on her desk read "Amanda Wyers."

“Hello, may I help you?”

“I need to talk to the principal about one of the professors. It’s about Jason Willows.”

I had guessed even the mention of his name would get me a reaction, and I was right. She took a breath, then looked up at me. “Please, have a seat. May I have your name?”

“Maisy Tripwater, and I’m in his cryptozoology class. As I said, this is important.”

Amanda stood. “I’ll be right back, please wait here.” She vanished through a door behind her desk.

I waited, glancing around the room. The window on the side wall overlooked the main square of the campus, which was currently mostly empty, given classes had started. A few students were crossing the square to the other buildings, but other than that, it was relatively quiet. I flashed back to so many years spent here, and—unlike some of my friends—I had enjoyed my time in school. I’d loved learning and had gotten along well with many of my peers.

The door to Principal Morrison’s office opened and Amanda appeared. “You can go in now,” she said, motioning for me to enter the room. She stayed, shutting the door behind her.

“How do you do, Ms. Tripwater. I hope you don’t mind but I’d like Amanda here, to take notes,” Principal Morrison said. He was tall and lanky, with wavy red hair, and he wore a nice but not extravagant gray suit. He stood, holding out his hand.

I shook it and took the seat that he indicated. I had never met him—he took the job long after I’d left school—and he seemed young to me, but then again, witchblood kept us younger than if we were human.

“I don’t mind if she stays,” I said. “I need to discuss the actions of one of your professors.”

Morrison sighed. “You said it’s Jason Willows?”

I nodded. “Yes. As you may know, I was a student here when I was younger—I attended from first grade through twelfth. I loved it here. So, I was excited to sign up for some continuing education classes when I moved back to Midnight Point a few months ago. But...” I paused, not sure how to approach the subject.

“Just tell us what happened,” Morrison said.

“I’m taking his cryptozoology class. We were supposed to go on a field trip yesterday, out to Hollow Hill.”

The principal flinched, giving me a wary look. “He planned to take students to Hollow Hill?”

I nodded. “It ended up with only four of us going all the way in. At first, some of the students left because they hadn’t realized that it would be that much of a hike through the woods. But four of us stayed, and when we got there, he unlocked the gate—he said he had a permit from the city—and a ferandal came bursting through the woods. It came after me.”

I stood and removed my cape, wincing. Then, holding out my arms so they could see the array of punctures, I said, “I managed to escape getting gored, but as you can see, I ended up scrambling through a bramble patch. I have over twenty punctures on my body, as well as all the accompanying bruises. I think Jason destroyed the ferandal, but I could have been gored. I could have been killed . I had to go to urgent care and I’m on antibiotics now.”

Principal Morrison sat back in his chair, staring at me. He glanced at Amanda, who gave him a look that I couldn't read.

"All right, can you tell me what you're thinking? Are you planning on suing the academy?"

I could tell that he had to ask that question; it made sense. "No, I don't want to sue Midnight Manor. I love this school. But he's dangerous. If I'd been older, or unable to move as fast, I could have been killed. He gave us no warning that this would be so incredibly dangerous. I'm just grateful I had quick-enough reflexes. He asked me not to say anything," I added. After pausing, I said, "Then I did a little research on him..."

"Understood," Morrison said. "I know what you found. All right, are you willing to put this in writing? And would anybody corroborate what happened?"

I nodded. "I'll write up a complaint. I think that at least one of the other students will, too." I was pretty sure Kyle would agree to make a formal complaint.

"Amanda will help you. And Ms. Tripwater, please accept my apologies. This is inexcusable, and the fact that you aren't suing the academy...well, I'm not sure I'd have the reserve that you do. You don't know how much I appreciate this."

"The academy is a necessity for witchblood students. Given this teacher was already problematic, and still kept on staff, well...that wouldn't look good." I stared at the principal, thinking that he knew exactly what would happen if this hit the news. Midnight Manor Academy would be under intense scrutiny. And if I had sued, I would have made out like a bandit.

"Exactly," he said. "As I said, I won't forget this. Please, make a formal complaint, and we'll make certain that nothing like this happens again. If you can get a second

complaint, so much the better.”

I texted Kyle. would you be willing to make a formal complaint against jason willows? i’m at the academy, talking to the principal. i found out some extremely disturbing things about jason that makes me even more determined to see him out of here.

Kyle must have been watching his phone, because seconds later I received a text. of course i’d be happy to make a complaint, given all that happened. just let me know what to do.

I looked at the principal. “Can my classmate make a report via email?”

“As long as it’s in writing and he’s signed it,” the principal said.

“What email address should he send it to?”

Morrison gave me his email address. I texted Kyle.

here’s the email address where you’ll send your complaint. just describe everything that happened yesterday. if you could send this off today, i’d be grateful. i’ll tell you more at dinner tomorrow night.

sure thing. see you then.

“Okay, Kyle will be emailing you with his complaint. Thank you for taking me seriously.” I stood, gingerly easing my cape back on.

“I’m sorry this happened,” Principal Morrison said. “This never should have happened.”

I nodded, gathering my purse and keys. “Just do something about him. Next time, someone might die from his stupidity. Field trips like that need to be monitored, and...tell me, do you think this was really approved by the city?”

“I doubt it,” Morrison muttered. “I’ll be checking on that as well.”

As I followed Amanda back to the main office and sat down at a desk with a laptop on it, I thought about what I was doing. I was ruining a man’s career. But then my common sense took hold. He had ruined his own career—twice. And he put my life in danger. I shook off the feelings of guilt and began to type out everything that had happened, along with giving the name of the urgent care clinic where I’d been seen, and how much Jason’s mishap had cost me.

* * *

An hour later, back at my shop, I decided I’d had enough. I needed more caffeine. I took a break and headed next door for a mocha. Crystal was swamped, so I just waved at her, got my triple mocha, and left. As I stood outside my shop, it occurred to me that I wasn’t really trying as hard for Zandre as I did for my other clients. Pain in the ass or not, he deserved his money’s worth. With a sigh, I unlocked my door and returned to my desk.

I pulled my crystal ball to me and cleared my mind. “I will give this a good shot,” I said. “I accepted his money and I’ll either refund him, or give this my best effort.”

Lowering myself into trance, I let my mind drift, asking that I be shown the kind of woman Zandre should meet. As my mind opened, I suddenly found myself staring at Crystal, surrounded by a rolling mist.

Oh hell no...it couldn’t be.

For one thing, when I went into trance for doing this, I was never shown the actual person. And second, no way in hell was I suggesting to Crystal that she get involved with a vampire. I cleared my thoughts, shaking her image out, and tried again. Once more, I found myself staring at Crystal.

Shaken, I tried a third time, and this time came right out of trance.

“What the hell?”

I’d never doubted my visions before, but this... How could I trust what I saw? Crystal was my best friend. Alarm bells started to ring and I pushed my chair back, uncertain what I was going to do. I could talk to my aunt, but I decided I needed to talk to Crystal first. Maybe something was wrong and she was just popping into my mind.

Pulling out my phone, I texted her. i know you’re busy but i really need to talk to you about something. it’s important. i don’t want to talk about it in your shop, so can you duck out and come over for a few minutes? i wouldn’t ask if i didn’t have a good reason.

I sent the text, then looked around, thinking I really should just refund Zandre his money. I was in over my head, trying to meddle in the affairs of vampires.

Crystal answered. i’ll be over in five. bringing treats.

I stared at her text for a moment, then headed over to the table where I did my readings for people. I wanted the cards’ advice on this, but I’d wait till Crystal showed up.

A few minutes later, Crystal pushed through the door, carrying double lattes and a bag of cookies. “Are you all right? You look pale as a ghost.”

I motioned for her to sit down. “I know you’re busy this morning, but a situation has come up and I need to talk to you about it, because you might be involved.” I took a sip of the latte. “Thanks, I can use this. Even though I just finished my latte from home, the caffeine is already lagging today.”

Looking worried, she settled in aside from me. “What happened? What are you talking about?”

There was no good way to ease into the subject, so I decided just to dive in. “You know how I go into trance, to find out the kind of person my clients should be looking for?”

She nodded. “Right.”

“Okay, so you know I’m trying to find someone for Zandre?”

Crystal nodded. “The woman he was obsessed with is dead. Oh man, don’t tell me she’s risen as a vampire, too? That might solve the problem, right?”

“She’s still dead. And that might have solved the problem or it made it worse, but either way—she’s definitely dead, she’s not coming back. So, I’ve told you how I go into trance to get a glimpse of who I should be looking for. Not specific people, but say a star witch—like for Brenda—or some clue of where to find them.”

