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Witch's Bell

Book One

Third Edition © 2018

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# Witch's Bell

## Book One

*Can this witch survive in a world of magic, possibilities, danger, and love?*

*Ebony Bell owns a cantankerous magical bookstore with a personality like a battering ram. Her best friend is a detective who drives like a bat out of hell. And a tall, dark, handsome, but seriously irritating stranger by the name of Nathan Wall has just walked into her life.*

*Oh, and she's a witch. A consultant witch, to be precise. She spends her mornings selling books and her evenings investigating magical crimes for the local police department.*

*While her life is messy, she manages until one investigation ends in a costly mistake. She reveals her powers to a normal human, and in punishment is severed from her magic for one lunar cycle. If that was her only problem, she would cope, but very soon darkness surrounds her.*

*Something is after Ebony Bell. A curse. She must fight it or die. And if that wasn't bad enough, she has to rely on the help, and kisses, of that darn Nathan Wall.*

...

*This seven-book series is complete, so start reading today.*

# Chapter 1

Ebony opened the door, her keys banging softly against the chipped wooden frame. She gingerly rubbed the scratched paintwork, hoping to smooth out the imperfections. Instead, all she managed was a splinter.

“You need a paint job,” she told the store as she walked in, dumping her bag on the counter. She bit her thumb, removing the shard of wood with little effort and spitting it onto the ground. “And I need manners,” she replied to herself with a satisfied laugh.

She didn’t have much to do today, in the way of store business, that was. She had to stack some shelves, move some books out from the back, and post a couple of rare tomes overseas. Apart from that, this would be a quiet day.

Ebony abruptly stopped short, halfway through flipping the closed-sign to open. This *should* be a quiet day, she corrected herself. You should never tell the universe what to do. Giving it categorical orders only ever made it tetchy.

Ebony kicked several dusty books out of her path as she made her way over to the window. She intended to yank open her ancient blinds and throw some much-needed morning light over this shemozzle. As the old wooden slats parted with a creak, perfect stripes of light moved across her face and into the room behind. Like seedpods on the wind, the sunlight lit up the dust motes drifting through the air and played against the dark mahogany of her loose hair.

Ebony took a moment to stare through the windows, fixing her gaze on the blue sky above. It should be a beautiful, warm summer’s day.

Should be, she repeated to herself as she turned from the view.

Her long hair trickled over her shoulder as she turned. Though trickle was not a word you associated with dead, lifeless hair, you had to widen your vocabulary when it came to Ebony. Not only did her curled strands store up the light like a handful of diamonds glinting in the sun, but the hair itself had a mind of its own. It sometimes swayed from side-to-side like wind over long grass. It sometimes danced between her shoulders like a bird hopping from branch to branch. Sometimes it sat there like a storm – eddying, brewing, each tassel a wild, concentrated wave.

No, Ebony’s hair was not every-day, normal, humdrum, or ordinary. Nothing about Ebony was ordinary – not her appearance, not her life, not her store, not her job.

Ebony Bell was—

The bell above the front door tinkled as someone came in. Ebony cocked her head to one side, her long neck straining until she got a full view of the door and the two men who cautiously walked in.

One was tallish, the other stout. Both were dressed in cheap but well-made gray suits. Both had the same starched white shirts, their collars so stiff and neat, they could have been carved from stone. The tall man wore a simple black tie, which sat straight all the way down his front. The short man didn’t wear a tie, and his top button had popped all the way open.

Detectives.

How Ebony could deduce who these men were based simply on the appearance of their clothes was not important. She had many gifts, many useful, unusual gifts. She also knew the stout man, which helped.

“Ben,” she curled her lips into a smile, flicking her hair over her shoulders as she moved out into the center of the store, “I thought I told you never to come here without food?”

Ben, a middle-aged man with a balding patch so circular it looked like a mushroom ring, grinned. His grins were half-cheeky, half-lopsided, and mostly chin. He shoved a hand into a pocket and produced a brown paper bag.

“Ohh,” Ebony pursed her lips and cocked an eyebrow, “I have you trained.”

Ben nodded in a humble but fake way and threw her the packet. Ebony could see the grease glistening off it as it spiraled through the air. When it came to Detective Benjamin Tate and food, salt, sugar, and grease were guaranteed.

She caught the packet without shifting her eyes. One long, elegant hand snatched it out of the air with a snap.

Ebony let her gaze draw to the man with Ben – the tall, silent, brooding man who looked like he belonged in a classical painting of a knight. It wasn’t just the way he stood with his chest puffed out, his feet planted, and his hands rounded into soft fists. It was the way his jaw was set with an edge of righteous defiance. The way his short, brown hair lengthened the shadows on his face. The way his dark eyes glinted at the world like pinpricks of fire on a moonless night.

If Ebony smiled, she couldn’t help it. Ben’s friend looked like a barrel of fun. With one glance, it was clear he found her irritating.

This made her smile all the harder.

Ebony slid her gaze off the man and onto the greasy packet in her hand. She peered inside to see some kind of fried biscuit. Why someone would intentionally deep-fry something that was already fat and sugar molded into a lump mystified her.

“So, Ben, tell me, what brings you here so early in the morning?”

“Early?” Ben produced another packet with the same type of fried biscuit inside and proceeded to squeeze it into his mouth between breaths. “It’s ten. I’ve already been up for four hours.” Crumbs tumbled off his lips and between his fingers, forming a pile at his feet.

She shrugged expressively, rolling her make-up-clad eyes. “We appear to have a different concept of time.” Which was true. For Ben, time trundled on like a clock strapped to a packhorse. For Ebony, time spiraled. “Now, can I actually help you? Or are you here to drop crumbs all over my precious stock?”

Ben ignored her comment, instead leaning down to pick up the book near his feet, bits of biscuit crumbling in his fingers. “Precious? You sure? This looks like a dog-eared Nancy Drew novel.”

This drew a sharp snort from Ben’s friend.

Ebony shifted her gaze over to him, like a cat looking up, mid-slumber, to see a mouse frolicking across its path.

Who *was* this man?

“So, who are you exactly?” Ebony didn’t beat about the bush or soften her tone. She took several confident steps toward the man and curled up one ruby-red lip. “I’m not used to men giggling from the stalls.”

The man bristled, his head shifting back slowly and his chest punching out even more.

Before she could exact her reply, Ben ruined the mood with a jovial laugh. “Leave him alone,” he pleaded. “The guy’s new.”

“Then why is he in an old suit?” Her smile was now nothing but her teeth pressed into her lips. She knew she was being cheeky, but she loved it.

The man’s look of affront hardened with a gaze that could cut steel. Making a show of looking around the room, he found his voice finally. “Strange, I would have thought it was the newest thing in this store and certainly the cleanest.”

Ben chortled from behind her, crumbs spraying out like waterfalls all over his jacket and tie.

She had to suppress the gleeful smile threatening to turn her into a Cheshire cat. “Ohhh,” she purred, lips forming a long and drawn out W, “aren’t you sharp? With wit like that, you should come with a warning.”

The man didn’t falter for a second. “I’ll send around a police dispatch now, or—” he paused, trying to look as if he was concentrating, “I could just leave and do some real police work. Why are we here again, Ben?” The man now turned from Ebony, facing Ben with a disapproving look. “Unless we can fine this woman for violating OH&S laws,” he reached out and tested the stability of a teetering tower of boxes and old magazines, “I think we should start on the murder from last night.”

Ben finished his final swallow, coughing heartily as some of the crumbs stuck in his throat. “Yeah, yeah, rookie. We’ll get to the case. Remember, the way of the mentor isn’t always clear to the little new guy.” He patted his hand at about hip height, indicating the man who stood a full five inches taller than him was a midget in Ben’s eyes. “You’ve got to relax. This is your first day, and I’m taking the time to show you the ropes, because around here the ropes are real important.”

“And food,” Ebony added, resting her chin on her hand, her fingers drumming against her cheek. She was getting bored with this conversation. She had a lot to do. But watching Ben’s new friend had a certain appeal. He was like some righteous Greek god who’d been plucked from Mount Olympus only to be slapped down amongst all these mundane little people who didn’t understand the justice and order of things.

The man was ignoring her now, concentrating instead on dragging Ben out of here. “Look,” he said with a sharp sigh, “I don’t see any ropes around here. And frankly, this is a used bookstore, Ben. Don’t you think a dark alley or a drug den or an abandoned warehouse or practically anywhere but here would be more relevant to police work?”

Ben trotted over to a half-full wastepaper basket and threw away his crumpled bag. Wiping his fingers on his pants, he shrugged. “Drug den? Have you been reading cop novels from the 1920s or something?”

The man’s expression grew more exasperated. “You know what I mean – meth lab, hydroponics unit, whatever. Point is, we’re wasting our time. That murder isn’t going to get solved by standing around—”

Ben raised a hand, and Ebony was pleased to note there was an edge of finality to the movement. For the most part, Detective Ben Tate was a softy. He’d never say anything without a grin, was sure never to drop by before ten, and hardly grumbled when Ebony stole his coffee. But when he wanted to, he could muster the authority of a field general. “Alright, Detective Wall, that’s enough. I brought you here to meet Ebony Bell. Ebony, this is Nate Wall.”

Ebony smiled, her perfect white teeth glinting between the ruby-red of her favorite lipstick. “Detectives Nate and Tate, hmm, now doesn’t that roll off the tongue?”

Ben made a loud sound like a buzzer. “Wrong answer, Eb. That’s where you curtsy and say, ‘nice to meet you, Detective.’ And as for you,” Ben turned on Nate, “this is where you—”

“It’s such a damn pleasure to meet you.” Nate crossed the room quickly and, much to Ebony’s surprise, lifted up her hand and shook it vigorously. He had a grip like a jeweler’s vice and shook Ebony’s hand like a businessman after a sales pitch. “Gee,” his voice was high and fake, “my name’s Detective Nathan Andrew Wall, such a pleasure.”

Ebony blinked, surprised at his sudden personality change. Her first impression of this man had been one of a sarcastic but mostly boring all-around good guy. Tall, handsome, officious, and would cite every single rule in the book, given a chance.

Now she had to change her estimation of Detective Nate Wall. Why? The man was playing her.

“So, Eb,” Nate stood too close to Ebony, his looming height and solid build a touch inside her personal space, “do you mind if I call you Eb?”

Just as she’d teased and prodded him before, the good detective was now getting his own back. “No, pet,” she stressed the term of endearment, “you call me whatever you need to.”

“Ah, how accommodating.” Nate nodded, face full of false cheer. Only the curl at the corners of his lips looked real. “So, Eb, I’m the new detective in town, and my partner here was just showing me the ropes.”

Ebony nodded, her eyes narrowing. Detective Nate could play this game all he wanted, but the boy had no idea what was coming.

“Anyhow, my partner here really seems to think it’s important that I meet you. I don’t know why.” Nate’s tone was beginning to shift. “I mean, you run a used bookstore. Hey, maybe you have a great section on crime or something? Or some collector’s editions of Guns and Ammo? Or—” the detective’s tone was as dry and sharp as a newly forged blade, “maybe this is a waste of time.”

“Hmm.” Ebony made a soft, careful noise. “You are in luck – I do have a very good collection of books relating to crime. And I might even have a couple of copies of Guns and Ammo hanging around.”

Nate’s expression was stony.

“Also,” her mouth formed the slowest of smiles, “I’m a witch.”

Dead silence met that fact. Finally, Nate’s expression cracked, and he let out a bullet blast of laughter. “A witch? Great, you’re wasting my time, and you’re mad.”

If Nate Wall had half a mind to look at his partner, he would have seen the ashen look of fear cross Ben’s face. “Ah, Nate,” Ben began, “you might not want to—”

“You know what, lady? I have work to do. There was a horrible, brutal murder last night. As fun as this has been, I have a real job.” Nate turned around and started picking his way toward the front door. “Judging by the look of this store,” he mumbled under his breath, “you would have no idea what work is, anyway. This damn thing should be torn down.”

Ebony crossed her arms, her red fingernails drumming on the sleeves of her white summer dress.

“Ebony,” Ben’s voice had a note of pleading, “don’t do anything too—”

A pile of old books and magazines suddenly tumbled off the counter and right into the path of the retreating Detective Nate. The detective had quick reflexes and dodged to the side with little effort.

“This place is a death trap,” Nate noted through a grunt.

Another pile of books tumbled over, then another. None of them were close enough or large enough to do any damage to the rude detective. Still, the man’s face started to tighten with fear. “What?” he snapped. “This store is coming down around your ears.”

“This store,” Ebony said, her voice a cold whisper, “doesn’t like to be insulted. Me,” she brought an expressive hand up to her chest, “I don’t care what you say about me, pet, but you really shouldn’t insult the store.”

Nate’s eyes widened as another pile of books tipped over by his side. Old novels and yellowed magazines were now strewn everywhere as if Ebony had gone up the spiral staircase that led to the second level and tipped box after box over the railing and onto the floor below.

“You’re going to have to say sorry.” She lifted her face to meet the detective’s gaze.

His eyes were wide, his brow more creased than a shoreline after a storm. Yet, somehow, he didn’t appear shaken. Boxes may have been erupting books like geysers spewing water at a hot spring, but somehow the man still had a determined tilt to his jaw.

“You aren’t serious—” he began.

Books now tipped from the bookcases as if shoved from behind. The open-sign somehow fell off its hook, striking the floor with a thud and coming to rest against Detective Nate's shiny shoes.

Nate looked down.

"Quickly," Ebony hissed, "before he starts tipping the bookcases over."

There was an ominous thud from upstairs.

Nate looked up and to each side, then finally back at Ebony. His chin close to his chest, he tilted his head down and looked up at her. "Sorry," he began.

A tenuous silence filtered through the store.

"But this is ridiculous," Nate finished.

Ebony sucked in a breath. "Why you little—"

One of the large wooden bookcases behind the counter began to tilt forward. Left alone, the thing would crash right over the counter and splinter on top of a surprised Detective Nate.

"Cowboy!" she spat as she stalked up to him. She grabbed his arm and yanked him toward her, out of the way of the teetering bookcase and out of the line of danger. "If I had a dollar for every time an arrogant idiot like you got yourself into trouble around magic," she paused, pushing him to the side as one of the light-fittings fell from the lamp above, "I'd buy you all life insurance and finally cash out. Really, is it so hard to believe in magic?"

With the now thoroughly surprised detective in hand, Ebony whipped an arm around her head in a small circle. At her feet, a soft blue glow appeared, spiraling outward until it encompassed both her and Nathan Wall with ease.

Finally, the detective looked surprised. No, that wasn't quite right. He looked bone-shaken, with pallid skin and a sharp, breathless expression on his face.

"Now," Ebony said, her voice soft, "for some reason this store has taken a spectacular disliking to you. He's never usually quite this rude. But unfortunately for you, you are the one who started it." She was standing close enough to the detective that she could feel the heat of his breath. "Like it or not, you're going to have to finish it as well. Now, all you have to do is say one little word." Her sharp gray-blue eyes twinkled at him. "Just one little word."

Nate stood and stared at her, his bottom lip jutting forward. "What on Earth is going —"

Ebony mouthed, "Sorry," expressively.

Finally, the dolt did what he was told. With a quick cough and a startled but sheepish look on his face, he announced, "Sorry," in a loud voice.

"Ah," Ebony clapped her hands together, "finally."

The books stopped falling, the magazines stopped fluttering, the bookcases no longer tipped themselves all over the floor, and somehow the open-sign had reverted to its usual place above the door.

Ebony patted her hair. "Now, that's certainly a strange way to start the morning." She clicked her fingers, and the blue circle of protection disappeared from her feet. She put her hands on her hips and surveyed the mess. "Oh, dear."

Ben crawled out from underneath a banana-lounge, his round face drooped like a flower. "Damn it, Ebony, are you trying to kill us?"

"It wasn't me." She waved him off with a flick of her hand. "Apparently Harry is in a mood this morning." She knelt down and started piling books on top of each other, trying to clear a path from the door to the stairs.

"What's going on, who's Harry?" came the gruff voice of Detective Nate behind her. "And what just happened?"