Crystal nodded, looking more puzzled than ever. “What’s going on, Maisy?”

“So, I went into trance today, searching for a clue as to who Zandre should be with. I figured I owe him an honest effort.” I paused, dreading saying the next thing. “Crystal, you showed up.”

She did a spit take, spewing coffee all over the table. “What are you saying?”

Coughing, she grabbed for a napkin as I took the coffee out of her hand and set it down. “You’re telling me that I should marry a vampire?”

“No! Just...you showed up twice. The first time, I thought it was just a glitch. The second time, you showed up again. Then it occurred to me that something else might be going on with you and I just picked up on it. Is everything okay?” I handed her a paper towel, since she’d used up her napkin, wiping up the coffee off the table.

Crystal let out hard sigh. “I’m all right, Maisy. Nothing other than making it through initiation. Azzy’s fine. My shop is fine.”

I shrugged. “Honestly, I don’t know what to think. That’s why I asked you to come over.”

Crystal settled down, leaning back in her chair. She looked like a deer, caught in the headlights. After a moment, she said, “I don’t know what to say. I haven’t even thought of being in a relationship. I haven’t had the best of luck with them, and I just... I think I’ve given up on looking for anybody.”

That hurt my heart. Love was one of the most important things in the world to me, and I wanted all my friends to be happy and in healthy relationships. I knew that some people weren’t cut out for marriage—like my aunt—but the ones who were, I continually held hope for.

“Oh, Crystal, don’t give up. There’s someone out there for you. Maybe whoever is meant for you isn’t ready now, or the circumstances just aren’t right, but don’t close off the possibility. Please?”

She gave me a shake of the head. “I can’t imagine anyone I might want to marry.”

I wasn’t sure, but it felt like she was hiding something. As I thought about it, I

wondered if maybe she was gay and afraid to tell me.

“You know you can tell me anything , right?” I asked.

She nodded. “Yeah, I know. You really mean that, don’t you?”

“Of course. We’re besties. No secrets.”

“No secrets? Right.” She sighed. “So, I showed up in your visions, huh?”

“Yeah, but don’t take it seriously.” I shook my head. “I thought I was going to have a heart attack when you appeared in my trance this morning. Trust me, I’m not trying to set you up. And I’d never try to set you up with a vampire. I don’t really trust them, not deep down, at the core of things.”

“Then why take them on as clients?” Crystal asked.

“Because, I may not trust them, but they share this world with us. And maybe...maybe a vampire in love will be kinder to others than a vampire who’s a loner. I suppose it’s a weird way of trying to make the world a better place. Maybe?”

Her question was a good one. Why was I trying to help someone I didn’t trust? But what I had said was true—at least to a point. Given how dangerous vampires could be, maybe this was my way of trying to smooth out the kinks in a very difficult relationship—the one vamps had with the living. I wasn’t sure, but it was something for me to think about.

“I think there’s more than that, but that’s for you to figure it out,” Crystal said. She hesitated. “Could your visions be off? What might affect them?”

I thought about it. “Poor sleep, fear...geomagnetic storms, being too close to a

powerful energy source for long enough. Illness, I suppose. And sometimes, when I'm not supposed to know something, my visions stop pulling their weight."

"Maybe you should just wait for a while and try again. Maybe your visions just need a breather." She shrugged, an odd look on her face.

I thought about it for a moment. "I wonder..." I shuffled my cards and laid out a five-card spread called the Star.

The first card—the outward energy of the matter—was the Lovers. That made sense, given we were talking about finding Zandre a wife. But I was surprised it wasn't the underlying energy—which meant that him coming to me was on the surface, covering up another issue in his life.

I drew the second card and laid it out. The Death card. Representing the underlying energy of the situation, death usually meant some sort of transformation. But given Zandre was a vampire—one of the undead—and that he had already died once, I had the feeling it was connected to him in a more literal way. Vampires could be killed, they could die the "final death"...but it wasn't common. But was he in danger? Was he being targeted? Had he come to me searching to fix something he felt was wrong, but couldn't put his finger on?

I sighed, drawing the third card, which represented factors to be considered. It was the queen of swords—a court card. Court cards almost always represented people, and my first thought was Crystal. She was an Aquarius—born on February thirteenth. A thought raced through my mind that—like it or not—she was connected to Zandre, in one way or another.

The fourth card, advice, was the queen of cups and I figured that was me. I was a Scorpio, a water sign, and the moment I saw it, I knew it meant to just be who I was, do what I did, and somehow, I'd facilitate whatever was going to happen.

The last card—the outcome—was the two of cups, indicating love and partnership, harmony and connection. Given the other cards, that didn't make much sense to me, but it made me a little more hopeful. Maybe Crystal knew someone who Zandre would click with.

“Well, we'll see how this turns out,” I said, glancing over at Crystal. I told her what the cards had said.

“If I'm the intermediary, fine,” she said. “I don't mind that.”

“I still have to convince him that he doesn't want to date me.” I paused, then said, “If I can't get out of dinner easily, will you go with me? I'll tell him I'm not comfortable going out alone.”

“Really? You're asking me to tag along like a third wheel? That sounds like a blast,” Crystal said. “Not. But you have the one thing that can make me say yes.”

“What's that?” I asked.

“You can play the friend card and I have to agree.” With that she laughed and headed back to her shop.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

By five-fifteen, I was nervous again, but at least I had some plan of action. I was still at work, and a few minutes later, as the sun went down, I called Zandre.

“Zandre, it’s Maisy Tripwater.”

The hope in his voice wasn’t lost on me. “Maisy! You returned my call.” He sounded surprised. “How was your weekend?”

As he spoke, I could hear the loneliness in his voice and it struck me how hard it must be to watch the centuries go by, to watch people you loved die and vanish into the dust of time. Now that I had time to calm the panic, I could hear the hunger in his voice for someone to talk to. He meant it, I thought. He wanted a companion he could talk to, someone he could be real with. He didn’t just want a woman in his bed to fuck.

“Zandre, I...” I’m not sure what it was, but I suddenly changed my mind. “It was a rough weekend. Listen, I’m willing to go out to dinner with you, but as a friend . In fact, I’d like to bring my best friend, if you don’t mind.” It occurred to me that maybe Crystal would lead him to his match—sometimes it took a series of events to set things in motion. Like when Brenda met her match because of the accident we’d had.

After a brief silence, he said, “All right. When and where would you like to meet?” He sounded disappointed, but the fact that he actually agreed told me he wanted friends as well as a partner.

“I’ll text you in a bit. Meanwhile, I’m looking for your match. I just wanted you to know that.” I paused, then decided to give him a little more. “I would have started sooner, but this weekend things went south and stayed there.”

“What happened?”

He sounded genuinely concerned so I told him about the field trip to Hollow Hill and the ferandal. “I’m pretty beat up.”

“I hope that professor loses his job. That’s the least he deserves. Would you like me to pay a visit to him so that he never thinks of doing that again?”

Whoops . I suddenly realized what it might mean to have a vampire for a friend.

“No, no—I contacted the school about him, so don’t worry about it. I doubt he’ll ever do anything like that again.” I quickly backtracked, told Zandre I needed to go because I had an evening class, and hung up.

As I gathered my things together, I called Crystal.

“Hey, what’s up? I’m in the drive-thru line at the Burger Barn. I decided I didn’t want to cook tonight,” she said.

“I’m headed to grab a bite to eat, and then to class tonight. Not Jason’s class, obviously. So, what night do you have free to go out to dinner with Zandre and me? I still have a feeling that—somehow—meeting you will help him find his way to his match. I have dinner with Kyle tomorrow night, then exorcism class Wednesday night. What about Thursday?”

“Thursday night works, but you’re paying.” Crystal paused and, through the phone, I heard her say, “I’d like a double cheeseburger, a strawberry shake, a six-piece

chicken nuggets with barbecue sauce, and a small fries.”

“That sounds good,” I said. “Anyway, Thursday night at seven? At the Numa Steak House? We can ride together, if you want.”

“It’s a date. Talk to you tomorrow!”

As she hung up, I headed out, arming the security system and locking the door behind me. Once in my car, I texted Zandre, giving him the date, time, and place. Then, deciding that Crystal’s dinner sounded so good I wanted the same for myself, I headed for the Burger Barn.

* * *

The advanced protection class was fast-paced and packed with information. We had been working on herbal charms, but tonight, the teacher was talking about erecting crystal grids on the astral plane. It involved building a sphere around either yourself or your house and land, much like a geodesic dome but spherical, of protection energy, and using crystals to energize the sphere. Toward the end of the class, the teacher recapped what we were learning.

“The reason we build a sphere instead of just a dome is...why?” Professor Markus looked around the room. She pointed to me. “Maisy?”

I cleared my throat. “We build a sphere because energy can enter from all directions. For example, an incoming cord or negative spell isn’t bound by physical barriers like the ground, unless we’ve enchanted that ground. So we create a sphere to protect from all directions.”

“Good. Correct. Now, can we mix energies into the same protection grid? Lonny?”

Lonny nodded. “Yes, you can mix crystal energy along with herbs or energy from wands or woods or whatever else you like. As long as they’re compatible.”

“Excellent. So, for your homework this week, I want you to create a protection grid for yourself, of a spherical nature. Be prepared for me to examine it next week. I won’t need to go to where you build it, because I’ll be able to see it in your aura if you’re properly prepared. Class dismissed.” She began to gather her things.

As everyone else started to pack up to go, I walked over to talk to her. “Professor Markus, can you tell me if a grid protection spell will keep a vampire at bay?”

She blinked, but then sat down at her desk, thinking. “What exactly are you thinking of? How do you want to keep them distant?”

“I don’t want to keep them from talking to me, but from glamouring me.”

“Well then, you’ll want to include clear quartz in your grid, as well as energy from the air element, and I’d make sure that your third-eye chakra is wide open, but your first and second chakras are protected. I’d close them off if you’re meeting up with a vampire. You can close them for periods of time without harm, if it’s not more than a few days.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I don’t want to offend him by wearing silver, but I don’t want to extend an open invitation, either.”

She nodded. “You might also infuse silver into the energy of the grid. Use a silver blade or wand to draw the circle and it should creep into the spell as you create it.”

“I can do that,” I said. “If I create a physical charm to go with it, would it work to add silver beads to it?”

She nodded. “That will help. But remember: vampires are clever. They’re apex predators, even if they adopt a seemingly meek persona. You can never fully trust them,” she added. “I’m not being a bigot, either. Nobody is fully trustworthy, to be honest. Some things can set off the most pacifistic shifter, and some things can set off even the most trustworthy vampire. It’s simply the nature of existence.”

As I left class, her words stayed with me. I needed to make sure that I wasn’t letting my empathy outweigh my common sense. I went home and immediately cleared my third eye and cast a protection spell for the rest of my chakras.

* * *

The next day I had two readings show up—fairly run-of-the-mill questions, but the women were happy with what I told them and they scheduled readings once a month for the next six months. Another woman dropped in around three.

“Hi, I’m wondering—do you do house blessings? I just bought a new home and I’d like to have it cleansed and blessed before I move in,” she said.

“I can do that. I charge \$150 for blessings, \$200 for cleansings unless something shows up that I have to exorcise or put extra time into.” I had come up with the prices on the fly.

I waited for her to answer. I’d learned never to reach for my calendar before they were ready to commit because it put unwanted pressure on the client, and they more often than not backed out. If I waited for them to decide, though, they usually booked a time with me.

“If you need to invest extra time, but I don’t have the extra money to pay for it, can you just leave it at a general house cleansing?” she asked.

“I could, though I wouldn’t guarantee it would work if there are firmly entrenched entities there,” I said. “I can come out and get a feel for the house first, if you like—while it won’t guarantee that something won’t come up as we get into the cleansing, I’m usually pretty adept at spotting latent problems.”

“That would be great,” she said. “Can I book you for mid-March?”

“What about...March twelfth? It’s a Saturday, which might make it easier for you, unless you work on the weekends? At one p.m.?”

“That works for me,” she said. “My name is Andrea Shale. What do you want for a deposit?”

“One hundred, which is refundable up until March tenth at noon.”

She handed me her credit card.

I printed out the receipt and handed it to her. “I’ll contact you in a couple weeks to make sure we’re still on.”

“Thanks,” she said, waving as she headed for the door.

The readings and booking the house cleansing put me in a better mood. At least I felt like I was attracting some business. It suddenly occurred to me that I’d have a bigger business if I opened up Married At First Bite to become a dating service as well as a matchmaking service, but I wasn’t quite ready to go that far.

* * *

At home, Astra was on the phone, ordering takeout. She waved as I headed toward my room to dress for my date with Kyle. I wasn’t sure what to wear—I didn’t know if

this was a real date. We were in that weird place where couples find themselves before they know if they really like each other well enough to date. I decided on a brown skirt, a hunter green turtleneck, and a pair of knee-high brown leather boots. I freshened my makeup, brushed my hair, and headed back downstairs.

Astra glanced at me and smiled. “You look lovely, dear. Are you meeting him, or will he pick you up?”

“I’m meeting him. I’ll be at Flora’s. Here’s hoping it goes well.” I paused, then said, “I think I really like him, Auntie.”

“I think you do, too. Have a good dinner,” she said, waving as I grabbed my jacket and keys.

* * *

Flora’s was an upscale seafood restaurant that had a cozy, ambient atmosphere, but served gourmet quality seafood, as well as the standard fish and chips, chowder, and calamari. I stopped at the hostess stand.

“I’m meeting someone—” I paused as Kyle entered the restaurant.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” he said. “I got caught in traffic.”

“Hey, you’re here now,” I said. “Plus, I just got here.”

He turned to the waitress. “Kyle Frost, reservation for two.”

I was surprised when Kyle gave the hostess his name. Midnight Point was small enough that the restaurants usually didn’t need reservations, but he had made one anyway.

As the hostess led us to our table, the smells from the kitchen made my stomach rumble. I blushed, but laughed.

“I guess I’m hungrier than I thought,” I said, patting my tummy.

“So am I,” Kyle said. He pulled out my chair for me, and I gave him a smile and sat down. “This was a good suggestion,” he said.

“I’ve been here twice,” I said, uncertain of what to say now that we weren’t being chased by a monster.

Kyle must have been feeling the same because he laughed. “So, what do we talk about now that things are relatively normal?”

I grinned at him. “I’m not sure. Did you make the complaint to Principal Morrison?”

“I did. If you hear anything, let me know. I tell you, Jason Willows is fucked up. That field trip was a disaster waiting to happen.”

“I found out more about him,” I said, proceeding to tell him about the seventh-grade girl.

“I hope they nail his ass to the wall, then,” Kyle said.

The waitress came to take our orders. “Our specialties tonight are calamari steak, and a surf-and-turf platter with filet mignon and lobster tail.”

“I think I want a bowl of chowder, and the halibut fish and chips. And I’ll have a glass of white wine, please.” I handed her my menu.

“I’ll try the turf-and-surf, with a starter of a cup of chowder,” Kyle said. “White wine

for me, too.”

Once she brought our drinks, the nervousness began to wear off and we started talking. I found out that Kyle had been born in Terameth Lake, but he felt more comfortable here in Midnight Point, near the water. He had family there, and while they didn’t get together for holidays every year, he got along with his sister and parents.

“Is your sister a tech mage as well?”

He nodded. “Everybody in my family is, even though, as I said before, I was the first one the Aseer formally assessed as such. My sister’s younger, and she was assessed as a techno witch as well. My parents are air witches, but they’re really early techno witches.” He paused to sip his wine. “So, you were born here?”

I nodded. “Yes. My parents died in a plane crash on the way to the UK. They were going on vacation and had left me in the care of my aunts. Astra and Sara took custody of me—they were my guardians appointed in my parents’ wills—and so, from the time I was seven, they brought me up.”

“You were married, right?” he asked.

I nodded, and—because it felt right—I told him about Dan. “It was a good marriage. Not perfect, but it was good. And I do miss him,” I added.

“I imagine you must.”

The questions turned into conversation as our dinner came, and I realized that I was already invested in Kyle, whether it turned into a friendship or something more. I liked him, and by the end of dinner, I’d decided that I wanted to see him again.

In the parking lot, he turned to me. “So...”

“So...” I said.

“So, I guess the next question is: where is this going? Although I should probably ask if you’re interested in it going anywhere?” Kyle leaned against my car, a questioning smile on his lips.

I took a deep breath. Time to be upfront and not dodge the question.

“I’m interested in seeing where this goes,” I said. “I think...we’re already friends. I’d like to see if we might...be compatible as more than just friends.” I felt so awkward that I stumbled over the words. I wanted to say kiss me ...but I wasn’t ready to go that far.

Kyle held my gaze, then slowly leaned down, pressing his lips against mine. I leaned in, and he wrapped his arms around me, pulling me close. His lips were soft against mine, and I felt lightheaded, almost faint. It had been so long since I’d kissed anyone. Kyle’s chest was warm as he pulled me into his embrace, and for the first time in two years, my body ached to be touched, to be loved.