Ebony rolled her eyes, sighed, and stood up. Ebony Bell was tall and slender with long red hair and sparkling gray-blue eyes. She was hardly a supermodel, though. She wore

her face and body like a trophy wife wears a jacket – one for every occasion. Not to say that she literally pulled off her face and slotted a new one in place. It was her expressions, her stance, her body language. At times Ebony would smile, her hair glinting in the sun, her eyes sparkling and warm – and she would look like the most beautiful creature ever born. At other times she would stalk to and fro, her lips pulled, eyes narrowed, fists rolled up – and look like a deadly menace, akin to the most terrifying of hardened criminals. Yet at other times, she would be engaged in the most mundane of tasks and look for all-the-world like a simple, ordinary woman.

It was a rule with Ebony – whatever she was doing, she became.

Why?

Because Ebony Bell was a witch. And the first hallowed rule of witching was becoming.

“Listen, Detective Nathan Wall. I’m sure you are a little surprised by all this, so let me start at the beginning. My name is Ebony Elizabeth Bell. I am a witch. I own a magical second-hand bookstore. Harry is the name of the spirit who inhabits the store.” She cast around her feet as if looking for more thoughts. “Now let me see, is that it?”

Nate looked at her askance. “A magical bookstore called Harry... a witch,” he repeated, his voice uneven.

Ben trundled up to him. “I told you she was an important one to meet. But no, you didn’t believe me.” He let out a stuttering laugh. “That’s the thing with rookies – they always think they know best.”

Ebony put a finger on her lips and wondered how much she should tell this man. He was a firecracker, to be sure – full of determination, idiocy, and a freakish sense of right and wrong. Just the recipe for having something explode in your face.

She had what could only be called a special relationship with the police force of this city. As resident consultant witch, she had to. The city of Vale sat right on top of a gate between worlds – a portal. As such, though it already had its fair share of ordinary crime, it also had extraordinary crime. That’s where Ebony came in.

Vale had ancient roots, and somewhere in its dark past, a pact was forged between the witches and whatever ragtag bunch that had then been equivalent to the police. When they had to, they worked together to keep its citizens safe. No one else had a clue about this pact, or even the existence of witches, for that matter. If Ebony walked up to an ordinary Valian and asked if they knew there was a witch who did consultancy work for the police department, they’d laugh.

Nevertheless, there was a pact, and it had held right up to this day. Somehow – no matter what happened to the governments, what political parties took hold, what laws changed, what mayor was elected – the pact held. Even during the two World Wars, the witches of Vale had still kept up their bargain. Come rain, hail, shine, or demon, the witches honored this sacred agreement.

For the most part, the police honored theirs too. No witch was ever dragged off by secret government spies for questioning and prodding in a dark room. And no policeman ever had a hex, love potion, or curse thrown through their front window. The police knew what they had to do, and so did the witches. Keep to the bargain, and somehow this unlikely alliance would last. As the old witches had warned, break the bargain, and the witches would simply disappear.

And guns and riot shields weren’t effective against a horde of demons.

That’s how Ebony had come to know Ben. Ebony had moved to this city when she was a sparkling-eyed ten-year-old, and she had fallen in love with it. She’d learned the code from her mother, a witch, and had learned to shoot from her father, a police officer. She’d gone off to study, travel the world, and generally bum around in her early twenties, before

coming back to the only city she knew. When Harry's second-hand bookstore had come up for sale, she'd managed to muster the money for the deposit. And when the police department had put out the call for a new witch liaison, she'd been delighted when they'd accepted her application.

That was her story. The enigma of Ebony Bell wasn't too mysterious, after all. Just a witch in a big city, trying to get by.

"Ebony is a consultant for us." Ben scratched behind his ear. "We call her in when... stuff gets weird."

Nate swallowed. "Of course you do."

"You remember when you were transferred to us?" Ben smiled. "You remember when the Detective Chief Inspector sat you down and said this job's going to be unlike anything you've ever done?"

"I thought he was just exaggerating." Nate neatened his tie until it sat flat once more.

"Yeah well, he meant it. Now, I really should have handled this better. Instead of briefing you at the office about the uh... peculiarities of working for the Vale Police Department, I thought I'd bring you straight in to meet Eb and get it all over and done with."

"You weren't to know Harry would react like this." Ebony kept picking up books and stacking them into piles.

"Yeah well, whatever. Point is, rookie, Eb here is a witch."

Nate nodded slowly, offering something halfway between a smile and a grimace. "We've covered this."

"Yep, she's a witch, and she works for us. Vale here is sitting on top of a... now let me get this right... a portal between worlds that somehow makes the energy here more charged... Kind of like a storm, I guess," Ben muddled through his explanation. His hands flew around him as he tried to make sense of his confused thoughts.

"Yeah, how about I explain?" Ebony cut in. "Vale is sitting on top of a Portal, that much is true. In fact, there are many such Portals all around the world. You just wouldn't know it. Vale's Portal, however, is unusually strong," she said quickly, knowing such details would be under-appreciated by the new-guy detective. He had no clue about magic, so the prospect Vale was sitting on one of the biggest inter-dimensional rifts this side of a black hole wasn't one he'd appreciate.

She took a deep breath and decided to continue trying to explain the incredibly complex to the obviously stupid. "While the Vale Portal itself is usually closed, things sometimes leak through. This isn't the problem, though. What is the problem is that being in such proximity to an inter-dimensional tunnel means the city of Vale is highly charged with magical fields. Without going too far into the theory of Field Work, what happens is that being so charged, it becomes much easier for people to unintentionally produce magic." She looked up to see Nate's face, a picture of pained confusion. "You aren't getting this, are you?"

"A magical bookstore just tried to kill me because I called it messy," Nate said truthfully. "I have to say, I'm having difficulty paying attention."

"Hmm okay, good point. Let me put it this way – when someone straps themselves to a metal pole on a bright summer's day, what is their chance of being struck by lightning?"

Nate sighed, chest moving deeply. It was as if he was finally surrendering to the sheer ridiculousness of the situation. "Low to none."

"Right, how about if they strap themselves to a metal pole during a violent thunderstorm? Their chances increase measurably, right?" She waited for the detective to nod. "Well, this is Vale. Vale is a violent electrical storm of magic. Now, anyone who recites an incantation they find off the Internet or buys a book on devil craft or accidentally picks up a cursed rocking chair in an antique store – they are like that idiot strapping himself to a



metal pole. In the ordinary, everyday world, magic is incredibly hard. Here, magic is easy to attract but still hits you like a lightning strike.”

“The way I look at it,” Ben shifted a pile of magazines off the couch and sat down, “is like this. Magic is like drugs. People use it to forget themselves, get high, get transcendental, whatever. But the stuff is powerful and addictive. It’s cheap too yet comes at a hell of a price. As Eb said, any goon with an Internet connection can look up the dark arts, just like any idiot can go downtown and get wasted on drugs. The kids don’t know what they’re dealing with but like the high. And we clean up after them.”

“Junkies,” Nate raised an eyebrow, “Vale is a city of magical junkies... right?”

“No, no, you’ve got the wrong picture. There really isn’t too much magical crime around.” She made her way over to the counter and started shuffling around behind it.

“Honestly, there isn’t. Vale is usually quite ordinary. However—”

“On special occasions, we have to call in to see Eb. We bring her a biscuit, she steals our coffee, then she goes and finds our bad guy.”

She found the book she was looking for. “Ah ha, here you go, Detective Nate, here’s some light reading for you.”

Nate took the book and looked at the cover. “A Brief History of Magical Crime in Vale? Ahh... who wrote this... and who published it—”

“Oh, no one wrote it; it wrote itself.” Ebony pulled out another book and threw it at Nate. “Here’s another one you might like.”

“Witches, a Comprehensive Study of their use in Law Enforcement in Vale,” Nate read aloud.

“There are other books I could find you.” Ebony began to pick her way toward the back of the store. She had to admit she was feeling a little ashamed, but only a trifle. She’d had such fun playing with this new detective, she’d let Harry get out of hand. The spirit of this old store was cantankerous but never as dangerous as he’d been today. To put it simply, she could have handled things better, and now she was eager to smooth things over.

Well, not smooth things over completely. There was something delicious in the way Detective Nate reacted to being teased. The man had this certain vibe about him that made Ebony want to walk up to him, mess up his hair, and pinch him on the cheek.

“Hey,” Ben walked up to Ebony and caught her arm, “you can look for books later. Right now, we need you on a case.”

“Oh,” Ebony said quickly, “oh, dear. It’s that murder from last night, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t like murders,” Ebony said softly.

“No one does, kid.” Ben nodded at Nate. “Now, you’ve kind of had a big morning. And I’m sorry for how things have played out. You can go back to the office, and I’ll get one of the boys to give you a proper debrief.”

Nate shifted from foot-to-foot, staring warily out at the store then down at the two books in his hands. “It has been an unusual morning,” he agreed carefully.

“Ha, yeah.” Ben clapped a hand on his shoulder and shook it lightly. “I told you it was important to learn the ropes in this town.”

“I did think it was strange when I was forced to sign a specially drafted secrets act,” Nate noted, his voice becoming more detached.

“About that.” Ben grinned, his chin dimpling like a sand dune in the wind. “That secrets act is going to be, ah... more binding than you think.”

Nate’s brow knotted. “Sorry?”

“It’s a magical document,” Ebony interjected. “One of the things you’ll learn in those books I’ve given you is about the sacred pact between the witches and the police department.

Part of that pact is vowing that you'll never pass on the secret of the witches. And in order to ensure that you comply, you sign a special kind of document."

Nate's brow tightened. "What kind of document? What do you mean?"

"Well, while breaching an ordinary secrets act might land you in jail, trying to tell anyone about the witches will..."

"It's not pleasant, son." Ben patted Nate's shoulder again. "Your throat will seize up, you'll lose your voice for a day, you won't be able to write or communicate in any way... oh, and you'll grow a really hideous wart on the end of your nose."

Nate grimaced. "Right."

"Now, we've got to get to that crime scene, Eb, while it's still, ah, fresh."

Ebony shuddered. If anyone had been paying close attention to her, they would have seen her stature shrinking, her stare becoming weaker, and her stance becoming less confident. While on familiar ground, she could be as cheeky and sassy as her red lipstick and wild hair would permit – when things became unfamiliar, uncertain, and unsafe, her confidence would ebb. As the confidence ebbed, the knowing glimmer would fade from her eyes to be replaced with... well, something more human.

"Rookie, I'll drop you off at the office on the way."

Detective Nathan Wall took a final look around the room, at the books in his hands, up at Ben's open face, and over to Ebony. "I signed up for this job," he said, his voice stiff but determined. "And this is my first day. I'll go with you."

Ben smiled appreciatively. "I knew you were made of strong stuff! Alright, let's stop burning daylight – the citizens of Vale are counting on us."

As the three of them walked out of the store, Ebony surveyed the strange Detective Nate: firecracker, live wire, pain in the butt, or knight in shining armor?

This one was going to be interesting.

## Chapter 2

Ebony stared up at the imposing apartment block, her hands resting uneasily by her sides. It should have been a bright summer's day, but heavy clouds gathered on the horizon. The building stood stark against the sky like a thick black line on a perfectly white wall.

"I hope Yates hasn't downed all the coffee yet." Ben stepped up on the curb beside Ebony and proceeded to clear his throat loudly. "Even though it's a bright and sunny day, be darned if I haven't gotten myself a chill." He plucked up the collar of his jacket, punched his hands into his pockets, and walked up the steps to the cop waiting by the door.

"Hmm," Ebony mumbled to herself, still trying to take in the scene. A good witch never rushed in, her mother always told her. A good witch waited and watched. Watching was mostly what witching was about.

There was a sense of something dark in the air – a residual taste of something menacing that made the hair on the back of Ebony's neck stand up like pins forced into her skin.

There were no birds perching on the windowsills, gutters, or ledges of the building. In fact, there wasn't a chirp to be heard. There wouldn't be any rats either, or mice, or pests of any kind. She fancied there wouldn't even be an insect left in that place – not a cockroach under the oven, not a mosquito perched on a light, not even a fly buzzing at the window.

All the animals would have high-tailed it out of there. Animals always had a proper sense of things. Humans rarely did.

She was sickened to see gawkers peering past the yellow police tape. They looked up at the building, over at the police cars, and talked amongst themselves with excited whispers. One of them even called over to one of the cops, "Hey, what's going on here? There been a murder?"

The cop barely looked up from his cup of coffee. "Use your imagination and stay behind the line."

Ebony pulled her gaze away from the people, wondering whether the human race would ever grow up. What kind of a creature would be so crass in the face of such violence? What kind of fool would stand in a place so dark, trying to catch a glimpse of something even darker? That's what these people were after – a glimpse of the hardened plastic of a body bag, or a blood-soaked knife, or even a broken-faced man being led away in handcuffs.

They longed for images of dread, pictures that could be seared into their memories so they could go home to tell their friends and family about them. "How was your day, honey? You got cut off changing lanes? Well, I saw a murder scene – body bags and all."

Wouldn't that make for an exciting story?

Ebony shook her head. Sometimes she doubted ordinary humans had any sense at all.

"Are you going to stand there shaking your head all day, or are we actually going to go inside?" Nate asked, his deep drawl reverberating and startling her out of her reverie.

She barely managed not to jump. How long had he been standing there? Had she been so lost in the moment that she hadn't noticed someone walking up and plonking themselves right next to her?

"I'm watching," Ebony said, making her voice sound as even and authoritative as possible. "A large part of what I do is watch."

"Right, of course you do. But are we actually going to go inside? Ben's already gone ahead."

She didn't move. She jutted out her jaw and patted down the flare in her dress.

She didn't want to go inside, not that she would ever admit that to anyone, especially not the blustering Detective Nate.

Theft, illegal summonings, family curses – Ebony had experienced and was comfortable with most of the witch work she had received from the police department. She'd swan in with her golden earrings glittering in the sun, survey the crime scene, joke with the on-duty officers, steal their coffee, and solve the crime within the day.

Murders were another thing. She'd only seen two before, and both times she'd had to find an excuse to run into the bathroom to throw up.

"You can't rush into these things," she eventually offered, staring determinedly up at the building. "You have to be careful," she was still patting down her skirt, "pet," she added as an afterthought.

Nate arched an eyebrow. "Right. The only thing is the body is in there." He pointed at the door to the building. "And unless you think the outside of the building committed the crime, we're really going to have to go inside to get the full story. Oh, and another thing," he ducked under the police tape and made for the stairs, "I'm not your pet, *dear*," he called out over his shoulder.

Ebony bit her lip. Who did this guy think he was? Barely a half-hour ago he'd been staring at her all trout-lipped as her magical bookstore tried to kill him. Now he was all gung-ho to check out his first magical murder. He should still be whimpering, still shaking in his shiny shoes at the mere thought witches existed.

"Whatever," she snapped, "rookie, then." She ducked under the police tape, ignoring the shiver that shot down her spine. "You won't be so ballsy when you see it," she added to herself.

"Hey there, Eb." the cop at the door nodded to Ebony as she walked up the steps. "How's that store of yours?"

"Howdy, Jeb." Ebony sauntered up to the man, gave him a wink, and deftly snatched the Styrofoam cup from his hands. "Store's fine. How's the wife?"

"Gees, Eb, you're such a thief." Jeb looked at his empty hands, shook his head, and proceeded to open the door for Ebony. "And the wife's fine."

She took a quick sip of her stolen brew and winked. "You know, you are meant to arrest thieves, Officer."

"Oh, I can't arrest you, Eb. You'd be a bad influence on all the other guys in lock-up."

Ebony walked in, pretending to look thoughtful. "Good point."

Nate was waiting for her inside the door. He'd witnessed the entire exchange, and he was staring at Ebony in mild disgust. "When you're finished, everyone is waiting for us on the second level."

She bit the edge of her cup and smiled. "Don't rush me, rookie. Remember, it's your first day. And me," she patted her chest, "I've been here... for ages."

Nate looked underwhelmed by her reply. "Been here for ages. Wow, I can't compete with that."

She narrowed her eyes, staring at him from over the edge of her coffee. "You know, this isn't a game, Detective Wall. Upstairs is going to be a crime scene unlike anything you've ever seen. No amount of training will ever prepare you for it." Ebony tilted her head to the side in an attempt to get just the right angle so she seemed both deliciously ominous and thoroughly in control.

When the detective stared back, expression blank, she harrumphed and pushed past him. "Where did you come from, anyway?"

"Carrington." Nate somehow appeared at her side, matching her pace easily.

"Oh, the big city." Ebony took one last sip of her coffee before tossing the cup into a bin.

Nate rolled his dark eyes. “We’ve got a potential homicide – do you mind not messing up the crime scene?” He walked over to the bin, fished out Ebony’s discarded cup, and handed it to her. His face looked like the picture of a perfect policeman – his jaw was set, his eyes cold, and his mouth drawn. It was the face of a man who would stand in the path of a charging bull, telling it off for being a public nuisance.

Ebony sneered through a smile, snatching the cup off him when she realized it was going to take too much effort to win this one. “Right. And exactly what did you do in the big smoke, Detective Wall? Did you arrest old ladies for jaywalking?”

“No,” Nate flattened his tie, “I worked in homicide.”

The words fell against Ebony like a tidal wave.

Great. No wonder he was hardly sweating over the idea of walking into a brutal crime scene. It would all be old hat to him.

When she finished swearing at the man in her mind, she realized he was paying close attention to her expression. “What?” she made the word as forthright as possible.

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” Nate had his head tilted as if he was examining some specimen behind glass, “but you haven’t dealt with many murders, have you?”

Ebony couldn’t stop her eyes from widening. As they did, she could feel her stature changing. If the detective was half as good as he thought he was, he’d notice her back slouching, her cheeks paling, and her bottom lip drooping open. It was one of the hardest things about being a witch – if someone was careful enough, they could read you like a book.

But darn it, this guy was new! He’d only found out what witches were an hour ago, and now he was already sussing her out like a long-time friend.

“A *magical*,” she stressed the word, “murder is not like your ordinary homicide. There are forces at play that you don’t understand,” she cautioned, turning from him and marching down the corridor.

“You mean more than the usual callous inhumanity of violence, degradation, and desperation?”

Ebony ignored him and walked up to Ben where he stood outside an open door.

“Where is it?” she whispered, trying to hold back the terror raising its ugly head in the pit of her stomach. She had to be in control; she was Ebony Elizabeth Bell, after all.

“Eb.” Ben tried for a smile, but it couldn’t hold. “I was wondering where you’d gotten to. Body’s in the bedroom,” he added carefully.

Ebony swallowed and walked past him.

She dearly wished she’d grabbed a coat before leaving the shop. It wasn’t just the terrible chill in the air, or the fact the sun was now hidden by slate-gray storm clouds – it was the fact she desperately wanted to hide her hands. The great thing about a coat was you could plunge your hands into the pockets, and no one would be able to see you digging your fingernails into your palms.

With a breath, she entered the apartment. The usual mix of uniformed officers, be-suited detectives, and forensics officers were milling about the place. Low, respectful mumbling filled the air, with the click, click, clicking of cameras as the forensics team documented the scene.

To say the feeling hit her like a wall wasn’t quite right. The mix of dark, desperate dread drove through Ebony like monsoonal rain. She felt wet, not from water, but from fear-tinged sweat.

“What do we know about the victim?” She heard Nate announce to the room as he entered. “Alone, single? She living with anyone?”

Ebony was slowly tuning-out the bustle around her. Her eyes were drawn to the living-room walls, and she walked toward them like a sleepwalker in the night. She picked her way past the man taking photos of the underneath of the couch and past the uniformed

officer flicking through the post on a dressing table until she finally touched a hand to the plum-colored wall.

Fingers pressed up against the cold paint, Ebony fancied she could feel the wall pulsating erratically, like a heart coming to rest. There were symbols etched deep into its surface. They had been scratched into the plaster with a butter-knife maybe, or a used razor, or even the broken neck of a bottle.

The symbols were wide and irregular, made with the shaking hand of the frightened, or the fitful rage of the frantic. They were dotted around the edge of two large circles. Both circles were painted with what looked like red food-dye but could easily have been watered-down blood.

A powerful spell, thought Ebony, the coldest of shivers running through her.

A hand latched onto her wrist, suddenly pulling her fingers from the wall. "Haven't you ever heard of gloves?" Nate asked, releasing her wrist after a moment.

"You have more of a chance herding cats than getting Eb to follow procedure," one of the forensics officers quipped from across the room.

Nate ignored him, staring at Ebony instead before meaningfully depositing a pair of white latex gloves in her hand. "This might be a magical murder, or whatever," he intoned coldly as he surveyed the room. "And I might be the rookie here. But there's one thing I have a feeling is germane to all police work," He snapped his head back to look at her, "respect the crime scene. Don't go walking all over your clues before you know what they are. Now, you told me outside you watched, well, watching doesn't mean touching, does it?"

Ebony's shock at being pulled from the wall so quickly turned into bristling anger. "Excuse me. Are you, or are you not, the same man who walked into my store this morning without a single clue that witches exist? Are you, or are you not, the man who has just found out about magic? Are you, or are you not, the man who has just walked into a crime scene he knows nothing about and yet thinks he can boss everyone else around?"

Her voice was loud and angry. Everyone else was now looking at her as she publicly dressed down the new guy.

The expression on Nate's face turned colder than a winter's night.

Ebony shifted backward. "You want to know everything about this crime scene, hmm? You want to know all the background facts? Well, let me make a guess." Her voice was officious, but underneath, it was all too erratic and peaked in all the wrong places. "The victim is a woman, lives alone, isn't married, has a cat, and likes the color red."

She played with the latex gloves Nate had given her, without once having the inclination to put them on. "Oh, one other thing – she's a witch."

This gem silenced the room.

Ebony heard Ben swear from over near the doorway. "Are you sure?"

"Oh, yes." She stopped playing with the gloves and put them down on the TV stand.

To Detective Nathan Wall's credit, he kept the same stance, the same expression, and the same righteous glint in his eyes. She may have just been rude to him, but the man was like a dog after a bone. "She *was* a witch," he corrected.

"No, she still is one."

"The body in the bedroom would like to disagree with you." He cleared his throat and flattened his tie. "There's nothing wrong with admitting you're new to homicide scenes," he added in a much quieter voice. "But you can't bluster through them."

Ebony clenched her teeth. "I'm the one in charge here," she reminded him, feeling her authority slip all the more. What an infuriating man. Only this morning she'd been playing with him, and now somehow he was playing with her. Sheesh, she might have to break the Sacred Pact and throw a cursed rock through his window.

"Right, of course you are," his words were hollow with sarcasm.

She longed to scream at him to stop saying that. "The witch," she said clearly and loudly, "isn't dead. This wasn't a murder at all."

Everyone stopped what they were doing and looked up.

"And how do you know that?" Nate crossed his arms. "You're right, I'm new to magical crimes, but I imagine there's more to them than snapping your fingers and pulling the bad guy's name out of a hat."

"That would be a magician's crime. Only magicians pull things out of hats," she corrected him, "and I'm not pulling anything out of anywhere. I'm just reading the writing on the wall."

"Arcane symbols, right?" one of the forensics guys asked.

"Yep, a powerful spell, too." Ebony nodded his way.

She realized with relish that lost look was returning to Detective Nate's gaze. Finally, he didn't look like he was riding the wave anymore.

"What?" Nate asked dumbly.

"There's a spell on the wall." Ben walked up to him and pointed at the etchings in the plum paint. "I thought it was a calling card or something."

"No, it's a love spell." Ebony tilted her head to the side. "A fairly fiery one, I might add."

"Okay, I don't know anything about magic," Nate conceded through gritted teeth. "But there is still a dead body in that room," he pointed out with desperation. "Whether there are magic symbols on the wall or not, surely the fact there's a corpse on the bed is important?"

"I told you," she found her confidence returning as Nate's grip on the situation obviously waned. "It's a love potion."

"Right, okay.... Dead body, huh? That's quite a love potion. Real attractive."

Ebony rolled her eyes, letting her mascara-clad lashes flutter. Now she knew what she was dealing with, the horror had left her. This wasn't a murder at all. Though there was heavy evil in the air, it was something Ebony could deal with now she knew what she was up against.

And what exactly was she up against? A naughty witch, to be precise.

"Is this sanctioned magic?" Ben trotted up beside her.

"Oh, no," she laughed abruptly, "definitely not. Someone will be getting in trouble with the Coven, I think."

"How do we find her?" Ben picked up the latex gloves Ebony had abandoned on the TV stand and stuffed them into his pocket. "What exactly are we looking for? And, Eb," Ben gave a small smile, "what is with the dead body?"

"Finally," Nate mouthed.

"It's a husk. The witch, whoever she was, committed a binding spell. I can't tell you why; they're fairly nasty, desperate incantations. The woman had obviously lost her mind." She trotted over to the window and looked up at the clouds above. Was it her imagination, or were they thinning?

"So is it a dead body, or isn't it?" Ben shot Nate a grin of camaraderie, which Ebony noted with a peeved twitch of her nose.

"For the last time, it's not a dead body. Well, not really. The witch has swapped her body for that of something else. The actual witch, her soul, is still alive. Whatever is sitting in her bedroom is just an empty casing."

"Swapped her body," Nate repeated, his voice vacant. "Right. That's... kind of heavy. What did she swap it for?"

"Oh, I don't know. Probably long legs, round lips, and a killer smile. That... or wings and a forked tail."

“Sorry?” Nate’s voice peaked with alarm.

“The witch has either decided to change herself into whatever she thinks is the most beautiful thing imaginable, or she’s gone and swapped her body for a powerful demon.”

“Most guys – and I think I’m right in making this generalization – usually go for long legs over a forked tail.”

Ebony played with the ends of her long hair. “Oh, it doesn’t really matter. Either the witch has turned herself into an alluring bombshell, hoping to catch her man, or she’s turned herself into a powerful demon, ready to exact its revenge for a love left unrequited.”

“That’s quite a distinction.” The edge of uncertainty and unease was starting to lift from Nate’s voice. “Don’t you think we need to know which one it is? I don’t mean to rush you or anything, but isn’t a demon-witch hunting down some poor man kind of a problem that we, as police officers, should deal with?”

Ebony gave a sharp laugh. “Don’t get excited, rookie. It’s not our problem anymore.”

“Not our prob—” Nate began.

“That’s Coven work,” Ben interjected, the smile returning to his lips. “You sure about this, Eb?”

“Oh, yes, I think we can all go home. Well, after someone buys me a doughnut.”

All the other officers in the room started to pack up, the level of conversation moving from its once respectful hush to the ordinary bluster of a room full of hardened police officers.

Ebony was sure she could feel the dark edge of energy lifting like a veil in the wind.

Despite the fact everyone else appeared satisfied, Nate stood there, not moving an inch. “So we don’t do anything? There’s a dead body in the other room, and we do jack?”

“You see, there are two sides to magical crime.” Ben clapped a hand on Nate’s shoulder, giving it a shake to loosen it up. “There’s our side, and there’s the witches’ side. We get involved when ordinary humans commit crimes, and Eb here is our consultant when it comes to all the magical stuff. She even helps us track down the bad guys. But when a crime is just between witches or whatever, then it isn’t our problem. The Coven or the Wizards deal with those crimes.”

“We’re the police,” Nate said stalwartly. “Isn’t all crime our problem?”

“Not in Vale,” Ben said with a broad smile. “Which is a damn good thing. Less work, see? Plus, let me tell you, you don’t want to get involved in witch crime – can be nasty. We hand it over to the Coven, and they deal with it a treat. It’s all part of the Pact.”

“I see,” Nate said blandly, shaking his head. “Actually, I don’t see. How do we trust this Coven enough to deal with these crimes impartially? Aren’t they likely to be lenient against their own kind?”

Ebony snorted. “The Coven is a counsel of the oldest, most powerful witches. It is their sworn purpose to uphold magical law. If magical law forbids the use of certain spells and a witch breaks the law, it’s up to the Coven to punish her. And if you think they’re lenient, you have another thing coming. You break their rules, and they’ll send the first squadron of Hell after you.” She flashed Nate a smile. “And that’s why this is no longer our problem. The Coven can deal with this one. I can go back to the store and clean up; Ben can try to teach your handful of brain cells all the things you’ll need to know about policing in this town; and you, Detective Nathan Wall, can study those books I gave you.”

He really did need to study those books. The detective didn’t stand a chance in this city if he didn’t know about its magical underground. Vale was an odd place at the best of times. At the worst, it was frankly terrifying. And, much to Ebony’s discomfort, these days, things were only getting worse. While it was true that every generation always thinks the battles they fight are far worse than those that came before, you could be forgiven for putting



more faith in that fact in Vale. Ever since Ebony had moved to this city as a child, Vale had only become wilder, more dangerous, and more ferociously magical.

Nate eventually shook his head. "This has been... an unusual morning. I bet it's going to be a hell of an afternoon, too."

Ebony hissed through clenched teeth. "Don't ever make statements like that, rookie. You never know what you'll invite if you go around provoking the universe."

"Provoking the universe? Or provoking you?" He smiled.

She laughed, tipping her head back and letting her tassels play against her shoulders. "Oh, too late. You've already provoked me, rookie."

"Alright, Eb, when you're done eating the rookie alive, I'll drop you back home." Ben sidled up to her. "As much fun as it's been, I've got a ton of ordinary, everyday, boring crimes to get to."

"And I have to clean up after this morning. And you," she poked a red fingernail at Nate, "better read those books and return them to me sharpish."

The look on Nate's face summed up the morning perfectly. His eyebrows peaked with defiance, his jaw jutted with attitude, and his eyes glinted with an insufferable knowing.

...

By the time Ebony made it back to the store, it was well into the afternoon. It would take her the rest of the day to clean up the mess and probably most of tomorrow too. She had bookshelves to coax back into place, magazines to sort, and boxes to fill again.

Despite the epic workload, she found herself smiling. It was one of those smiles that curled your lips until your cheeks pressed into your eyes.

Strange day, she admitted to herself, very strange indeed.

A tsunami of books in the morning, a witch who'd risked it all on a forbidden love spell in the afternoon, and of course the delightfully irritating Detective Nathan Wall.

Despite being a consultant witch for the police force and owning a magical second-hand bookstore, Ebony's life was usually boring. She'd pack books on shelves, occasionally deal with customers, and trot down to the police station to remove a curse from a ring.

Now the winds of change were blowing, and Ebony could feel them playing against her hair.

The only question was what would happen next?

## Chapter 3

Ebony shifted her body from side-to-side, head weaving to-and-fro as the music pumped through her store. Her hair flicked around her like a skirt flaring in mid-twirl. She snapped her fingers in time with the beat and shook her wrists up and down until her copious golden bangles tinkled like triangles.

She didn't believe in working without music. Working without music was like working without food: unsustainable and dull. Whenever she worked, she always made sure she had two things with her – blaring music and a bag full of candies sprawled across the counter.

Cleaning up the store had been quite a task. Harry had put on a show the other day when he'd taught that new detective a lesson.

Ebony sighed. Though it had been amusing when it had happened, she was now sick of picking up books and stuffing them into shelves.

Time for candy, then.

She dumped the three books she had in her arms on the ground, dust clouds eddying off the floor as they struck. Sweeping the floor was a task she had never gotten around to doing. It was because of brooms – she hated brooms. Human fiction had gotten that part dead wrong over the years. Witches didn't fly around on broomsticks all the time, black cloaks billowing in the wind, wands at the ready. Why? Because witches hated housework, the color black was passé, and wands were for magicians.

Plus – she reasoned as she flung herself down the old metal spiral staircase that separated the first floor from the second – people expected dust when they came into a used bookstore. If the books they were looking for weren't caked in the stuff, how would they know they were old and used?

The stairs clunked with rusty creaks as her red, bedazzled high heels pounded them. This bookstore really was old. It was a large open-plan building with a high ceiling. It was stuffed to the brim with books and shriveled magazines not a soul had likely ever read. The counter was off to one side, right at the front of the store near the fire-truck red door. There was an old cash register sitting on top of it next to a glass bowl full of candy and ludicrously colored lollipops. She always offered one to customers after they'd bought something to sweeten the deal.