“Maisy, you’re so beautiful,” he whispered, then kissed me again.

I kissed him back, eagerly, and then—as the heady kiss went on—I suddenly froze as a wave of guilt swept over me. I pulled back, both wanting more and wanting to run.

“What’s wrong?” he whispered. “Did I move too fast?”

“No...yes...” I broke out of his embrace. “I... I don’t know. It’s not you—not at all.”

“You’re not ready, are you? You need some time.” He sounded disappointed, but he

wasn't planting a guilt trip on me.

I stared at the ground. "I like you, so much. But...I didn't know I was going to respond that way. I didn't know it would shake me up so much." I looked up, about ready to cry. "I feel so confused, and now I've ruined everything."

"No, no—you haven't," he said, reaching out to take my hand. "Listen, we're just getting to know each other. It's only been two years since you lost your husband. If this is your first..."

"It is," I said. "I haven't been on a real date since Dan died. Friends tried to fix me up, but I just couldn't go through it. This is the first time I've wanted to go out with somebody. I like you, Kyle, and I would like to see where things go, but I'm going to have to take it slowly. If you aren't willing to wait, I do understand."

"I'm not going to just run off because you need some time. What about a hug instead of a kiss? And if you're free, maybe we can go to a matinee on Saturday? I know you have coven meetings Saturday nights."

"Not every Saturday night, but this upcoming one, yes. And I'd like that. I think I can handle that pace." I hesitantly opened my arms and he embraced me again, but gentler, and it felt warm and soft and comforting. He kissed me on the top of my head and then let go.

"What do you think will happen to class?" he asked.

"I don't know. If they let him continue to teach, I'll be contacting the media." I yawned. I was tired and emotional and feeling all sorts of confused. "I think I need to go home and go to bed. I'm exhausted."

"I'll drive behind you to make sure you get home all right, if you like." He opened

my car door for me after I pressed the key fob.

“That’s all right, but thank you for caring enough to offer.” As I slid into the driver’s seat, it occurred to me that I was a lucky woman. Not many men would be patient enough to wait for a widow to be ready for a kiss.

Kyle winked at me, then watched as I pulled out of the parking lot. All the way home, my thoughts were on the feel of his lips, the feel of his arms around me, and though I still felt guilty, I had to admit to myself that I’d liked it, and I hoped I’d be ready for another kiss sooner than later.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

That night, my dreams were disturbingly normal. I'd expected a lot of turmoil, but I woke up refreshed, feeling like—for once—I'd slept without worry, without grief, and without tension. I yawned, then got a chestful of fluff when Miss P. pounced on me, purring and licking my face.

“Hey, I’m getting up, all right? Okay! Okay, floofbutt,” I said, laughing as she frantically began grooming me, licking my face and snuffling near my ear.

I pushed myself up, surprised to see the sun shining through the window. It was early light, pale and ethereal, but it was sunshine, nevertheless. I'd taken a shower the night before, so I dressed in a pair of dark blue leggings, a warm mint-green jersey tank dress, and slid on a navy denim bolero jacket. I brushed my hair into a ponytail, put on my makeup, and then slipped into a pair of ankle boots with chunky heels. As I headed downstairs, I thought about the date with Kyle, and a warm fuzzy feeling spread through me.

Astra had made oatmeal and sausage links, and she was checking her email on her tablet while she ate. She looked up as I entered the kitchen, humming.

“You certainly sound like you woke up on the right side of the bed,” she said. “Oatmeal is in the pan, and it’s still hot.”

I flipped on the espresso machine and pulled three shots. I frothed the milk and added vanilla and caramel syrup, and mixed everything into my butterfly travel mug. Next, I scooped some oatmeal into a bowl, added some evaporated milk, brown sugar,

raisins, and a pat of butter, then joined Astra at the table.

“How did the evening go?” she asked, pushing her tablet back.

I stirred my cereal. “Well, we’re going on a second date. I did have a slight meltdown when he kissed me.”

“Was he a bad kisser?” Astra asked, grinning. But she quickly sobered as tears welled in my eyes.

“Not at all. I enjoyed it...that’s the problem. I thought about it last night before I went to sleep. At first I thought it was just that I missed Dan, but I realized that I felt guilty. I feel guilty because I’m moving on.” I spooned some of the oatmeal into my mouth. “Last month Dan told me that he’s moved ahead, that I’m not leaving him behind. It’s easy to see that analytically, but my heart...my heart still feels like I’m betraying him.”

I dropped my spoon in my bowl as tears began to trickle down my cheeks. “I want to be happy. I want to move on. I know Dan wants me to. I just don’t know how to let my last cords to the past go, and to step into the future.”

Astra reached across the table and took my hands. “My chickadee...what would it take for you to move ahead? Do you know?” She handed me a tissue.

I wiped my eyes, then took a drink of my latte. What would it take for me to let go? I frowned, stirring my oatmeal again. “I’m not sure,” I said, but in the back of my mind, I heard a whisper—it sounded like Aphrodite—saying, You need to really start over. You need to reinvent your path into something you really love.

Startled, I looked over at Astra. “I’m not sure what this means, but Aphrodite just told me that I need to reinvent my path into something I really love. But I love

matchmaking.”

“Do you? Truly?” Astra asked.

I stopped short. “What do you mean?”

“Let me put it this way: what do you love about it?” Astra got up to serve herself some more oatmeal. “Do you love the actual matchmaking, or the elements that go into it? I know you haven’t been satisfied with how your business is doing.”

I sighed. “I never thought about it that way. Right now, I have to admit, I enjoyed my job in Seattle better than having my own business here. I’m trying to be positive but I’m not feeling like I’m achieving enough.”

“Okay, there’s that. So, what do you love about matchmaking?”

“I love bringing people together. I love seeing that spark when they click. I love...” I paused, thinking for a moment. “I love bringing harmony into the world. I love making people happy, and taking away their loneliness and fear.”

“What about marriage? Are you focused on helping them find their life-partners? Where does that figure into it? I sense you’re on the edge of a breakthrough.”

“Let me think.” I finished my oatmeal, trying to process the questions she asked me. After a moment, I said, “It’s not so much the marriages. It’s bringing people together. It’s taking away their pain or their loneliness or their fear.”

“Then how can you shift your business to focus on those things?” Astra asked. “Forget about what you did in the past. What can you do to turn things around?”

Taking a deep breath, I said, “Well, I suppose...”

All of a sudden, the monthly Midnight Hour meetings flashed through my mind. The town's social club was fine, but it wasn't what I'd do if I were running it. And then, I thought about the size of my store. It wasn't big, but it was too big for just a matchmaking service.

"I could start a social club. I could focus on giving people a place to meet and have fun. That way, even if they aren't ready for marriage, but they want to meet people and get out and mingle, they'll have another option. The Midnight Hour feels like it's more for couples who just want to go to a country club." I sat straighter, thinking about the possibility, growing more excited as I envisioned opening up my shop once every couple weeks for mixers.

"What else could you do?" Astra asked.

"I could expand my house cleansing, blessing, and clearing services." Another thought hit me and I snapped my fingers. "I could include baby blessings, rites of passage rituals, I could perform marriages and even...facilitate rituals for couples who want to let go—amicably. But I'm not about to mediate angry lovers."

"And how would doing all that make you happy?"

"Helping people find peace, helping them find joy. That's it, really—I want to help people find their joy." I leaned back in my seat. "I thought it was all about finding joy in finding a partner, and that's part of it, but there's so much more."

"And now, you have some things to think about." Astra carried our dishes to the sink. "So, what are you going to do next?"

I worried my lip. "I think, I'll finish up with Zandre, and meanwhile, I'll sit down and revamp my goals. I'll focus on how I can bring peace and joy into the world."

“Then you have a plan,” Astra said, kissing my forehead. “As to Kyle, go on a second date, don’t rush it, and see where it leads. I like him,” she added.

“So do I,” I said, gathering my things to head for the office.

* * *

By the next day, I had settled on expanding my business. Crystal and I were sitting at my desk, lattes and cookies in hand, as I told her about my talk with Astra and the conclusions I had come to.

“It’s not all about marriage. It’s about helping people find their joy, and that can include marriage, but it can also include people finding friends, bringing peace into their environments, creating meaningful milestones in their lives.” I felt like the world had opened wide for me. That I was on the precipice of major transformation, both in my personal life and my business life.

“This is exciting,” Crystal said. “I think you’re going to draw a lot of people into the shop. And if you add in selling some premade charms, maybe some perfumes or hey—what about a lover’s spell kit, with incense, candles, perfumes, and an incantation that a couple can perform before a special night? If you have those on the shelves when you hold your mixers, people will see that you offer more than just a matchmaking service.”

I nodded. “That sounds good. When I first thought about opening the business, I thought about trying to mimic what I was doing in Seattle. But I can’t—they have all the databases, the population can support their services... Those are things I don’t have here. With my former company, I only focused on matchmaking. Now, I have time to really expand my vision.” I paused, then asked, “How about you? Are you excited about your initiation?”

“I am,” she said. I feel like this is going to open a whole new world for both of us.”
But her expression clouded over.

“What’s wrong?”

“I think...we’re going to be facing a lot more problems like we did with the psychic vampire in the coming future. Call it intuition or future-casting, but I think that the Covenant of Chaos is going to rise into prominence again, and it feels like that’s one reason we’re both being drawn into the Dark Moon Society. We’re going to be needed.”

As she spoke, a shadow crossed my grave and I shivered. “You may be right,” I said. “Maybe that’s why we’ve been drawn in. Now that you mention it, I can feel it too.”

As we sat there, I looked around my shop. I was starting to have glimpses of how I might change it, and what it would look like. And some of those potential changes led down a dark path before they found their way into the light.

* * *

“I can’t believe I let you talk me into this,” Crystal said. She was wearing a pair of black pants, a black turtleneck, and a gold belt. She looked far more feminine than she usually did. “How do I look?”

“Great,” I said, rather surprised. I hadn’t bothered to change, except for freshening my makeup. I was wearing a dusty blue cold-shoulder dress that was a medium-weight jersey, and a pair of gray leggings. I had added a gray patent leather belt, but in no way looked ready for a fancy date. I didn’t want to stand out as too appealing.

I had picked her up on the way to Numa’s Steak House.

“What’s he like?” Crystal asked.

“You’ve never met a vampire before, have you? It’s okay—I hadn’t either. Actually, Zandre is polite and nice. He’s intense, but I think that goes with the territory. Part of it may be his glamour. Vampires can turn on the glamour, yes, but to some extent, it seems like an innate trait.” I paused, then said, “Remember in seventh grade when we were drooling over vampire romances?”

We’d gone through a period where we read every vampire romance novel we could find. I flashed back to how I devoured them, massively in love with the idea of someone wanting me bad enough to take me through eternity with them.

Crystal laughed. “Yeah.” She blushed. “Can I tell you something before we get there?”

“Sure, what is it?”

“I have to admit, I still read vampire romances.”

Surprised, I glanced at her. “You do? That surprises me.”

“Yeah, there’s something else.” She cleared her throat. “I need to tell you something. No secrets between besties, right?”

“Right,” I said, worried. “What’s going on, Crystal?”

She took a deep breath. “I’m...I’ve always wanted to meet a vampire. Not a psychic vampire, like Marcus, but...a real vampire. I always thought it would be terribly romantic to spend eternity with someone I love.”

I tried to understand what she was saying. “Is that why you don’t date?”

Crystal shifted uncomfortably. “Maybe.”

I pulled over to the curb, easing into a parking space. “What’s going on, Crystal?”

“All right, here’s the thing.” She blushed and stared out the window. “I’ve got a thing for vamps. I’ve tried to ignore it, but I just find the whole concept so damned hot. I’m not interested in relationships, per se, but I guess those books hit hard because I still find myself fantasizing about being swept away by some handsome, wounded undead hero. And I’m so embarrassed. I didn’t ever want to tell you because I sound like some moony teenaged girl, drooling over a cardboard cutout.”

I didn’t know what to say. I had known Crystal since we were little girls, and though she hadn’t been that interested in dating when we were kids, I thought maybe she was just asexual or maybe she had other priorities. I hadn’t ever dreamed that those late-night conversations over all the book and movie boyfriends we had crushes on were actually still part of her psyche.

Swallowing my surprise, I struggled to find the right thing to say. It felt like she’d just told me that she committed some crime that she’d kept secret all these years. But I didn’t want to make her feel bad—everybody had their own preferences. Even though I’d never known about her vampire fetish, if it could be called that, it didn’t make her any different than the Crystal I had always known and loved.

“You know,” I said after a moment, “I want to apologize. I don’t ever want you to feel like you have to hide something from me. We’re ride-or-die buddies, and unless you do something horrific, there’s nothing you can say that would make me look at you with anything but love, support, and friendship. Please, if I ever make you feel hesitant again, let me know, please ?”

Crystal sighed, leaning back in her seat. “Thank you. This is the one thing I’ve hidden from you. I always felt like I might be some kind of...perv?”

“Oh trust me, given I’m in the process of getting a real pervert kicked out of the academy, you’re nothing near that. Now, if you wanted to date a zombie, I’m not sure I could handle that .” I laughed, glancing over at her.

“Eww, trust me. I want my man with all his body parts. If any are missing, it better be through an accident...okay, that sounds weird. But you know what I mean. No dropping rotting arms or legs along the way.” She grimaced. “We’re rapidly descending into a weird space, you realize that, don’t you?”

“I think we passed that mark a long ways back,” I said. “All right, let’s head out. And I want you to promise me something: If you do find Zandre attractive...tell me. I want to find him his love, and I don’t want to miss that just because you might feel hesitant about saying anything.”

Crystal laughed, then sobered. “I promise,” she said. “And I have to say, I’m actually going into this with an open mind.”

As we headed for the steakhouse, my thoughts were flying in a million directions, and all of them felt uncharted.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:28 am

The steakhouse was bougie, very upscale. The hostess was wearing black palazzo pants trimmed with gold lace, and a matching shirt, sheer with the ends tied in a knot at her waist, over a pale gold tank top. With a high ponytail, sleek and black, she was wearing a nametag pin, which read Rachel .

I smiled at her, and said, “We’re here to meet Zandre.”

She glanced at her list, then nodded. Picking up two menus, she turned toward the screened-off dining room. “Please follow me.”

We threaded our way through the main dining room, where mostly couples were sitting at tables, though here and there a four-top or six-top was buzzing with quiet conversation. There weren’t any children present—Numa was an adult eatery, and while not explicitly forbidden, it was obvious kids weren’t welcome.

We came to a table near a big bay window, where Zandre was waiting, wearing a black suit and red tie. With slicked-back hair into a ponytail, and expensive sunglasses, he looked even more like some gothic prince, or gothic millionaire. He stood as we approached, slowly removing his sunglasses. The crimson rings around the black of his irises glowed.

“Ladies, welcome. Please, sit down.” He moved around, holding Crystal’s chair for her, then my own. “I’m so glad you could join me for dinner.”

At first, I thought he was speaking to me, but then I noticed his eyes were on Crystal. The moment he took his sunglasses off, he had fixed his gaze on her and he wasn’t looking away. Crap. Could my visions actually be right ? Was Crystal Zandre’s

potential mate? Regardless of her obsession with vampires, I hoped they wouldn't make a connection. I wasn't sure whether I was afraid for her, or whether it was my own prejudice speaking.

I cleared my throat. "Thank you. Zandre, please meet my friend Crystal. Crystal—Zandre."

Crystal reached out and he took her hand, but instead of shaking it, he leaned down and placed a gentle kiss on the top. She caught her breath and slowly leaned back in her chair. I sensed a ripple between them.

"How do you do?" Crystal returned his gaze.

"Meeting you has made my day," he said.

I started to clear my throat, wanting to interrupt what I foresaw happening, but Aphrodite whispered in my ear again, startling me.

You have to get used to this. You're not going to feel comfortable with every match. You don't control this. You're my priestess now, you need to understand that I'm going to be talking to you a lot. And, as my priestess, I expect you to listen.

But Crystal is my best friend. I don't see this as working, long term.

She'll still be your best friend, but you can't always dictate the way you think love should go. It's not your place to step in and stop this—not unless she's being harmed. Maybe this will work—you can see the attraction and chemistry that's simmering under the surface. Maybe it won't. You're used to finding precise matches, but maybe it's time you let go of control of the end result?

Crystal and Zandre began to chat, exchanging pleasantries, barely noticing me at all.

Meanwhile, I sat with my discomfort, trying to fathom what was happening. Why was I so resistant to their obvious connection, other than the fact that I didn't trust vampires? And at that moment, it hit me. I didn't trust Crystal to make her own decisions.

Oh my gods, I'm the expert, so I feel that I should be the one to pair her up!

Bingo, Aphrodite said. And you'd feel the same about your aunt, if she were to find someone. You want to run the show. You want to protect them. But you can't. The truth is, your power lies in facilitating meetings, not making the final choice. If you make a match, there's no guarantee it will last forever and you have to be okay with that.