The rest of the first floor was partitioned off with giant, dark, wooden bookshelves. Rather than having them arranged in neat rows with labels and some kind of order, Ebony preferred the hodgepodge method of library cataloging.

There were old, red, velvet banana-lounges dotted around the place, their fabric torn and worn with age. Behind the lounges, or to the side, or in front of windows, or wherever she damn pleased – were large bookcases, their shelves overflowing with books of all sizes, colors, and content.

It was a rabbit warren, as her father described it, a crazy rabbit warren dug out by rabbits on drugs. She'd always giggled at that description.

Her mother had a different opinion. A messy mind, Avery Bell always warned, summoned a messy life.

But Ebony loved the place. Sure, having no actual order meant most people became too frustrated with searching to buy anything. That didn't matter. For the few people who stuck it out, it was always worth seeing that look of wonder in their eyes. That marvelous glint of achievement as they realized they'd found precisely what they were looking for, despite the sheer chaos of the place.

Upstairs was a different world. While downstairs resembled a book-cyclone, upstairs was neat. It was a mezzanine level with a large wooden railing from which one could peer down at the store below. Beautiful old bookcases were lined, neat and exact, along each of the three walls. Each was stacked with old books. They were all sun-damaged and pale, but the blue, green, red, and black spines still twinkled under the right light. If you made it close enough, you could even make out the original gold lettering printed on their spines.

Upstairs wasn't open to ordinary customers, a rusty chain being hung over the base of the staircase with the word *private* painted in chipped red-paint on a wooden board. Upstairs was her, ah, *other* collection. It was a comprehensive set of books on magic, alchemy, witchcraft, wizardry, spells, demons, and anything else you could think of. Unlike the fluff you might buy in an ordinary bookstore, these books were the genuine article.

The books on the top level formed the backbone of Harry's original collection. Harry Elbert Horseshoe had been a wizard of some repute during the early twentieth century. He'd traveled the world collecting any magical book he could get his hands on, eventually bringing his whole collection back to his hometown of Vale. Though Ebony didn't know too much about the old-timer, she did know he'd guarded his collection like a mother hen guards her chicks.

Ebony jumped off the final step, bangles jangling on her wrists. She intended to trot up to the counter, grab a strawberry lollipop, and continue sorting out the mess, all while her stereo system blared.

To her surprise, there was an actual real customer standing at the counter.

"Oh." She jammed her thumb onto the pause button on the stereo-remote in her pocket. "Didn't see you there, pet."

She walked up to the counter, teeth pressing into her lips in a cheeky smile. "I really should invest in a bell I can hear over my music – oh," she said suddenly as she rounded the back of the counter, "it's you."

Detective Nathan Wall smiled back, though you couldn't call it a smile. It was more a twitch of acknowledgment. "I don't think there is a bell on Earth that could be heard over that din." His voice dripped with sarcasm. One arm rested lightly on the counter, the other pressed two books into his chest.

"You," she cocked an eyebrow, pursed her lips, and blinked, "are wearing a different suit."

Nate looked down, expression bland. "Great detective skills. I can see why the police department consults you now."

Ebony plucked a red lollipop from the bowl by her side and gestured toward Nate with it as if it were a wand. "You are sarcastic, rookie, and that's all that can be said about your personality." She unwrapped the lollipop, letting the wrapper fall onto the counter.

"Hmm, and you dance like a kitten on speed, which I think kind of sums you up too."

Briefly, she was horrified that this buffoon had seen her dancing upstairs. The blighter had obviously been here for some time and hadn't had the manners to announce himself.

Ebony shooed away the embarrassment, choosing to smile mysteriously instead. "First, you come in here and insult my music and now my dancing. Tell me, Detective Nate, is that how we make friends?"

"Who said I was trying to make friends? What I'm really here to do," he placed two books he was carrying neatly onto the counter, "is return these books."

"Hmm, I see." Ebony pulled them away from him, making a show of checking them over completely for any sign of damage or misuse. "And did you actually manage to read them?"

Nate flattened his tie. "You'd be surprised, but literacy rates amongst homicide detectives are actually on the rise."

Ebony cooed. “Oooh, you can talk, and you can read. Next, you’ll be finding manners. Then you’ll be a real man.” She placed the books behind the counter with a satisfied smile.

Nate’s grin stiffened. “I think you might need to look up the definition of man in the dictionary, you might find it illuminating.”

She ground her front teeth together. Now, now, wasn’t this detective sharp? She had to admit, she much preferred this man when he was frightened. He was too much work to handle, otherwise.

“Hold on, you wouldn’t actually have a dictionary around here, would you? You know an actual useful book?”

She straightened up, pulling the lollipop from her mouth with a pop. “It depends if you like paperweights, Detective Nate. Are you telling me you didn’t find those two books I lent you useful? Would you rather learn all about witches, the Pact, the Portal, demons, and such by being thrown into a graveyard at night during the witching hour with nothing but your blazing wit to save you? Because if you’d like, I can take you down to the Portal right now and introduce you to a mind-sucking demon-fly. But only if you’d like.”

Nate’s expression was, as usual, unreadable. “The books were fine,” he changed track, reverting to his usual officious tone. “In fact, I’d be interested in more if you have any.”

Ebony drew a loop in the air with her lollipop. “Are you asking if I have any more books? Look around – I have a whole store full.”

Detective Nate was obviously done playing. “Specifically, I was wondering if you had anything pertaining to that Portal of yours, especially anything relating to the Portal Prophecies.”

She blinked, shocked. “You actually read those books, didn’t you? And it’s not my Portal,” she corrected with a laugh. “You think I’d be working in a second-hand bookstore if I had my own tamed space-time anomaly?”

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” Nate appeared to ignore her attempts at humor, “but much of the relationship between the police and the Coven is due to the Portal, right?”

“I guess you could say that,” she said carefully, caught off-guard by his insightful questions. “The Portal is incredibly powerful. It allows things to happen in Vale that couldn’t happen elsewhere. As such, it can be dangerous unless properly managed.” She sighed, not knowing where to begin. There was so much about magic and Vale he didn’t know, let alone about the Portal. How was she supposed to explain it all to a man who looked dumber than a cardboard cut-out?

Nate stared at her evenly, obviously waiting for his answer.

“Okay, here’s the low-down. Like I said before, the Portal is usually closed. Actually, it’s always closed. It’s been a really long time since anything tangible has come through it. Just energy and the occasional thermic cloud—”

“Hold on, are you saying that nothing can come through the Portal? Nothing but energy, that is?”

Ebony rolled her eyes, not liking to be interrupted, especially by someone so darn keen. “No. I mean, technically no. Things from our side,” she patted her chest, “can occasionally go through the Portal, but nothing comes through to this side. Nothing but energy—”

“But what about the Prophecies? You said nothing ever comes through the Portal, but if that’s the case, then why do most of your books refer to it as a door? Doors are usually two-way. And the Prophecies specifically mention creatures coming through the Portal, so why dismiss it?” As Nate spoke, his voice was easy but precise. Ebony realized for the first

time that he actually sounded like a detective. His questions were exact, to the point, and probing. Worse, he sounded in his element – in control.

“Okay, whatever. Yeah, the Portal Prophecies mention that creatures from the Other Side can occasionally hitch a ride into our world. But you have to understand, Detective, that these Prophecies pertained to a time long past. A time when people knew more about magic but less about risk control. A time when some dumb diddly of a wizard thought it would be a neat idea to try to communicate with interdimensional beings, regardless of the consequences.” She took a breath. “Look, magic is closely regulated these days. It needs to be. You think it’s especially easy keeping something like magic secret in this technological age? Of course it isn’t. So, for the benefit of magical creatures, and for the benefit of humanity as a whole, magic is kept under control. Maybe in the past it would have been possible to open up the Portal and invite some nice old dimensional alien around for tea, but it just couldn’t happen anymore.”

Nate hardly seemed impressed by her reassurance. His face was so set, she fancied not even a barrel of diamonds would impress the man. “The reason I insist,” he said clearly, obviously wanting Ebony to pay attention, even if he thought she didn’t seem capable of understanding him, “is because the Portal seems to be at the center of the relationship between the witches and the police. It also seems important to the variety of crimes you experience in Vale. That, Ebony, makes it important to me.”

She stopped herself from rolling her eyes. “There isn’t much to tell, Detective, honestly. The Portal just is. Trust me. Nothing is going to come out of it any time soon. That’s really not what you have to worry about here. You want to understand crime in Vale? Then your major culprits are idiot kids and the Internet, accidents, petty-theft of blessings, and the occasional neighborhood hexing – nothing of inter-dimensional importance, not by a long-shot.”

Nate hardly seemed pacified, but he did nod his head. “So, do you have any books for me, or what?” he repeated his original request with the same steady, unnervingly precise tone.

She liked to look like she took everything in her stride. It was part of her blazing personality. She was now realizing, however, that she didn’t like it when other people did the same. This man was coming across as arrogant in the extreme, too eager to control, and too damn capable. He’d just found out magic was real, and now he was having a serious argument with her about the possibility of directional material-transport through a magical inter-dimensional space rift. *How dare he.*

The ticking of Harry’s old clock filtered through the room. It felt like the heartbeat of the place, the background reminder that things were never as they seemed. It also reminded Ebony she could hardly stand here and fume at the man. He was a detective, and there was the Pact to think about. Part of her job as the consultant witch for the police force was to keep their officers up-to-speed. She was obliged, but she didn’t have to smile about it.

Damn, sometimes she hated the Pact.

“Fine. I have a book relating to Portal dynamics,” she said quietly. “I’ll just go find it.” She walked around the counter, trying to keep her back straight but her hips swaying.

She bit her lip with annoyance when she realized Nate was following her.

“So, what is a Portal? Are there Portals elsewhere on the planet? If it produces energy, why haven’t scientists discovered it? If it’s inter-dimensional, then doesn’t there need to be a balanced flow of energy into and out of the Portal in order to maintain the thermal equilibrium of both systems?”

She felt like she was being followed around by a pesky child who had more questions than friends. “Thermal equilibrium? What kind of question is that?”

"It's a smart question. You should try asking them sometime. Then, in the event that you meet someone smart, you might not sound so dumb."

One of Ebony's eyebrows rose like a puff of smoke. "Really? Very nice."

"Seriously though, there has to be more to this Portal, and I'd like to know it." His tone and his expression both returned to normal. He was capable of switching between sarcasm and efficiency in the blink of an eye.

"Look," she put her hands on her hips and pressed her lips into a pout, "do I look like a walking dictionary? You seem capable of reading, so why don't you do that?"

"I'd rather it comes directly from the witch's mouth, so to speak." He flattened his tie again. It was something he did at every opportunity.

"Listen," she picked her way past a banana-lounge drowned under books, "obviously, I can't tell you everything about magic and the Portal, because obviously, you simply wouldn't understand."

"Obviously."

"But I can tell you this," she ducked around a pile of teetering boxes, her moves graceful and elegant, "the Portal itself, while important, isn't what you should be concentrating on. You need to know about magic first." Ebony sighed, hating this impromptu lecture more and more. She hadn't the faintest idea where to begin schooling this brat. "Okay, we'll start with this." She pointed to herself. "I am a witch," she said slowly. "Now, the first rule of witchcraft is to *become*."

"And how does this relate to the Portal? Not that it isn't fascinating," he added drolly.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, *listen to me*. You are jumping ahead. Magic is where you need to start this story, Mr. Detective. If you want to understand why the Portal is important to Vale, then you have to understand that it is not because of the Portal itself, but because of how it affects magic here. Magic is everywhere. In fact, it is as ubiquitous a force of nature as Death, Truth, Movement, and Light."

"None of which are forces of nature," he pointed out, his voice toneless.

She ignored him. "Magic isn't zipping around on brooms, waving wands, and waking the dead. Magic is a part of reality. It's the part of reality, in fact, that makes the unlikely likely and the impossible real."

"You mean delusion?" He cleared his throat.

"No, I mean chance. Look around you – notice anything? Books, shelves, maybe some dust – nothing unusual, right?"

"I don't know, I would hardly call you ordinary." He offered a sarcastic grin.

"It's a Labor of Hercules trying to teach you something, Detective. And if you interrupt once more, I shan't tell you a thing."

He put his hands up as if in submission. "Please, go on. Magic is chance," he prompted her.

"Not exactly. Magic is simply a type of Movement. It's one of the forces of reality that make things happen. Magic simply pertains to the unlikely, the impossible, and the apparent never-can-be's. If you manage to do the impossible once, we call it a miracle. If you manage to do the impossible every day, then you are magical."

He crossed his arms. "So people who know magic are mini-gods then?" He looked at her carefully, obviously not believing his conclusion for a second.

"If I could smite you right now, darling, I would. But it doesn't work like that. Sometimes if you know enough about reality – about the real reality and not that nonsense they teach you in science class – you can affect a change. There are two truths, Detective, and two paradoxes. We are told anything can happen, that anything can become, right? We are also told that whatever occurs is brought to be through laws and regularity. Chaos and Order. Now, magic sits between those two." She sniffed, happy at her explanation.

Nate's expression grew even less impressed. His eyes pressed together, and he wore a tight frown. "That tells me nothing. This doesn't make any sense. I ask you to explain the Portal, and you get sidetracked trying to explain the impossible—"

Ebony harrumphed and crossed her arms. "Teaching you is like teaching a stone."

"Perhaps you should try harder, then. I don't need to know the inner workings of your world, believe me. What I do need to know is all about the Portal. Now, are you going to tell me, or what?"

She'd never dealt with a man like this. To say he was dogged was an understatement. Nate was impossible. "Okay. Time for the three-year-old version. Magic is real. It works. It's regulated. It also can't be understood by thick-headed detectives who ask too many questions but don't have any insight. The Portal is a doorway between worlds and serves to increase the frequency of magic within Vale. I'm a witch, you're a detective – and now we have to find a way to work together." She ended by cocking her head to the side and smiling sarcastically. "Got it?"

Nate, eyes still narrowed, opened his mouth to ask a million more questions, but the mobile in his pocket rang. He grabbed it up in a flash. "Detective Wall here."

Ebony could make out the muffled tones of the person on the other end of the line but found it far more interesting to watch Nate's expression instead. The man had obviously grown up on too many movies of knights in shining armor. He simply couldn't puff out his chest any more or jut out that jaw any farther.

Chevalier. She rolled the term around in her mind. Idiot Chevalier.

"Ah ha, got it," he said quickly, his tone even. "Corner of 22nd Street and Matriarch's Place."

Ebony looked up. She knew that place – an antique store run by a peevish old woman who always wore too much floral.

"Yep, don't you worry; I'll go find our official witch liaison now." Nate looked over at Ebony and nodded his head. "We'll be there in 20."

She clapped her hands together. "We have work, don't we?"

"Apparently."

"How lucky for you that you just happened to be here." Her tone could only be described as luscious – dripping with enough chocolate and honey to catch any fly.

"Lucky." Nate returned the phone to his pocket and tucked the book under his arm. "Let's go."

"I mean, don't you find it strange?" She fluffed her hair away from her face. "Because I certainly do."

"Find what strange?" Nate shifted, half turning to face the door but still keeping an eye on her.

"Oh, come on. Why didn't you admit you were already here?"

He didn't reply.

"Hmmm," Ebony made an appreciative sound as if she'd just come across a buffet cram-packed with delicious desserts of every kind. "You said you'd just go find me, rookie. Why didn't you admit you already happened to be here?" She winked.

He cleared his throat. "Does it matter?"

She looked wistful. "I think it—" Ebony suddenly looked up. A book had somehow found its way to the edge of the bookcase just behind Nate. In the extended, drawn-out time a witch enjoyed during periods of danger, she saw the thing fall off the edge and angle toward Nate's head.

She lurched forward without a moment to lose. She planted a foot right next to his own, pressed a hand onto the shelf behind his hip, and reached up in time to catch the book.

The thing clunked into her palm, time returning to normal in a snap. “Oooph,” she said, realizing how heavy the tome was. She promptly tumbled backward, right onto the ground.

She lay there, the considerable tome resting on her chest, a stack of magazines digging into her back, the swirls of her gypsy skirt surrounding her like clouds.

“What the—” Nate managed, his expressions running the full gamut of open-eyed shock to mild amusement. “What are you doing on the floor?”

Ebony groaned, neatening her skirt and pushing to her feet. “Harry,” she muttered under her breath, “that’s very rude.”

“Harry? You mean – *you mean your store is still trying to kill me?*” Nate hooked a hand on her elbow and helped pull her up, taking the heavy book from her as she stood. He glanced at the cover. “Your store is trying to kill me with this? The Illustrated History of Man Bags? What is a man bag?”

Ebony chortled, trying to rub the pain from her back. “Well, I’m glad Harry still has his sense of humor.”

“Your bookstore just tried to kill me again,” Nate’s words were quick and sharp, his teeth clenched. “And you’re making jokes?”

“I saved you. What’s the big deal? Plus, we have to go to Matriarch’s place, remember? We have a job to do.”

As they both walked out of the store, she was somewhat amused to see the extra-careful look on Nate’s face as he surveyed every shelf and box. Gone was the arrogant competence and back was the boy who’d just found out magic was real.

....  
By the time they reached their destination, Ebony was ready to scream. Twenty minutes in a car with Nate was like a lifetime of driver’s education lessons. He would stop well before each light, put his handbrake on when paused in traffic, wait to let people into his lane, and even slow down to let bikes past.

“You drive like an eighty-year-old preacher,” she spat as she hauled herself out of his car, patting down her skirt and flaring out her hair.

“No, I drive like you’re meant to. I obey the rules. Is there something wrong with that?” Nate waited until Ebony had slammed her door before he locked the car. He did a quick sweep of his surroundings, those camera-lens eyes of his picking up and documenting every single detail in sight. “So, apparently we’re looking for—”

“Cursed rocking chairs.” She shot an appreciative grin at a handsome man that walked past. “Or maybe cursed armchairs – depends what the fool has been up to lately.”

“Sorry, cursed *rocking* chairs?”

“Hmm.” She played with her earrings, enjoying the feeling of the warm sun on her back and hair. “Flora Wheatly,” she pronounced the words clearly, turned around with a flutter, and started to march off down the street. “We’ve warned her before.”

“Ben just said something about an antique store and curses—” once again, Nate appeared at Ebony’s side, matching her pace without the slightest effort.

“It’s Flora. Trust me.” She rounded the corner into Matriarch’s Place. It was an open arcade, dotted with shops: spice stores, booksellers, cafes, and one lonely antique store.

Flora’s Antiques was an old, dingy building. The once-white sign above the door was missing so many letters, you could only make out ‘ra – nts’ by now. Which, Ebony thought with a smile, was incredibly fitting when it came to Flora.

Ben was standing outside, sharing the shade of the awning with a uniformed officer. His face was drawn and tired. “Blimey, Eb,” he said as soon as she came within earshot, “this is doing my head in. It’s the second cursed rocking chair in a month!”



She shook her head knowingly as she marched up to him. "I know – the fool is insane."

Ben nodded. "Isn't there anything the Coven can do?"

"She's not a witch, Ben," she said softly. "She's not a normal woman," she added as an afterthought, "but not a witch."

Ben shrugged. "So, rookie, how's the morning been?"

Nate's expression was blank. "Barrel of fun."

"Sounds like you've been hanging out with Eb. Anyway, we've got to find some way to deal with this one. It's driving me insane." Ben turned back to Ebony.

"What's the story—" Nate began, but quickly corrected, "what's the case?"

"Cursed rocking chairs, so comfortable you just can't escape." She peered through the dingy windows of the shop, trying to catch a glimpse of the awful Flora.

"Sounds... terrible. So, if we know she's been selling them, why don't we just go in and arrest her?"

"Not so fast, cowboy." Ebony caught sight of the old woman sitting behind her counter, her menacing eyes glinting out at the world. "Ever heard of the word warrant?"

"Are you serious? You need a warrant to make an arrest for a magical crime? I thought only the police force was bound by the Pact? How do you ask the local magistrate to sign off on arresting someone for cursing rocking chairs without being locked up for wasting the Court's time?"

"Witching Warrants are kind of different." Ben shrugged. "Same premise, though. You've got to have a reasonable case before you can arrest someone. You can't just swan around throwing every kid with a Wicca book in the lock-up – not without evidence."

"And we don't have a case? You said you knew it was her. What more do you need?"

Ebony sighed heavily. "We've brought her down to the station before. She just claims she didn't knowingly import cursed-furniture, and she didn't knowingly curse the chairs herself. Says the wood the chairs are made from came from a cursed forest."

"A cursed forest?" Nate was looking at her askance.

"It happens." Ebony shrugged. "Point is, we can't prove it. If she's right – which she isn't, because she's a rotten little liar – but if she was right, and the chairs were actually harvested from a cursed forest, then we wouldn't have grounds for arrest. She could and has complained that she ordered those chairs from a legitimate, ordinary supplier. And if they were cursed, it's only the unusual magical environment of Vale that is bringing out the full power of that effect."

"You see," Ben had found some kind of chocolate bar in one of his pockets and was nibbling it, sure to keep it well out of Ebony's reach, "if the cursed chairs had been bought anywhere else but Vale, the curse wouldn't have manifested properly. The worst the owners could expect is a couple of splinters and maybe the chair would fall on the cat once – nothing too bad."

"But because it's in Vale," Nate interjected, keen eyes sparkling with annoying competence, "the curse comes out in full. But if this Flora woman didn't curse them herself and imported them legitimately, she can't be held accountable for any damage caused, right?"

"She can be held accountable," Ebony said passionately, curling one hand into a fist and shooting Flora a defiant look from behind the glass, "because the stupid woman obviously cursed the darn things."

Nate scratched his neck. "I don't get it. So we can't charge her, but surely we can get her to stop selling the chairs and recall the ones she's already sold?"

"We did." Ben stowed his chocolate bar. "I slapped her with the warning myself. But now she's claiming she's switched suppliers, and much to her horror," Ben's voice was staccato and sarcastic, "it looks as if these chairs are cursed too."

“Cursed rocking chairs,” Nate repeated dully. “This really is different from my previous job.”

Ben slapped him on the back. “You’ll love it in time.”

Ebony looped her hair behind her ears. “Alright, I’m going in,” she snapped at Ben. “I’ve had enough of this idiotic—”

“Eb,” Ben warned, “don’t be too fiery now. There’s the law, remember.”

She arched an eyebrow, snorted like a bull, and shoved open the glass door of Flora’s Antiques.

“You know,” she heard Ben whisper to Nate behind her, “most of this job is controlling Eb.”

She almost whirled around to swear at Ben, but she caught sight of Flora. The old devil was perched on a white wicker-chair behind the counter, beady eyes staring out over floral-rimmed glasses.

“Dear,” Flora intoned in a creaky voice that sounded like a rusty weathercock shuttling around in the wind, “it’s dear little Ebony.”

Ebony drew to a halt at the counter. She rested one long hand on the wood and started to drum her red fingernails with a steady beat. “Don’t you call me dear.”

Flora looked up with a fake, meek, little smile. “Oh, sorry, darling.”

Ebony snorted. “Look here, we know what you’re doing. It’s got to stop. If you have some strange fetish about furniture that hugs you to death, keep it to yourself, for crying out loud.”

Ben drew up beside Ebony, Nate taking up a position on her other side. She felt hemmed in – or contained, maybe.

“Officer Tate.” Flora smiled up at Ben.

“It’s Detective Tate.”

“You have a new friend.” The old woman’s voice was soft and deceptively friendly.

“I have a new partner,” Ben corrected. “And you, apparently, need a new warning.” Ben produced a folded-up piece of parchment from his pocket. “And here it is.”

“Oh, Detective Tate,” the old woman teetered on the edge of her dirty white wicker-chair, “but I didn’t know, honestly. It was just another accident.”

“Yeah, okay.” Ben’s voice was strained but even. “Don’t let it happen again, Flora.”

Ebony’s palms curled, her fingernails digging ceaselessly into her flesh. They were just going to let the fool get away with it again, weren’t they? So a couple of weeks down the track, she’d sell yet another cursed chair, and some poor old grandfather would get quite a shock while nodding off in front of the news. Sure, Flora hadn’t killed anyone yet, but it was precisely misuse of magic like this that annoyed Ebony more than anything else. It was so pointless.

“Now you listen to me.” Ebony’s voice became darker. The clouds outside began to block out the sun, casting long shadows into the store. “You may not be a witch, Flora, so you won’t have to deal with the Coven. But there are worse things, Flora, much worse.”

“Eb,” Ben hissed sharply in her ear, “don’t do anything stupid.”

Ebony ignored him. “If you keep practicing magic, especially magic like this – magic without a purpose, magic without a story – and you’ll attract things, *horrible* things.”

She was satisfied to see Flora’s bottom-lip quivering.

“But I’m not practicing magic, dear,” Flora tried.

“Oh, of course you aren’t. I’m just saying, hypothetically, if you were – then I’d watch out. You can curse all the chairs you want, getting whatever bizarre kick you get from it. But sooner or later something stronger is going to sniff out your magic and latch onto it like a tentacle in the dark.”

Ben now hooked a hand around Ebony’s arm and pulled her back.

Flora's face was growing as off-color as the chair she sat on. "You get out of here, witch. You can't touch me."

As Ben pulled the fuming Ebony back, Nate stood in front of her, right between Ebony and the counter. He set himself down with the finality and weight of an anchor. "You have your warning, ma'am. Be sure it doesn't happen again."

Flora's aged and inexpertly lipstick-clad lips beamed out a smile. "Oh, thank you, dear. Aren't you a sweet one?"

"Thank you, ma'am," Nate said expressionlessly. "But I suggest you take this warning seriously. It's an official document—"

"Of course it is. I'll take it very seriously."

"Be sure you do." Nate turned and gave Ebony a disappointed look. It said clearly that he couldn't believe she'd had an outburst like that. "I see what you mean," he whispered to Ben. "She does need controlling."

Ben, hand still latched around Ebony's elbow, tried to head for the door.

"That's it, Detective Tate." Flora rocked on the edge of her chair, her grin showing her teeth. "You get rid of that little witch. Horrible warty little hag!"

Ebony's face paled. "Why you little—" she began to shriek.

"Alright," Ben practically picked Ebony up and wrestled her out of the door, "I really wouldn't go saying things like that, Flora, not if you want to stay this side of the law." While Ben's tone wasn't overtly threatening, it had the weight of a judge's gavel.

When Ben finally managed to get the erupting Ebony through the door, he swore like a sailor. "Why, that stupid old woman." He finally put Ebony down. "The department is really going to have to do something about her."

Ebony's top teeth dug so hard into her bottom lip, the flesh turned white from lack of blood. "Errgh!" She stamped the ground. "How dare she."

"You handled that situation very well, I thought." Nate rounded on Ebony.

"Oh, get—" she began.

"Alright then, that's all done." Ben clapped his hands together loudly. "It's time you and I get back to the station, rookie. I've got an in-tray of ordinary crime and two doughnuts sitting on my desk."

"So, we're done here, then?" Nate shot a careful look at Ebony.

"No, we're going to go back in there and hex that stupid—" Ebony began.

"Yep, that's a wrap," Ben said, his tone saying it all.

## Chapter 4

Ebony pulled the brush through her hair. It ran as smoothly and quickly as a flag through the air. There had never once been a knot in Ebony Elizabeth Bell's hair, and heaven forbid there ever would be. She only ever brushed it to liven it up – to give it bounce and body, and to remind it of its magical roots.

She hummed to herself as she picked a pair of earrings off her dressing table. They were silver dangling things with beautiful blue stones that sparkled like stars on a dark night. Once she'd finished hooking the earrings in, she selected three bracelets and crammed them over her hands. They were all golden, gleeful, and just so pretty.

Still humming, her hand hovered over her collection of rings as she wondered which to choose. Rings were always difficult accessories, especially for a witch. The problem with rings was they were, well, ring-like. They were circles. Circles were powerful symbols for witches. Circles magnified, concentrated, and strengthened anything that lay at their center. While a bangle was technically a circle, and for that reason also had its power – rings were worse. They were worse because of where you wore them – on your fingers. And fingers could point. A point was like a circle – it concentrated, it restricted. *It magnified*. So a ring worn on a finger was a powerful thing indeed, especially considering which finger you chose to wear it on.

Ebony sighed, deciding not to wear a ring at all today. It was too hard, and anyhow, she hadn't even begun to decide what outfit to wear, and it was already 10:30.

Though most people chose what to wear before they picked which accessories could match their outfit, she always did things the other way around. She picked her accessories first and her clothes last. Why? Because Ebony changed accessories depending on her moods, not her tops.

"Now, now, now," she said softly as she walked into her walk-in wardrobe. "What kind of day will today be?" she asked a pair of jeans as she ran a hand over the tough fabric. "Is today a jeans day? Will I be sitting down at restaurants and walking in the rain?" She pointed over to a pair of cowboy boots. "Will I be stalking down the street, hair flaring behind me?" She tugged at a '50s-style red dress. "Will I be posing on the tops of stairs?" She grabbed a white hat. "Will I be staring sadly as the rain drizzles down the windows?"

She giggled. By far, this was her favorite part of the day: dressing up. Her father never could understand why she always took so long to get ready in the morning. He'd always have a shower, slap on his uniform, tug his hat over his hair, kiss Ebony's mother, and walk out the door.

Ebony, on the other hand, sometimes took a full hour to decide what to wear and how to do her hair and make-up. Only her mother understood why. A witch had to be careful about how she met the day in the morning. Wear a floral dress, and don't be surprised if someone gives you flowers. Wear winter boots in summer, and don't be surprised if it rains all day. Go to breakfast in an evening gown, and you should expect someone to run past and dump a cocktail in your hands.

She always had to be careful about what she wore. So it was quite lucky she had such a vast collection of clothes to choose from.

"Okay." She ran a hand down her face. "What do I have to do today?" she asked her assembled collection, playing with the bangles around her wrists. "Well, I have to go to the post office to buy more tough bags for the store – I also need more pens." She ticked things off her imaginary list using her French manicured pinkie. "Then I have to go to Wonda's Witch Wonders and buy more candles for Friday's séance." Ebony looped her long hair around her hands, lifting it up off her neck and letting it fall down again softly. "Then I have

all those files to look through for Ben.” She ran a hand through her rack of dresses. “Then I have to go down to the police depot and remove curses from all that jewelry.”

She nodded. “Okay, that’s it. Well, it’s really simple then, isn’t it? I have just too much to do today, and I just don’t want to be bothered by anyone when I’m just so busy.” She clicked her fingers. “So I simply must wear white.”

She grabbed a pretty, pure-white summer’s dress. It was a light, but thankfully opaque, cotton. The shoulders were tied into bows at the neck. It pinched in at the waist and flared out at the hips.

She also grabbed a pair of white high-heels – not too tall but not too short.

Finally, she grabbed the white hat from before – the one with the wide, stiff brim.

Now she knew how to meet the day, Ebony dressed quickly and was out of the door in less than five minutes.

“Ah ha,” she said as she closed and locked the door behind her. “Wear a summer’s dress and invite in the sunshine.” She angled her face up to the perfect blue sky above.

It was a dazzling day. There wasn’t a cloud in sight, and the sky was a bright shade of azure blue. The slightest breeze gently moved the leaves on the trees and played against the tips of Ebony’s loose hair. The background hum of insects filled the air, and there was such a pleasant vibe to things, she felt like she was off in the country somewhere – not smack bang in the middle of a city.

Ebony gave a happy sigh as she walked along the street, her heels clicking softly against the pavement.

She made quick time to the post office. The day simply moved around her – not dragging or sticking, like some days did, but gliding gracefully like a bird on the wing.

“You’re in luck,” one of the post-office-workers declared as Ebony walked in, “Bob was late this morning and still hasn’t delivered to your shop. We can have him deliver these postbags and pens to you if you’d like?”