I started to argue, but then realized—how much follow-up had I done on my matches, a year after they got together? None. I had no clue if any of the people I'd paired up were still married. My expertise was in bringing people together, not assuring happily-ever-after. I wasn't the clearinghouse for happy marriages. I was just a witch who managed to pair up eligible and compatible people. But that was no guarantee of long-term happiness. It was no guarantee of ever-after.

"Are you okay?" Crystal asked. "Earth to Maisy, are you in there?"

"What?" I jumped.

"I've asked you if you're okay twice and you ignored me."

I must have been so deep in thought and discussion with Aphrodite that I hadn't heard her. "I'm sorry," I said. "I was thinking."

The waitress showed up to take our order. Zandre ordered a steak and lobster.

Crystal followed suit. She glanced at me. “Since you’re driving, I’ll have a glass of red wine,” she said.

“Have two. I’m definitely not drinking tonight.” I turned to the waitress. “I want a double mocha, with whipped cream and shaved chocolate. And a bowl of minestrone, and the fettuccine Alfredo.”

She wrote it down, then vanished, promising to be back with our drinks in a few minutes.

As we waited for our food, we fell into an awkward silence. Crystal and Zandre were exchanging glances, and both kept shooting side-eye at me, as though at any minute, I was going to jump up yelling at them. I tried to navigate what was happening. I had planned on trying to shoo him off from the idea of dating me, but now I realized that wasn’t an issue anymore. On one level, that made me relieved.

“So, I’m thinking of changing up my business model,” I said, deciding somebody had to say something.

“Oh?” Crystal asked, looking relieved, though she was still blushing.

“Astra really made me think about it. I’m going to start holding mixers at the shop once every couple weeks, and I’m going to offer more services than readings—I’ll keep the same name, but it’s time I branched out.”

The waitress appeared with our food and, relieved, I fell into eating. I was surprised to see Zandre eating, but then I remember vampires could eat food—it just didn’t do them much good beyond in a tasty treat kind of way.

As I focused on my dinner, Crystal cleared her throat and asked, “So, Zandre, you’re a member of the Pacific Northwest Vampire Collective?”

He nodded. “Yes, I am. I represent Midnight Point. I’m not high up in the hierarchy, but Val Slater does listen to my ideas.” He paused, then added, “I’m proud of what I do, though. I didn’t ask to become a vampire, but since I am one, I want to make the world a better place for all of us to coexist. I know that sounds odd, coming from someone that most people fear, but I like to think I retain enough of my humanity to make a difference.”

“How were you turned?” Crystal asked, quickly adding, “Don’t feel you have to answer. I really don’t mean to pry.”

Zandre paused, then said, “After my wife was shot by the bank robbers—this was around 1825—I went into a deep depression. I began drinking, and one night I was out late, when a woman I met in the bar offered herself to me. I was so lonely that all I could think of was that for maybe a minute, I could forget Eugenia. Maybe, for just a moment, I could be happy again.”

My stomach knotted and I wanted him to stop. I could feel the pain around him, and I knew what was coming.

“She wasn’t a prostitute, was she?” Crystal said, her voice soft.

He shook his head. “She was looking for victims. I went home with her, and the next thing I knew, I was naked in her bed and she attacked me. I remember her draining my blood, and all I could think was that my father would be so disappointed in me.”

Crystal reached out, placing her hand on his arm, and all I could think of was how much pain Zandre had been through, and how harsh his life had been.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“I died...and then I woke up, and I was out in the forest near the town, awake and

healed up. But something was different. My sire found me—she could sense where I was—and she explained to me that I was now a vampire. Then she laughed at me when I asked if I could travel with her. She left me behind. I think she must have been staked, because eventually, when I thought of her, I couldn't feel anything."

"Can you usually feel your sire?" I asked.

"For the first few decades, yes. But she vanished after about ten years, at least from my mind. When I was left alone in the woods, I had to make a decision. I could live by hunting victims, or I could go back home and figure out a way to exist with my family, if they'd have me. I chose the latter. My parents had already lost one son to the bank robbers. I didn't want them to lose me, too. I need blood every week or so, just enough to keep myself strong and viable. And so, I occasionally did a bloodletting on the cows—it was enough to sustain me, though it tasted vile. And my family took me back in, although they always treated me differently. But I helped my father make a go of the bank."

"Vampires seem really good with financial stuff," I said.

"We are. It's an odd flex that we receive as our powers grow. When my father died, he left the bank to me. I sold it at a profit, and left the area, eventually settling in Midnight Point."

"Do you have any family?" Crystal asked.

He shook his head. "My sister married and had children, and they had children, but the line died out with her great-grandchild. There was only one, and he died childless and alone, too young. So, I'm alone. Nobody else—none of my cousins wanted anything to do with me." Zandre sighed, then shrugged. "I've been here for over sixty years, after traveling around the United States. But I'm lonely. I can admit it."

I didn't say much, but his story had affected me. I realized that, vampire or not, he'd had a rough life and he was just trying to carve out a bit of happiness for himself. If I could help with that, I wanted to help.

As the evening wore on, the awkwardness slipped away. As I watched, I could see the connection forming between Crystal and Zandre. Even though it didn't make me happy, I found my resistance weakening. Whatever happened, Crystal would be okay, because I could tell that Zandre wouldn't hurt her—whether they became friends or lovers.

* * *

Next morning, I joined Astra in the kitchen. "I have a reading today," I said. "But after that, I'm closing my doors for a week or so, then reopening with a new focus. Aphrodite—and you—have convinced me that I've been on a path that really isn't my path. Close, yes, but I need to embrace all of my strengths. Not just what I thought was my strength."

"I don't think you'll be disappointed," Astra said. "So, how did dinner go with the vampire?"

I wasn't sure what to say. "It was...unexpected. We'll see how it turns out." I told her about what happened. "Crystal was so happy last night when I dropped her off. I had to confront my tendency to turn away from the things I don't want to see. That she felt so embarrassed telling me how she feels, it hurts my heart. She thought I'd look down on her. That tells me something about myself—something I'm not proud of."

"And what is that?"

"That I'm a snob. That I'm bigoted, and I didn't realize it. I want to do better, Auntie." I poked at my waffle with my fork. "But I apologized to her, and we're

good. With Zandre, I need to wait and see. But I'm trying not to automatically mistrust him. He's had a hard life, and he's made some good choices. I don't know too many people who could choose the path he did, after being turned."

Astra snapped her fingers. "Speaking of hard lives, I almost forgot to tell you. You remember you asked me for help with Terry's fundraising? The mailman?"

I nodded. "Please tell me that there's good news on that."

"Yes, there is. Most of my gardening group know him. They had no idea what was going on. We've started a Please-Help-Me in his name and we're spreading the word. In less than two days, we've already raised \$25,000 to help, and it's still going strong. And a couple of our members were nurses. They've volunteered to donate a couple afternoons a week to go over and help out. Terry's insurance barely covers one day a week for home health care, but with our volunteers, we've managed to cover every afternoon of the week, so Terry won't have to worry about his husband being alone all day long."

Relieved, I almost burst into tears. "Thank you," I said.

"That's not all," Astra said. "We arranged for the Happy Maid Cleaning Service to come in—they're going to volunteer a cleaning every week until Lin passes, and then a full deep clean afterward, when Terry's ready."

Touched by how kind people could be, I settled back in my seat. "This will make a world of difference for them. I really do believe that when you help one person, you help the entire world."

"So do I, my dear. So do I."

At that moment I received a text. It was from Kyle. I read it and smiled. "Kyle just

received an email from the school. I probably did, too. Willows is out. He won't be hurting any more students."

"Cheers to that," Astra said, raising her coffee mug.

As we ate breakfast, I thought about my future.

I was trying to find a new label for myself. I was more than a matchmaker. I was more than a widow. And all facets of my life were changing.

As Miss P. jumped on my lap and I began to pet her, I once again felt at loose ends. But now, my world was expanding, rather than just exploding, and I was in control of the direction in which it was growing. I was part of the Dark Moon Society, I had a home with an aunt I adored, I was exploring a new business path that promised a brighter future, I was dating again, and my best friend may just have found the love of her life. And all in all, that wasn't bad.

* * *

If you loved this book, stay tuned for more of Maisy's adventures in Yasmine's Married At First Bite Series . In the meantime, for more paranormal women's fiction, read on for the first chapter of Starlight Web , the first book in Yasmine's Moonshadow Bay Series and you can preorder the thirteenth book in that series: Feathered Web .