She smiled appreciatively. “You mean rather than have to walk two boxes back to my shop, you can have someone else actually drive them there? Well,” she said, beaming at the man, “I think that would be lovely.”

“Okay, then.” The old man tipped his hat at her in a gentlemanly fashion. “You have a nice day there.”

Ebony waved at him as she left the shop. “Oh,” she touched the rim of her hat, adding a wink, “I think I will.”

By the time she made it back to her shop, she was literally shining. It was just such a nice day. Everything was going right – the sun was bright, birds were singing, people were smiling. It was almost the type of day where nothing could go wrong.

Almost.

Ebony announced a cheerful, “Good morning,” to her store as she opened the door.

It replied with a warm silence, dust motes drifting through the bright sunlight shining through the open door.

“It’s going to be a good day today, Harry,” she said as she walked behind the counter, retrieving a file she’d left there. “All I have to do is look through these files for Ben and do a tiny little bit of work down at the depot,” she patted the counter, “and then I’m free. To do what?” she continued the one-sided conversation with just as much engagement and passion as she would with an ordinary person. “I simply don’t know. I might just go down to the Turkish takeaway, grab a bag of pastries and Turkish delight, and go catch a movie.”

She bit her bottom lip lightly, securing the file under her arm. “But for now, I bid you adieu.” Ebony winked, grabbed a candy from the glass bowl on her counter, and walked back out of her store. While she could easily stay there and complete her work, leaving her store open for the rare customer who might walk in, she simply had to get out today. She had to sit

at a nice cafe somewhere and stare at all the happy people from over the rim of her chocolate milkshake.

By the time she found a cafe she liked the look of, it was pushing past midday. She would spend an hour or so on these cases for Ben then pick up her candles and finally head to the depot.

A handsome waiter handed Ebony her towering chocolate milkshake, a pressed-lipped grin on his face. "Here you go, ma'am," he said softly. "A lovely drink for a lovely lady," he added, widening his smile.

"Aren't we charming?" She flashed him a mysterious wink and quickly sipped her ice-cold drink.

When she was sure no one was paying her too much attention, she opened the file on the cast-iron table. Though she was never public about her work and was certain Ben would have a fit if he knew what she was doing, Ebony didn't care today. She was always sure to cast a babbledegook spell over all her important documents. It ensured that if any non-magical person, or someone outside the confines of the Pact, saw the documents, all they'd see was a bunch of images and words that meant nothing at all. So what did it matter if she chose to read in the sun, rather than in her stuffy store?

Ebony ran a finger around the rim of her glass, collecting the excess chocolate sauce and popping it in her mouth. "What have we here?"

There were seven cases in total, ranging from the innocent to the criminally bizarre. In one case, a university student had become too interested in some reproduction of a rare grimoire he'd found on the Internet, and he'd accidentally summoned a monkey-demon. The demon had quickly gotten out of his control, trashed his basement apartment, and escaped, only to be found later by police taunting the other monkeys at the zoo.

The student in question had been brought in, given a warning, and had voluntarily agreed to have his future Internet searches filtered for potential accidental-zoological-summoning spells. The monkey had promptly been sent back from whence it had come, but only after it had managed to steal two police hats, one badge, four cups of coffee, and Ben's lucky tie.

Ebony giggled to herself. It was remarkable how much of the crime they dealt with was essentially random. Just accidents from people who had no idea what they were doing. They'd run into a spell in a chat room, buy a strange book from a store, or pick up cursed souvenirs from their overseas travels.

By and large, they didn't mean to do these things, and they certainly had no idea what magic was. It was all just accidental, which, while it was sometimes annoying, was better than the alternative. Accidents were random; patterns weren't. Patterns always linked back to purposes. Patterns had points, had meaning, and were part of stories. And stories... they had power.

Ebony remembered, with an uncomfortable tingle along her spine, that terrible day she'd had with Flora several weeks ago. Sheesh, that fool was infuriating. She had no clue, simply no clue. Ebony had warned her, in all sincerity, that powerful magic performed without patterns attracted... others. The one-time, accidental cases Ebony was looking at now weren't the same thing. A ratty kid in a basement who accidentally summons the monkey of death is only going to make that type of mistake once. And while it is technically possible that some passing force might latch onto his purposeless magic, it is unlikely. But the more someone practiced purposeless magic, the more likely it became that they'd attract attention from all the wrong kinds of creatures.

Flora was playing a very stupid game. She was playing with something she didn't understand. Like a child playing with a lighter and petrol, she'd be surprised when it all blew up in her face.

It was the entire point of magic, after all, that it had a purpose. Magic was used to make the unlikely possible. It brought about mini-miracles, small pockets of the incredible. Just like a miracle, magic had to be part of a story. You called on magic when you needed something, when you stared into the face of the undesirable-probable and somehow plucked the impossible out of it. Magic was at its best when it was finding fire-swords for heroes in need or reducing the shackles of the bound to sudden piles of dust or giving wings to the damsel flung off the wall of the castle.

Magic had to be part of a story for it to be appreciated as magical. If magic was purposeless, if it happened for no reason, it was nothing more than chaos.

It was the first lesson of raw magic: give it purpose, and you'll bend it to your will. Practice without a goal, and a stronger creature than you will take it from you – bending you into the arc of their own greater story.

This was the risk Flora ran: her pattern-less rambles of magic would be picked up by a creature – a creature far more powerful than Flora. They would absorb her into their own story, taking her magic for their own, directing it along their own lines, for their own purposes. She would become a sideline, a footnote, a character in the background. She would be owned, taken over, and absorbed. She would be transmuted from gold into lead.

Magic, in this way, was like marbles. Unless your aim was steady, right, and true – the person with more marbles would win and claim what you had as their own.

Marbles, creatures, magic, and a whole lot of trouble. Flora simply had *no* idea.

Ebony shuddered.

It all depended on what creature took hold of Flora, too. Being owned was one thing, but being taken by a full-demon of Hell or a vicious wizard or a homicidal witch.... Well, it wouldn't be pretty.

Ebony took the last sip of her milkshake, returned it to the metal table with a clang, and wiped her lips with delicate pats of her fingers.

She closed the file, satisfied she was up-to-speed. She always liked to stay up to date with the cases she wasn't directly involved with just so she could keep the general pattern of random magical-crime in her mind.

She was like a film editor sitting on the carpet with every frame of a movie cut up and sprawled out before her. If she could keep every single scene in her mind, she was more likely to be able to predict how they all fit together – *if* they fit together.

"Okay," Ebony said softly, speaking to the remainder of the day, "on with the show."

She walked gingerly to her next appointment, though not in the same happy daze as she'd met the morning with. Though she was ready to dismiss it, some of the shine was gone. The sun was still warm and lovely, but the breeze was picking up ever so slightly, her skirt playing against her legs with tugs and pulls.

There were even a few small wisps of clouds in the sky, dotting the edge of the horizon like specks of dust on an otherwise clean windscreen.

She strode to Wonda's Witch Wonders, one hand securing her hat in place as the wind picked up even more. The other hand pressed her file into her chest protectively.

Wonda's Witch Wonders was situated down a dark laneway in the industrial district of town.

It was such a strange and dingy part of town for a store, but she understood the rationale for its location. It was out of the way, remote, and unlikely to be chanced upon. Vale may have been sitting right atop a magical portal with incredible power, but ordinary Valians would be no more likely to believe in witches than Francis Bacon would. They had no idea of the secret underground of magic that pulsed through their city, and Ebony was sure they would like it to stay that way. Magic was confronting and made people question their reality in fundamental ways, just like Nathan Andrew Wall had been forced to do.

Ebony smiled to herself cheekily. It had now been almost a month since Nate had transferred to the Vale Police Department, and watching him come to terms with magic was as entertaining as the circus was to a five-year-old on a candy-high.

He would sway fitfully between being in control and being hopelessly out of his depth. Just the other day he'd managed to take down a possessed motorbike all by himself, only to stare in slack-jawed horror when a cursed mannequin had taken a stab at him with her plastic-pointed hands.

He was such a peculiar mix – strong, in control, and as abrasive as steel wool. Yet, much to her disappointment, he was beginning to settle in. Ben had stopped calling him rookie and had even started ensuring Ebony didn't steal Nate's donuts off his desk. The office ladies all said warm welcomes to him as he walked in every morning, and Ebony was sure Barney from the depot was doing an extra special job of keeping Nate's gun cleaned and serviced.

People liked Nate, for some reason. Ebony had no idea why. While he'd been fun to tease at first, surely his awfully arrogant edge irritated people as much as it got to her?

There was no denying one thing, unfortunately – Nate was attractive. The man was as handsome as you could imagine, which accounted for his popularity amongst the female officers. But seriously, even they should be able to see that behind the face, the competence, and the fiery sense of right was a lump of something astoundingly irritating. Fun enough to tease, but Ebony was starting to get the terrible feeling that Nate only let her tease him when he felt like it. Rather than Ebony being able to push his buttons and sit back and watch him splutter with frustration like an overloading robot, Nate would sometimes shut her down altogether. He'd get this tunnel vision, this pin-point concentration, and block her out completely.

Ebony sniffed, rounding the corner to Wonda's alleyway. She strode up to the pale-green door and knocked carefully on it.

Wonda's shop didn't have advertising. It didn't need it. Everyone who had any business knowing about magic knew about Wonda's Witch Wonders. She had the cheapest and largest range of ceremonial candles in town, and she was always willing to order things in.

The door creaked open. "Come in, Ebony," a clear voice said.

Ebony patted the door gratefully. "Thanks, Ruby."

Wonda's Witch Wonders was a lot like Harry's second-hand Bookstore. Both stores were possessed by the spirits of previous owners. But Ruby, unlike the cantankerous Harry, was a soft, gentle spirit who always ensured there wasn't a speck of dust on the candle you'd picked up and that there was just enough light filtering in from the medieval chandelier above so you could easily read the ingredients list on all the herbal teas and tinctures.

Ruby talked, too, unlike Harry who would remain silent for months on end until he'd rattle in Ebony's ear, "There's a pigeon stuck in my chimney. Go tug it out, girl."

"How are you, Ruby?" Ebony ran a hand over the line of beaded curtains that hung close to the door. Each bead glinted under the soft flame of the chandelier.

Wonda's Witch Wonders was a large store, set on one sprawling level in a room with no windows. It had only one giant cast-iron chandelier to light the whole place.

The chandelier didn't run on electricity. It beamed out with a hundred lit candles. It cast such a soft, magical glow, Ebony had always fancied taking one of the hand-woven blankets from off the shelves and curling up for a nap. She'd probably dream of dragons, she reasoned, or knights in shining armor.

"Well," Ruby answered with a tinkle of the beaded curtains, "I am well. So are you – you are beaming."



Ebony smiled. It was one thing to receive a compliment from a human. Humans always wanted things, and you could never be sure they meant it. But when a disembodied spirit said you were looking particularly fine, you could believe it.

“Thank you.” Ebony’s tone was joyous, appreciative, and genuine.

“Here for candles?” Ruby spoke through the shine of the hundred candles above. “Or love potions?”

Ebony chortled. “Love potions! Since when have I ever had to buy a love potion from you, Ruby? I really don’t think it’s possible for anyone not to love me.” She flapped a hand at her chest.

Ruby didn’t answer.

“I’m here for candles.” Ebony walked confidently over to the seven shelves packed with candles of all shapes, sizes, and origins. She picked up a curious eye-shaped candle from Korea. It was black with a suspended golden orb in the center. “You have new stock,” she said distractedly. “I have to say, I like it.”

“We are soon to be in the Month of Rites,” Ruby intoned through the still air of the shop. “So I’ve been sure to stock up.”

Ebony nodded. “Of course. I’ve been so busy. I’d almost forgotten—”

“A witch can never forget the duties of the Coven,” Ruby said automatically.

Ebony put up a hand. “I was joking. Of course I haven’t forgotten about the Month of Rites, and I’m well aware of my duties. I guess all I’m saying is I haven’t put a lot of thought into it this year. I’ve had so many other distractions this past month that I haven’t really been with it.”

“The Month of Rites is the most important time of all the year,” Ruby spoke through the mouth of a skull candle, its lifeless eyes twinkling. “You must give it all the importance you have.”

Ebony smiled politely. “Look, I know; I’m a witch too, remember? I guess I’ve just gotten side-tracked.”

“Then now you must get re-tracked. The Month of Rites imbues your magic with purpose. Without the Rite, Ebony, you are at risk. If you do not know which direction you travel in, you cannot know when you become lost or when another leads you astray,” Wonda said ominously. “So it is very important. What will you Rite this year?”

Ebony picked up a simple beeswax candle and traced a finger over the lattice pattern embossed into its sides. “I don’t know... I’m not sure what I want for the coming year.”

“You must write it before you Rite it,” Ruby spoke again through the candles above.

“I know, I know. If I am not careful to write very clearly what I want, then I leave myself open to being rewritten. I do know all this, Ruby, honestly. And I’ll figure it out. But right now,” she grabbed four of the candles, “I’ve got so much work to do! I’ll take these four candles,” she gestured with them, “and if you could have them, plus a box of cleansing tea delivered to my store, that would be great.”

“Of course,” Ruby said. “I will have the shop imps deliver them tonight.”

“Thanks, Ruby.” Ebony ran a hand down her dress. “And I promise I’ll give more thought to my Rite.”

“What is the right rite of a witch, she will write before the final night of the Rite,” Ruby said automatically, her voice intoning along the circles of dust whirling through the air.

“I know, I know. I’ll see you later, Ruby.” With that, Ebony patted the handle of the door fondly before walking out and closing it behind her.

...

By the time Ebony made it to the Vale Police depot, it was already late afternoon. The wind had picked up, she noted with more than a few harrumphs as she tried to keep one hand on her hat, one hand on her file and one hand on her skirt – which proved impossible.

“Oh, go away, silly wind,” she’d berated the weather with pressed teeth. “You were such a nice day this morning.” She looked up as more and more pale clouds gathered along the horizon. “And now look at you. I wouldn’t be surprised if it rained tonight. No, scratch that, poured.”

Ebony walked into the depot by ducking under one of the large garage doors as it closed behind a departing car. The depot was a large, stout building that sat underneath the police station. The station was a tall, elegant building with the soft lines, blacks, and creams of the Art Deco period. The depot sat around and underneath the police building, with street access on all four sides.

The witches had enjoyed a say in the design of the current police station. When the last one burnt down during the late ‘20s, the witches had been sure to run a careful magical eye over the architectural designs for the new one. They suggested building it in the center of a crossroads. It ensured the building had a view of, and access to, everything that lay around it. The corners of the building were rounded off, too, in usual Art Deco style – a feature the witches agreed with. What, with the round edges and central access, the police station was practically a circle inside a circle of roads – which made for a powerful building, indeed.

The witches had ensured that etched onto every single supporting beam of the structure were powerful protection symbols. They’d even consecrated the ground with a month-long ritual that involved a lot less nudity and wine than you might expect from your average witch get-together.

Suffice to say, the station was well protected, and it had never been under direct threat.

She always felt comfortable here. The police station felt like home. It was partly due to the powerful protective magic, but also due to her childhood. She had such fond memories of following her father around, teddy bear in one hand, her father’s large hand clasped over the other. Everyone had always been so friendly. People had patted her on the head, offered her sweets, and even let her play around in the uniform cupboard.

Despite the wind and clouds, part of Ebony’s smile returned. “Show me some cursed rings,” she announced to the room as she entered.

“Ebony!” Barney greeted her with his over-the-top, showman’s voice. “How are you going, girl?”

Ebony clicked her fingers. “Fine and dandy. How’s the old Barney?”

Barney made a show of patting himself down. “I don’t feel dead, so I must be okay, I guess.”

“You’re the best police officer I know,” Ebony chuckled. “So where’s all that cursed jewelry?”

“Around back. You’re going to like this one, Eb,” Barney said as he unlocked the door to the evidence cage. “A pair of cursed wedding rings.”

“Eek, what do they do?”

“They just had a return spell on them, I think. I mean, I don’t know this magic stuff, but whichever happy couple would buy them, they’d annul within a week and sell the rings back to the jeweler they’d bought them from.”