STARLIGHT WEB (BOOK 1 OF THE MOONSHADOW BAY SERIES)

Chapter 1

I leaned in my car window to crank the stereo, then returned to the sidewalk, staring at the house. Warren Zevon was on the radio, singing “Lawyers, Guns, and Money.” The lawyers I had, for all the good they did me. Fortunately for Ellison, I wasn’t carrying a gun. But the money part? Not quite so flush, especially after Ellison took me to the cleaners.

As I stood in the driveway, I paused, jamming my thumbs in the pockets of my jeans.

Eighteen freaking years I’d spent with my scumbag of an ex-husband. For eighteen years I’d done things his way, followed his traditions instead of mine, kept my mouth shut while he made one mistake after another because I didn’t want to field yet another argument.

I’d decorated the house to his tastes, I’d worn polite, prim clothing because he couldn’t stand for anything to be too “weird” or “garish.” I’d played the good little wife and muted my magic when I was around his friends, who were oh so disdainful of anybody born outside of a human suit. I had put my life on hold to work for his dream, and I’d made his dream happen.

I’d done everything he asked, and what was the end result?

The end result was that I was now standing outside my house for the last time. I had been dumped for a twenty-year-old bimbo, I’d been blacklisted from any job in

publishing in the area, and I had been bilked out of both the magazine that I had started almost single-handedly and the house I'd helped to buy.

Sure, I had been awarded half our known assets, but I knew that we had accumulated far more money. Ellison had just managed to squirrel it away from the judge's eye, a judge who should have recused himself from our divorce proceedings because he was Ellison's good buddy. But he hadn't, and I'd gotten screwed without even an orgasm to seal the deal.

"Fuck you, Ellison Reilly. And your uptight prig of a mother, too." I flipped the house the bird, but that didn't feel like enough of a parting statement.

Then it hit me. I knew what to do.

I marched back inside and dug through the closets until I found his tuxedo—the one he had worn when we got married. The thousand-dollar stand-in for a honeymoon. I'm sorry, January, but I can't afford a honeymoon, even though I promised you one. I had to buy my tux. We'll take one later. Only later had never come.

I added my wedding dress—a modest white sheath dress, because I had stuck to the budget we had originally set for our wedding—and carried both the tux and dress outside.

My next act was to toss the thousand-dollar tux into the fire pit, then drop my wedding dress on top of it. After they were firmly inside, I poured lighter fluid over the whole shebang. I stepped back, then lit a match and flicked it into the pile of clothing. Whoosh! The flames roared up into the cloudy sky, filling the air with the acrid stench of dry-cleaning chemicals. The flames weren't bright enough to attract undue attention, and Ellison was out with his floozy, so he wouldn't find the charred remains until tomorrow.

I thought about dancing around the fire but I wasn't in a celebrating mood and it

wasn't a full moon. And I still didn't feel like I had payback—at least, not enough. I wanted to say good-bye on a big note. One he couldn't ignore.

A snowflake landed on my cheek and I glanced at the sky. It was only the first week of December and already the weather had taken a turn toward winter. We didn't always have snow in Seattle, but this year, it looked like we were about to break the odds.

Ellison was out for the evening with Ana—one “n”—his trophy bride-to-be. He'd spent a year trying to gaslight me that he wasn't having an affair with her, but I could sense her residue energy on him every time he came home late. Finally, I called Ari and asked her to cast a spell, asking that the affair be brought into the open if it was really happening. I was too close to the situation and didn't trust my magic not to backfire. The next day, I came home to find his head between Ana's legs and boom , that took care of that.

I looked around for one last way to signal my departure. I really didn't want to destroy the house—I had loved that house. But then I caught sight of his convertible and I knew how to sign my good-bye note. He had bought a \$55,000 car that we could barely afford, while I was still driving a fifteen-year-old Subaru that was in the shop more often than it was out.

“Can you get any more midlife crisis?” I said, shaking my head. A convertible in Seattle made as much sense as a bikini in the Antarctic, but men who thought with their penises usually made idiotic decisions. Dashing back in the house, I found the spare car key he kept in his desk.

Back outside, I opened the car door, fit the key in the ignition, and rolled down the window just wide enough to fit the hose. One more trip back to the side yard and I found the hose and dragged it around to the driveway. I stuck it through the crack, then returned to the faucet.

“Okay, January, think,” I said aloud. “Do you really want to do this? Is he even worth the effort?”

But my heart answered for me. He had used me to build something wonderful, then cut me out of it as thoroughly as he had cut out my heart. The pain of losing him? I was over that, but I wasn’t over the anger that he had taken everything away from me and then blacklisted me with all his buddies in the publishing industry. I had lost my marriage, my career, the magazine...all in one fell swoop.

I turned the faucet on, turning it all the way. The water began to fill the car.

Feeling a grim sense of satisfaction, I stood back, my hands on my hips. “Okay. This... this is closure. Good-bye, Ellison. We’re done.”

I tossed his car key and my house key into the flames still flickering in the firepit, then turned away. The movers were gone, hours ago. The last of my suitcases were in the back of my Subaru. I settled into the driver’s seat, fastened my seat belt, and turned the ignition.

“Come on, Cookie,” I whispered to my car. “Let’s get a move on.”

Smiling for the first time in weeks, I turned up the music as the track switched over to the Talking Heads, and rolled out of the neighborhood with “Burning Down the House” echoing in my ears.

* * *

Moonshadow Bay was a town on the coast of Washington, about ten miles south of Bellingham. With a population of around five thousand, it also happened to be the town I was born in. And though I had lost my parents to a car crash five months ago, the town was filled with happy memories, and even though they wouldn’t be there to greet me, my aunt was waiting for me and that was enough to make me smile.

As I drove through the quiet streets, a life that had felt a world away when I was in Seattle came rushing back. Some of the shops had changed, but the town square was still set up for get-togethers and meetings, and the City Central building, which housed the police station, courthouse, jail, town hall, the main fire station, public works department, and the library, still stood in the center of town, as stoic as ever, with the clock in the tower that was always and forever ten minutes slow, watching over the center of Moonshadow Bay.

The snow had already cloaked the town. Moonshadow Bay was close to the Canadian border, and the town was on the lower end of Bellingham Bay, overlooking the Salish Sea. The storms came in past the islands. The farther north I got from Seattle, the heavier the snow had become. I had been driving for almost two hours, given the slippery roads. The weather added thirty minutes to the usual time, as well as me slowing down to thirty-five on some parts of the freeway. I wasn't afraid of driving, but I wasn't stupid, either, and when the snow was falling so heavily it was hard to see through, I took my time.

As I pulled into town, I began to breathe easier. I was finally here, almost home. As I passed the city limits sign, I felt something shift, and the anger I had still been carrying seemed to fall away.

Welcome home , the town whispered. We've missed you.

Moonshadow Bay was beautiful, with more parks and woodland areas than it had buildings. The centralized downtown district was fairly dense and compact, and from that inner core, the residential area sprawled out, feathering through the trees and the streams that flowed down to the Salish Sea. While it didn't have all the amenities of a large city, Bellingham was close enough to make up for that.

The streets were coated with a light dusting of snow and everywhere faerie lights shone, sparkling as they wove around the trees and lampposts and shop windows. Every store seemed decorated and ready for the holidays, and I suddenly felt the

tension draining away, out of my shoulders. There was magic in the air—I could smell it as sure as I could smell the snow. It crackled, darting like shifting sparks, and it too whispered, Welcome home. Moonshadow Bay is where you belong.

And it truly was, in a way.

My great-grandfather, Brian Fletcher, and his wife Colleen had come over from England. The family powers had descended through her—we were Fam-Trads , a family of witches—and even though I didn't know a great deal about Colleen's heritage other than she had been born in Ireland, I knew that the magic came down through her, through the women in my family. My mother and my grandmother had been witch women, too, and so was my aunt Teran, who was a few years younger than my mother had been. And all of them had passed on their knowledge to me. And what had I done? Turned away from it because Ellison was too spooked by Otherkin.

I passed through the main strip, watching the pedestrians strolling along the sidewalks. The stores were open late due to the holidays, and while the streets had been plowed, they were still slippery. I eased along, making sure not to slam on the brakes.

As I left the town square and turned the corner on Maple Street, my eyes grew misty. I was only a few blocks away from my house. My parents had left me the house I'd grown up in, but I hadn't been home since they had died, and then I had been so distracted by my grief that I had barely noticed my surroundings.

But now, the realization that I was coming home, and my mother and father wouldn't be around to greet me ever again, hit hard. It didn't matter whether you were fourteen or forty, losing your parents cut a deep hole.