“Ha, very charming. Casting spells on your goods to get guaranteed returns. Surely there’s a better way?”

Barney shrugged. “Hey, don’t ask me to try to understand this. This is for you witches.” Barney patted his chest. “Me, I’m just a regular guy.”

Ebony reached down and carefully picked up both of the rings Barney had pulled from an evidence bag. "It's not my stuff, Barns. There's a lot more to magic than witches."

"Yeah, I know." He handed her a washable marker and grinned.

Ebony took the marker, dumped the rings on the table, and started to draw careful, precise symbols around them. It was just a regular child's marker from the local newsagent, but what she was writing with it was anything but regular. She concentrated as she drew a perfect freehand circle around the rings.

She closed her eyes until she could hear a snap ringing through her mind. It was the spell breaking away from the rings like a ship from its mooring.

It was a very simple spell and hardly took much time or effort to break, which was just how Ebony liked her work.

"Done?" Barney asked from beside her.

Ebony replied by picking up the rings and dumping them in his hands. "I'm sure the next couple who buys these rings will break up for all their own reasons, rather than magical interference."

"Now come on, Eb." Barney shrugged his shoulders. "You've got to be more romantic. The couple doesn't have to break up. Let 'em stay married forever, live happily ever after, that kind of stuff."

Ebony waved him off, standing up with a smile. "That's your story, pet. Now, I'm more than ready to go home."

As they walked out of the evidence cage, she could hear the muffled sounds of gunfire. There was a shooting range in the depot, which the officers used to keep up their practice. Ebony used to go there with her father sometimes – when she'd been old enough. Regardless of the fact she was her mother's daughter – a witch through and through – Ebony's father had endeavored to teach Ebony everything he knew, making Ebony the only witch who was equally versed in hand-to-hand combat, guns, and tracking as she was in ceremonies, rituals, and summoning.

Barney must have heard the gunfire, as an enormous grin spread across his face. "Hey, Eb. You've got to see this." He tugged her arm. "This guy's almost as good as your dad."

Ebony's eyes narrowed. "Who?"

"The rookie, of course."

"Detective Nate?" Ebony couldn't hide the surprise in her voice. "Unlikely."

"Come on, have a look." Barney waved her forward as he crossed the concrete floor to the shooting range.

Ebony felt her lips tighten into a frown as she followed him.

Barney opened the door, ushering her inside.

There were several other officers, most of whom were female, gathered around one of the shooting cubicles. They were all standing back behind the line, their faces alight with dumb, excessively girly wonder as Detective Nate shot bullseye after bullseye.

"Twerp," Ebony said under her breath, narrowing her eyes at Nate's back.

He was out of his usual jacket, the sleeves of his white shirt rolled up to his elbows and that damn black tie of his sitting just as flat as usual against his torso. The look on his face was one of careful but easy concentration.

Ebony's nose twitched. There wasn't a drop of sweat twinkling against his brow, because it all just looked too easy for him. What was worse, what was far worse was how darn attractive he looked.

"Stupid little—" she began to mutter.

Nate stepped back, clicking the safety on his gun and running an arm over his brow to wick away the non-existent sweat.

He smiled at his assembled fans behind him and glanced over at Ebony.

She narrowed her eyes, tilted her head up, and whipped her hat off. “Barney,” she said in a very loud voice, “you know it’s been absolutely ages since I’ve fired one of those things.”

“You mean a gun, Eb – don’t you?” Barney asked, taking the hat.

She waved a hand. “One of those things.”

Nate hadn’t said a word yet, but his brow was furrowed with amusement.

Ebony waited patiently, her hand held out until Barney furnished her with an unloaded gun and a clip.

“Have you actually ever fired *one of those things*?” Nate mimicked her voice perfectly.

Ebony didn’t answer, just walked into a cubicle, not bothering with the mufflers or other protective gear because, after all, she was a witch. She waited for the target to come up and emptied the clip, bang into the center of the bullseye.

She smiled with satisfaction. She was just as accurate – if not better – than the silly Detective Nate.

She turned, looking more triumphant, she hoped, than Julius Caesar upon conquering Gaul.

Barney gave the obligatory cheer and woot. But Nate, Nate just stood there.

She couldn’t tell if he was impressed, shocked, annoyed, or bored. But he certainly wasn’t groveling at her awesome skill, which was what she had aimed for.

“What?” he said, unwrapping a piece of gum from his pocket and popping it in his mouth. “Am I supposed to be impressed?”

Ebony narrowed her eyes, choosing to answer with a haughty silence.

“Because I’m not.” Nate chewed the gum from side-to-side. “You’re a witch, after all.”

“I didn’t use my magic,” she assured him. “I’m just that good.” She gestured a hand toward the target.

“Right, of course you are.”

Oh, lord. She hated it when he said that. Every second word Nate said was a sarcastic, “*Right.*”

“Na,” Barney walked off behind Nate, grabbing something from the wall, “Eb can’t use magic to shoot – it’s one of the restricted magics. Her old man was DI Bell. He still holds the unbeaten record for accuracy.” Barney dusted the photo he’d grabbed from the wall with the corner of his sleeve and smiled down at it.

“Your father was Detective Inspector Derrick Bell?” Finally, Nate looked impressed, but only mildly.

Ebony curtsied. “Yes, indeed. And, like father like daughter, he taught me everything I know about those funny gun things.”

“Right.” Nate began to roll down his sleeves, still chewing on his gum. “Things make a lot more sense now.”

She couldn’t keep the smile off her face. She’d won.

“I always wondered why you got this job.” He began to push past her.

“Because I’m trained in both ordinary and magical forms of combat.” Ebony drummed her fingers against her chest.

“Nope,” Nate put a hand on the door, not bothering to turn around, “nepotism.”

“Why you little—” Ebony began.

Barney gave a sharp laugh and handed back her hat, taking the gun. “That guy’s a laugh.”

“That guy is just so—”

The door to the shooting range opened suddenly, and a very serious Ben dashed inside. His face was that shade of white it always took when Ben realized that not even his usual sense of cheer would see him through.

“What?” She crammed the hat onto her head. “You look like you’ve just seen a—”

“Ghost,” Ben finished her sentence. “Yeah, we’ve just had a report of someone doing a Death Summoning out at the graveyard.”

Ebony’s hand froze on her hat, her face setting like starch in the sun. “Blessed be Hecate,” she said softly, words shaky.

“I’ll start the car.”

## Chapter 5

Ebony felt her heart pounding as she half-jogged, half-ran beside Ben. One hand was clenched, fingernails scraping over her palm. The other hand removed the wide-brimmed hat from her head and unceremoniously dumped it onto the concrete floor of the depot. “What do we know?” Her voice was icy, practically chilled to zero Kelvin from her usually sunny disposition.

“Not a lot.” Ben ran a hand over his mouth, eyes rounded with shock. “But this is really bad, right, Eb? I mean, do we call in the Coven?”

“They’ll be there... if it gets serious enough.”

That was the thing about the Coven. The entire reason they’d set up their special relationship with the police department in the first place was so the police had the means and knowledge to deal with magical crime on their own. A witch was kept on as a liaison. But mostly the police were expected to deal with whatever crazy, hideous, and unfortunate magical maladies might strike the citizens of Vale without calling in the big guns.

If, and only if, something got completely out of hand and the sanctity of the Portal itself was at risk would the Coven come in. They might send more representatives – adding a couple more witches to the force. But the Coven – as the ruling council of the witches – would only be seen on the streets of Vale if Hell or its equivalent bubbled up from the depths. The Coven wasn’t there to save the ordinary citizens of Vale from the everyday mishaps of magic. They were there to save people’s souls from the once-in-a-nightmare offerings of damnation.

“Look,” Ebony unclenched her hand to grab the passenger door handle, “this is bad, Ben, I’m sure it is. But you know the rules. The Coven isn’t going to bother getting out of their rocking chairs and putting down their knitting for this.” She was about to pile into the car when she saw Nate occupying her seat. “What?” she spluttered. “That’s my sea—”

“Just get in the back,” Ben’s voice was curt and sharp.

Ebony, for once, did what she was told.

“But they’ll send reinforcements, right?” Ben continued as he gunned the engine.

“If things get out of hand.” She kicked off her high heels, shoving them under the seat with her feet. She really, really liked those heels. They were white, soft, and reminded her of the glamor of the ‘50s. They went perfectly with this dress, and she wasn’t about to let the tormented ghost of some recently-deceased soul ruin them. A girl had to have boundaries, a witch doubly so.

“I don’t get it.” Nate looked at Ebony through the rear-vision mirror, even though it was angled toward Ben as he sped up the ramp and out of the depot, barely waiting for the roller doors to open. “If this is serious enough to get you to follow orders, why don’t we just call for this backup now? We can’t go into a dangerous—”

“Oh, you don’t understand.” Ebony harrumphed, pushing further into the seat behind her and crossing her arms tightly over her chest. This wasn’t how today was supposed to go. According to her wonderful morning plan, around about now, she should be sauntering off to grab Turkish delight and catch a film at the old refurbished cinema at the end of her street.

She stared out the window, her expression cold. “The entire point of the Pact, the entire point of me acting as your consultant, is so the Coven can keep their interference to a minimum.”

“You mean they have better things to do with their time than help us mere mortals stay this side of death?” Nate scoffed from the front seat. “Sounds real nice.”

She barely held back the urge to give the back of his seat a sharp kick. “No. Look, if we called the Coven every single time an old grandmother picked up a possessed coconut

from the fruit market, then don't you think the rest of Vale would catch on? I don't know if you've realized this yet, but not every witch looks like me."

Nate mumbled something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like, "No one else looks like you."

She ignored it. "Not all witches have a stunning sense of fashion, excellent jewelry, and, I don't know, a face at all. The Coven consists of the most powerful of the witches, and let me tell you, when you get to that stage, you physically change. You don't look like an ordinary human anymore, because guess what? You aren't human anymore. You've given yourself over to power completely, and it has seeped through every cell, every pore, and every centimeter of your body. So, Detective Nate," she stressed his name like an irate principal calling the dunce to the front of the class, "if you want a group of faceless, wild hags terrorizing downtown every other day, then I can tell you how to contact the Coven. But if you'd like the citizens of Vale to remain peacefully ignorant about the true nature of their city, then you'll have to stick with me."

Nate stared at her squarely through the rear-vision mirror, his gaze as even as a builder's level. "Right, of course. But if we need it, we have backup, right? Even if it's a bunch of toothless, faceless, old ha—"

"Oh, shut up." She really did kick the back of his seat now. "I might get away with calling them hags, Detective, but a word of advice – never follow me for behavioral directions. And yes, we have the backup, if we need it. But it will come at a cost."

Costs. She rolled the word around in her mind. Though she wasn't about to announce it to the annoying detective, the costs she was warning about wouldn't fall on his wide shoulders. No, they'd fall on her appropriately proportioned, much cuter shoulders instead. Maybe that's why she was so angry. She was going into a hazardous situation knowing that if, or when, it all went to Hell, she'd be the one dragged down with it. While the police department might do an internal review if something went horribly wrong, Ebony would be called up in front of the Coven. The Coven... weren't a very lenient bunch.

Ebony took a steadying breath. There was only one thing she could be thankful for... maybe. Of the nine witches who sat on the Vale Coven, she knew one quite well. Fantastically well, in fact. Avery Bell, after all, was Ebony's mother.

Which meant Ebony faced the exceedingly uncomfortable fact that if she failed today, she wouldn't just have to wipe the egg off her face and submit to the punishments of the Coven; she'd have to explain it all to her mother as well.

Ebony shifted the left strap of her dress in an attempt to make it sit straight against her shoulder. Lord, she hoped everything would go well, but she had a twisting feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Tonight would end with a bang.

"Why don't you kick the back of my chair again?" Nate suggested, his voice harsh and sarcastic. "You'll find that comes with consequences as well."

Ebony thought she caught a glimpse of Ben rolling his eyes from the driver's seat. "You two are like my kids – annoying as hell when you're together but strangely companionable when you are apart."

She didn't reply, just bore her practiced evil eye through the back of Nate's chair, hoping to give him at the very least that horrible sensation of being watched, if not a mild headache.

Silence fell again but only in words. The sound of the tires grinding over the road, Ben's hands sliding across the wheel as he took corners too fast, and the general hubbub of the rest of the traffic made sure things weren't all that quiet. Still, Ebony started to feel the silence around her. It prickled up her arms like a spider in the night. It was that strange silence that would fall over a group when they were waiting for the yet-unsaid to make itself

heard. Only problem was, she realized as she scratched her arms, there was an edge to this silence, an expectant edge.

“So,” Nate said with a tortured sigh, “are you going to tell me what the consequences are, or are you going to leave me hanging? Tell me, consultant witch, what’s going to happen to us if we have to call in for backup?”

Ebony was no longer listening to his words – she was listening to the pronounced silences that punctuated them like hail before a storm. “Shhh,” she said sharply. “Do you hear that?” She put a hand flat on the window, repositioning herself so she could get a better view of the sky outside.

Things were growing dark. Not the natural, welcome dark that drew on into the night. This one came from the brewing storm clouds above. – the very same wisps along the horizon Ebony had dismissed at midday were now collecting into a wall of blue-gray menace.

“What?” Nate said, more irritated than interested. “I don’t hear anything.”

“Precisely.” Ebony bit her lip. “It’s going to start raining in a second,” she predicted.

Sure enough, as Ben slowed down at a set of lights, his fingers drumming repetitively on the leather steering wheel, the sky opened up. Tiny droplets of rain started to hit the roof of the car, slide down the windows, and streak the pavement outside. They began to grow fatter as the seconds passed until Ben slid a hand over the wipers, turning them on with a practiced move.

“You think I’m supposed to be impressed by that?” Nate intoned, his voice drawn out. “It doesn’t take a witch to realize clouds like that—”

Ebony clicked her fingers with a poignant snap. “And then thunder.”

The heavens opened up with a roar. Though the thunder wasn’t close, it still managed to jangle the lucky-charm Ben had wound around his rear-vision mirror. Ebony had given him that charm. It was a set of three golden bells on a tiny silver chain. Though it was just something she’d picked up from a trinket store, and it didn’t actually have any magical credibility, Ben swore by it. That was enough, Ebony knew, to make it thoroughly magical anyway.

Now those little bells jingled with a fitful dance as the thunder roared above.

“How did you know that?” Nate turned in his seat when the thunder abated.

“It’s not done yet.” Ebony angled her face up as if confident she could stare right through the top of the car and out at the stormy sky above. She couldn’t, of course, but that wasn’t the point. “This is going to be one hell of a storm.”

“Sit straight in your seat,” Ben said quickly, clapping a hand on Nate’s shoulder and dragging him back around. “I’m about to hit the highway and hit it hard.”

“Atta boy,” Ebony said appreciatively. That was the great thing about Ben. Well, one of the great things about him. Though you wouldn’t know it, his father had been somewhat of a misfit – running bootleg-alcohol around Vale as a young man. Ben’s father had gotten quite the reputation for driving like a bat out of Hell, to borrow a phrase. A skill he’d passed on to each of his sons. Though Ben, for the most part, would drive like an ordinary police officer ought, during times of high-speed-need, Ben knew exactly where to put his foot.

“Seriously,” Nate said, hand on the handle above the passenger’s side window in an attempt to keep himself from falling out of his seat, “how did you know there was going to be thunder?”

Ebony sighed. She didn’t like having to explain all her magical, mysterious ways. She liked the shiny allure that reminded everyone she wasn’t just something ordinary – she was a witch. For the most part, the rest of the police department respected it. They didn’t pester her every five seconds for an explanation about her wondrous powers. They just asked her to do things. She did them – end of the story. They let the magic live, she reminded herself, by not prodding it to fit into explanations all the time.



Then the idiot Chevalier had to come along – Detective Nathan Wall – and he was so cram-packed with questions, she was starting to feel like a full-time kindergarten teacher.

If he wasn't being rude and insensitive, he was asking her to explain her every move.

"Does it matter? I mean, I'm a witch – isn't that explanation enough?"

"No," he said blankly. "Because I asked how you knew, not why you knew."