One more turn and I was on Fern Street, and there, up ahead on the left, was a beautiful two-story farmhouse, with a wide front porch that was supported by intricately carved newel posts. The driveway was clear, except for one truck, which I

recognized as my aunt's. Teran had driven an old beater for years now, and how the thing held together, I didn't know. It ran on a whisper of magic, for sure.

I parked next to the truck, then turned off the ignition and sat in the silence for a moment, taking it all in.

The house came with a half-acre of land, so the yard was wide and private, surrounded by trees on all sides. Fern Street was a dead-end road, ending at one of the many pathways leading into Mystic Wood State Park. I lived right up against the park. I finally opened the door and hauled myself out of the car, wincing as I stretched.

Even though I worked out on my exercise bike every day and did yoga, the years were beginning to tap on my shoulder, reminding me that I wasn't anywhere near the shape I wanted to be in. But given that I had held down a full-time job and cleaned the house and took care of everything so Ellison wouldn't complain, I decided to cut myself some slack.

I slung my purse over my shoulder and clattered up the front stairs. As I reached for the bell, the door opened and there she was—Aunt Teran.

“Thank heaven you're here. It's setting in to blow up a gale out there,” she said. “The movers made it here and I did my best to direct them where to put the boxes.”

My aunt had a smile a mile wide for me. She held out her arms and then it hit me. Her eyes—they were same as my mother's eyes. The same depth, the same love, the same color even. And in that moment, the dam broke and I leaned into her embrace, bursting into tears for the first time since my parents' funeral.

* * *

Twenty minutes later, I was snuggled under a throw, curled on the sofa with a

peppermint schnapps mocha and a plate of cookies. They were oatmeal raisin, with just the right amount of cinnamon.

“So you’re back to stay,” my aunt said. She was sitting in the rocking chair. My parents had updated the house shortly before they died, with new paint throughout, a new kitchen and a new master bath. It felt like home and yet, oddly different. The living room had a new sofa in it, and I had to admit it was comfortable, but it felt out of place.

I let out a sigh. “Yeah. I’m back to stay.” I paused, then said, “I guess that chapter of my life is over.”

“Was it bad? The divorce?” Teran sipped her mocha. “I don’t know if I spiked this enough.”

“It’s got plenty of kick to it,” I said, rolling up to a sitting position. “The divorce? Well, it wasn’t good . I know I should have ended it years ago, but I was...”

“Comfortable?”

I thought about it for a moment. “No, not comfortable. I was in a rut. I had no clue what to do if I left, and back then I didn’t want to think about the fight we’d have dividing the magazine. I guess Ellison took care of that for me.”

“Tell me what happened with that.” Aunt Teran folded her legs under her in the chair. She was tall and sturdy, and she had hair down to her butt. It had been salt and pepper when I last saw her, but now it was black, streaked with electric blue, and it looked amazing. She was wearing jeans, a rainbow-pride top, and her throw-back granny glasses. Teran had never married, and she had never told me why.

“I did something everybody always warns you not to do. I signed a document—a notarized one at that—without reading it. We were in a hurry, Ellison assured me that

what I was signing were articles of incorporation. But the notary was actually a friend of Ellison's who was helping him. The articles of incorporation turned out to be a prenup. They got my signature but actually managed to change the date, pre-dating it to before our wedding. I gave Ellison full control over the magazine, as well as giving him full ownership of the house, but I can't prove anything." I groaned, bringing my knees up to lean against them.

"I feel like such a fool. I trusted him and he screwed me over so bad my lawyer couldn't untangle it. We told the judge what happened, but it was useless. It was my word against Ellison's, and he has some powerful friends in the Seattle law community, including that judge. So he basically conned me out of the magazine I started and any interest in the house."

I winced, glancing at her. Teran could be mighty blunt, but I really needed some TLC now, not a lecture.

She stared at me for a moment, then the next, she was by my side, scooching me toward the center of the sofa. She slid in behind me and began to rub my shoulders.

Sighing, she said, "You know, sometimes the con artists of the world catch us by surprise. Ellison was good at hiding his true nature, although I never liked him very much. He was such a pompous ass. I'm not going to scold you about this. But..."

That "but" hung in the air, and I dreaded hearing what was attached to it.

"But what?" I finally asked.

"The thing I can't excuse is the fact that you spent eighteen years sublimating yourself for a man who wasn't worth a fraction of what you bring to the table. How the hell did everything we taught you go sliding out the window?" She slid her arms around my shoulders, hugging me from behind. "What happened, child?"

I shrugged, scooting to the side and turning around. I couldn't face her.

"I don't know, to be honest. At first I fought. I fought to celebrate my holidays. I fought to practice our traditions. I argued about the clothes he wanted me to wear. I made excuses for his rudeness, especially around other Otherkin. Basically, I tried to hold my own, but after a while, he wore me down."

"Why didn't you leave him?"

Again, I had no good answer. "I don't know. You'd think I would have, right? But...somewhere along the way, I guess I lost my confidence." I glanced over my shoulder at her. "I gave up. When someone tells you you're stupid time after time, you begin to believe it."

Teran gave me a hug. "Well, that ends now . That ends tonight."

I ducked my head, smiling. "I've missed you."

"And I've missed you, too. But I knew that you weren't ready to see me, child. I remind you too much of your mama." She stroked my hair, pulling it back. "As wavy as it ever was."

I laughed. "We're always going to envy each other's hair."

Teran had straight hair, down to her ass. Mine was dark brown and wavy. Not corkscrew curly, but long and wavy and just rough enough to never take a good shine.

"And yours is as smooth and silky as ever. I love the blue, by the way." I sighed, then said, "You're right, though. I wasn't ready to face their deaths yet. But I guess...now I have to. It feels good to be back in Moonshadow Bay, though. I'll see Ari a lot more. Ellison didn't like her and he almost broke up our friendship."

“You two were always thick as thieves,” Teran said. “All right, I’d better get on home. Ree and Roo are probably hungry.” My aunt had two hound dogs. They were as old as the hills—or at least, as old as most dogs get—and they showed no sign of slowing down. But her familiar was a great horned owl that lived out in the trees near her house. They had a deep connection that crossed the species barrier.

I walked her to the door and she gave me a hug, then handed me a key. She had taken care of the house after my parents died. “Here, you’ll want this back.”

I shook my head, folding her fingers over the key. “No, you keep it. Just in case.” I pressed my lips together, thinking of my mother and father. “You never know what’s going to happen.”

“Too true, love,” she said, hugging me. “That’s why you have a key to my house, too. For the same reason.” As she headed down the sidewalk to her car, it occurred to me that I was really, truly, starting over. For the first time in eighteen years, I was embarking on a new stage in my life.

I walked out on the porch, watching the snow fall. It drifted down, the flakes larger, like thick wisps of cotton candy. There was a softness to the night, and all around the neighborhood, lights twinkled on the windows around the houses.

I glanced over at the house next door, only to see a “Sold” sign on the front lawn. When I was little, the Hart family had lived there, and I’d played with Sallie Hart, though we weren’t best friends. Now, it looked like her parents were off to greener pastures.

Slowly descending the steps, I walked out toward the front of the yard. The streetlights cast a muted glow in the winter night, and I closed my eyes as I crossed my arms, jamming my hands deep beneath my armpits to keep warm. My breath hung in the air, vaporous—like a miniature cloud. It was cold, but I just wanted to let the peace that came with the snowfall encompass me.

“Hello...” The voice came from over my shoulder, but when I jerked around, I couldn’t see anybody there. It was a woman’s voice, clear and familiar though, and I was sure that I had heard it. I glanced around, suddenly realizing I was going to be alone in the house. While Ellison hadn’t been much comfort, at least he’d been a warm body.

“Can you hear me?” The voice echoed again, this time from the other side. I whirled around, but still, there was no one in sight.

Holding my breath, I turned and ran back up the sidewalk and took the steps two at a time. Once inside, I slammed the door behind me. I didn’t have the energy to deal with ghosts tonight, and since there hadn’t been any stranger lurking in the bushes, that was all I could assume the woman’s voice had been. There were certainly enough of them hanging around.

Shaking, I locked the door. Tomorrow I would dig out my mother’s herbs and make a protection charm, but for tonight, I decided to sleep on the sofa. In the kitchen, I found the biggest, meanest-looking knife my mother had owned. Clutching the hilt, I returned to the living room. I placed the knife on the coffee table within easy reach and then, exhausted, I curled up under the afghan on the sofa and promptly fell into a dreamless sleep.