Ebony gave a very loud, very obvious sigh. "Why do you even want to know? So you can debunk it and offer up some better, Detective Wall pre-approved explanation that's had all the magic stripped out of it?"

"Blimey, you'd think I'm asking you for a kidney. All I'm asking—"

"Is for me to explain something that can't be explained. I'd rather give you the kidney. There's something you obviously don't get about magic, and it's frankly doing my head in. You don't get to think about it in your ordinary everyday ways. Magic isn't the same as newspapers, coffee, and cold fusion. It doesn't fit into convenient definitions that you pin up alongside science and reason for easy and ready comparison. Magic isn't understandable – but that doesn't make it unbelievable, either. Magic, Detective Wall, isn't a giant lollipop-covered cake-house in the forest. It's not silly tales of golden hair and porridge. It's not fairy godmothers giving their charges ridiculously specific curses. That type of nonsense has been stamped out. No, magic is when you catch a glimpse through a window into another world." She could feel her cheeks reddening as the conversation took hold of her, the words bubbling to get out like magma from an erupting volcano. "Though I doubt you've ever had such an experience, as you're as square and blank as a bathroom tile. But magic is little moments of wonder, different from all that other rubbish that tumbles through your day – little moments full of a prickly power that make you amazed at life's possibilities rather than routines. Magic is magical." Ebony took an immense breath and sat there, daring Nate to respond to such a sudden soulful outburst.

He didn't immediately reply with a well-rehearsed, "Really, of course." In fact, it took him some time to respond at all. "I know the feeling, Ebony. Trust me."

That's all he said. Short, careful, and precise. Very not like Detective Nate.

How dare he just leave it there. What on Earth did he mean, anyway?

Ebony began to grind her teeth in silent rage.

Before she could give Nate's seat another hearty kick, Ben threw a devilish corner that took them skidding up the narrow road that led to the cemetery.

Vale Cemetery was situated on a hill set several minutes outside the city limits. It was an imperious place with a direct view of the city below and the mountains behind. Vale was a sprawling metropolis set with its back to a rugged mountain range and its mouth to a bay that led directly to the sea. Large, wide highways ran along the coast either side of Vale, connecting her to the rest of the country like a knot in a chain.

From the cemetery, you could see the city below, the ocean beyond, and the mountains behind. You could walk in one direction, peer over an old sandstone wall, and only see the grays, browns, and blacks of the city below. You could trick yourself into thinking that was all there was – just the stacks, buildings, roads, warehouses, silos, depots, and houses of Vale City. But as soon as you walked to another wall, you'd see the docks leading down to the bottle-shaped mouth of the river and the ocean beyond. Though the ocean didn't always glitter or beam at you with the warm azure smile of the tropics, it still invited the eye. It was something to do with the way the bay was shaped as it led the gaze forever out onto the horizon of simply endless ocean.

If Vale was a knot on a chain of roads, the Portal was the protrusion around which it had formed, making the ocean and the mountains the throat around which the chain rested.

Ebony undid her seatbelt as they neared the gates to the cemetery. A line of police cars was already there, their lights flashing in the forever-dimming day. She gathered her skirt around her, ready to leap out at the first opportunity.

It was no mistaken analogy that left Ebony thinking Vale resembled a chain around the neck of the land. It was the way the mountains led down, like a backbone, to the narrowed point of Vale, then opened out onto the head of the ocean.

Also, it was the way the city itself felt. It sometimes gave her the impression of just floating there, sitting above the land rather than being cut into it. At other times, it felt as if the whole city was talking to her, not with the combined words, actions, creations, and aberrations of its citizens – but with something far more mysterious. It was as if the Portal itself was somehow summoning the whole city at once – enlivening it with the terrible yet wonderful magic that came from the Other Side.

Ben pulled up alongside another car, barely turning off the engine before he was out of the door.

Now she had to concentrate on the matter at hand – some delirious idiot about to use the souls of the recently-dead to contact Death itself. Still, she couldn't entirely forget the mysterious and foreboding architecture and placement of this darned cemetery. The witches of Vale had often wondered who had designed it or how it had come to be. For witches past had sworn none of them had had such a hand in city planning. No, the placement of Vale Cemetery had all been down to the Valians – another magical accident to chalk up on their board of ignorance.

Ebony managed to hide a shiver as she drew alongside Ben. He was getting the lowdown from a pale-faced uniformed officer who kept shuddering at the slightest sound that emanated over the dense walls of the cemetery.

She hoped for one thing, and she wished for it with all her heart. Because of where the cemetery was, because of the amount of natural magic it commanded, Ebony desperately, desperately hoped no other *ah... thing* would get involved. Her warning to Flora had been genuine. Practice magic without a direct purpose and something with a stronger purpose will take it from you.

Now that warning rang in her mind like a church bell over a silent city.

Practicing magic in a cemetery was downright dangerous to begin with. No witch would ever do it alone. Cemeteries were places of powerful, formidable emotion and memory – two of the key ingredients to any magical spell. Any magical creature worth its name would know this. As such, you never knew what you'd find lurking behind the warped oaks, musty headstones, and corners of the old, dark crypts of cemeteries.

Nate drew up beside her in his usual silent fashion. "I don't see the ghosts," he said automatically, using his height to peer over the wall beyond. "Shouldn't they be zipping around the sky in trails of light, listening to loud '80s music, and making ludicrous faces?"

"This isn't Ghostbusters," she reminded him, this time with a shiver. What with the fat raindrops and the general atmosphere of doom, she was having trouble keeping warm. Though it certainly wasn't raining as hard as it had been in the city, Ebony could see an even darker set of storm clouds rolling down from the mountains like opaque mist over a river, which simply meant she was only likely to get colder.

She was mildly surprised that Nate seemed to actually see and note her shiver with a small smile. It wasn't a mean smile or a triumphant one – it was almost kind. But then he ruined it, "I bet you're regretting wearing such a tiny white dress." He looked down at her feet, his eyebrows dancing around in amusement. "And where the hell are your shoes?"

She instantly put a finger up to her lips. "Shhh," her tone was harsh. "Don't use that word around here – things might hear you."

He leaned in, face still a picture of sarcasm. "You mean shoes?"

She mouthed, “Hell. Though honestly, a little trip down there might do you some good – beat a bit of manners and sense into you.”

“Manners?” he said as he took off his suit jacket, handing it to her. “I don’t know what those are. But here’s my jacket if you’re cold.”

Ebony looked at the jacket, then up to him. She was trying to detect the joke, because she was sure this had to be one. “What are you playing at—” she began.

“You’re going to run around a cemetery in no shoes and a white cotton dress that’s only going to get more see-through.” His voice wasn’t filled with its usual irritating arrogance. “I thought you could use a little... discretion.”

She looked down, alarmed. Darn. Sure enough, her dress was starting to go a bit see-through – not that you could see all that much yet. But another ten minutes in the rain, and the world would know precisely the style and color of underwear bookstore-owning witches preferred.

She grabbed the jacket, throwing it on in a quick move.

Nate looked away, pretending to be more interested in the noises coming from the cemetery beyond.

Once Ebony managed to do up all the buttons on the jacket, she coughed. “Well.” She was, for once in her life, more than thankful the dark storm-clouds were out in force, because at least Nate wouldn’t be able to see the exact shade of pink she’d turned. “Th... thank you,” she finally pushed the words out.

Nate cracked a grin so large it looked as though his face was going to be split in two. “What did you just say?” His head bobbed to the side, and he leaned in even closer. “Because it couldn’t have been what I just heard.”

She clutched the jacket, trying to ignore the subtle but perceptible hint of cologne on the collar. “I said thank you.” She raised her head in defiance. “Like you will later when I save your butt from ghosts.”

“Okay,” he nodded, “but you ruin the jacket, you pay for it.”

Ebony blustered. “That’s not very gentlemanly!”

“I wasn’t being a gentleman, remember? I don’t have any manners. I was just covering you up so you don’t distract the officers.”

She flashed her teeth. “Are you calling me distracting, darling?”

Before Nate could snap back a quick response, or hide a careful cough, Ben turned to them. His face was dripping with rain, his eyes sallow with the cold and a hint of dread. “Okay, our guy’s in the middle of the cemetery. He’s got himself down in a crypt—”

Ebony swore softly.

“We don’t know his name, but we’re sure he’s not a full-blown wizard or magician, or one of the other magical races.”

“Hold on.” Nate put up a hand. “How are we sure about that? I mean, if we don’t have an ID?”

“We’re sure, because he’s still here and not splattered against the headstones. No actual wizard would do something this idiotic. They’re all regulated like the witches. No one who actually knew the consequences would do something this absolutely horrible.”

Ben took a shallow breath and continued, “We know he’s in a crypt, and we know he’s got some kind of spell protecting the door—”

She swore again.

“Well,” Nate rolled up his sleeves, the white fabric already distractingly see-through, “can’t we just bust in another side? Or break the spell? I mean, isn’t that what Ebony does?”

“This isn’t a normal situation, Nate.” Ben sighed again, the growing shadows catching underneath his eyes, emphasizing his fatigue with shadow. “Look, Eb, explain it to him.

We've got to wait for more police back-up anyway. You've got about five minutes, and then we move."

Ebony took her own, deeper sigh and angled her head to the heavens above. "You've got about another five minutes until the sky opens up, too," she said under her breath. The ominous clouds, rolling in off the mountains beyond, were now swooping toward them like crows on the wind. From the weather, to the day, to the feel of the place – she didn't like this one bit.

Ben marched off, pulling his phone from his pocket.

"I don't get it. If this is so dangerous, why don't we just move?" Nate looked down at her. By now his shirt was all but transparent, allowing her a complete view of the detective's impressively chiseled physique.

If it was any other day, she would have commented on it, or at least offered a cheeky whistle. "Look, just like any other police operation, we have to wait for backup."

"But I thought you said the witches weren't coming yet? And I hate to say it, but what use are ordinary humans against whatever the hell – I mean *heaven* – is waiting for us in there?"

"In a word? Guns."

"What?"

"Guns, Detective Nate. I think you'll find they're still quite effective against most magical creatures. They make loud noises, give off smells and, if you are lucky, propel bullets at your target." She pulled her gaze from his wet clothes and back up to the sky above.

"I don't get it. Our guns could hardly be effective—"

"Oh, they won't work against everything, that's for sure. If you face a cloud apparition – filling it with lead isn't going to count for much. Anyhow, that's not the point."

Nate flattened his tie for the fifty millionth time. "But we're fighting ghosts, right? I really don't think—"

"Two things." She held up two fingers, the long sleeves of Nate's jacket almost completely obscuring them. "You won't be using ordinary bullets today, and you won't be fighting the ghosts."

"Aren't the ghosts the ones doing all the damage?" Nate shrugged as the sound of concrete cracking rang over the graveyard walls. "Aren't they in there right now smashing up the whole cemetery?"

"No, they're the victims here."

"The victims," he repeated, voice empty. "But they're ghosts."

"Now, now, don't be discriminatory. Anyone can be a victim, Detective. But the real culprit today is the evil blighter who has ensconced himself inside that crypt. The ghosts are just trying to protect themselves and what they were from being sucked up by his pointless spells."

"I don't get this." Nate ducked slightly as an even louder noise cracked through the dark afternoon like a bullwhip by his ear. "And shouldn't we hurry up and do something?"

"We're waiting for the restricted ammo to come in. As soon as it arrives—" she didn't finish her sentence. As soon as it arrived, she would have to think of a way to achieve the impossible.

Somehow she would have to make her way through the cemetery – through the wild, enraged ghosts and through the various horrible creatures attracted by the excess magic – and finally into a highly protected crypt. Once inside, she'd be faced with some jumped-up, cape-wearing loon who didn't understand magic but still had the balls to steal into a graveyard and perform rites on the dead. And... if the idiot was successful, she'd likely come face-to-face with Death itself. She'd have to do all this in an oversized jacket, with no shoes on, and in the pouring rain. Oh, and she'd have to ensure no one else got hurt.

*Oh, man, that little voice in the back of her head moaned again, you should be watching a movie by now.*

“So what are the parameters? What do we do? And what the hell is going on?”

Ebony looked up at Nate, rain trickling off his face. “Okay, time for a crash course in Death Summoning. There are several ways to directly rewrite a story, Nate. This is one of them.”

“Rewrite a story,” he repeated, voice incredulous. “Are we going to be dealing with a bunch of Gothic copy-editors in there?”

“Look at it this way – we are bound by our past. Our past is a reminder of who we are, but it is also a shackle. Without it, we would be lost. But if you hold on to the past too tightly, then it restricts what you can do in the future. If you have been an ice-skater all your life but would really like to be a particle physicist, you can’t just wake up one day and decide to start smashing some atoms together. Your past will remind you – your memories, your friends, the photos of you on your mother’s bookshelf – of who you were.”

“I get it. You can’t click your fingers one day and change jobs, the color of your hair, and blood groups,” Nate said.

Ebony gave a small laugh. “Strange examples, but they work. The past keeps us on track, but it also binds us to one path. However, there are certain ways, certain *magical* ways, of lessening or eliminating the hold of yesterday over today. If you can change the past, then you can do virtually anything you want in the now.”

“And that’s what’s happening here?” he questioned, wiping at the rain dribbling down his forehead. “But what’s this got to do with death?”

“You rewrite the lives of the living through altering the lives of the dead. You sacrifice the past for the benefit of the future.” She closed her hands before her. “By using the recently-deceased, Detective, you can summon the force of Death. And when you have it in your presence, you can use the immense magic released to rewrite your story. Death is a universal force, and its power is unimaginable. Death is the very thing that keeps stories going, not that you’d know it. The very thing that keeps the living alive, that keeps the moving in motion. Everyone thinks that Death is the end. They’re dead wrong. When things begin to slow down, when their energy begins to ebb – they die. And through death they change forms, break up, and recombine in other ways. The movement is preserved.”

Nate hardly looked impressed by her impassioned description and simply kept blinking the water from his eyes. “But the dead are dead. Trust me. I’m an ex-homicide-detective. How exactly do you call this ‘Death’ through a corpse?”

“Death, unlike what most people believe, isn’t an instantaneous thing. You don’t die, then Death severs your soul and you skip off to the afterlife or get reborn. You dream first. It can take up to a week or even more. But the soul goes through the memories of its life – the dreams, losses, and achievements – and collates them. It’s like marking up a score sheet at the end of a game. It’s a way for the soul to be clear about what it’s achieved before it moves on.”

“Sounds like mumbo-jumbo,” he declared with a cough.

“No, mumbo-jumbo is a special type of magic practiced by the witches of the Caribbean. And let me assure you, this doesn’t sound anything like it. Plus, I’m not asking you to believe in this; I’m just asking you to listen.”

“Then skip to the stuff I need to know. Time’s ticking.”

She pursed her lips. “Time doesn’t tick – clocks do. Time wanders. But that’s not the point. The point is our bad-guy in there has found the grave of a recently-deceased soul. He’s probably been planning this for some time.” Ebony wiped the water off her face, only for the driving rain to replace it. “What you do is you gather the important objects of whoever you are performing the rite on – a wedding ring, a photo, a beloved pet, the deed to their house, a

book they wrote – whatever gave them incredible meaning in their lives. Anyhow, you perform the rite on the grave.” She found her stomach turning at the thought of it. She hated this side of magic. It was dark, inhuman, and violated everything magic should stand for. She put a hand on her stomach before continuing, “Anyhow, you perform the rite and summon up Death.”

“So what are the objects for? Why do you want a guy’s favorite watch? Is that to get a lock on him or something?”

“No, that’s to threaten his soul.”

“Threaten his soul?”

“Okay.” Ebony saw a specially painted truck finally pulling up at the cemetery gates. It would be carrying the ammo they needed. It wasn’t every day the Vale Police Department would get access to magic bullets, because, Ebony reminded herself with a soulful sigh that it wasn’t every day they needed them. They were a pest to get hold of. It was all a part of the Pact. Should the need arise for more direct magical intervention, and before the Police would be forced to call the Coven, they would get access to heavy-duty weaponry. They had to request them directly from the Coven. But once the weapons were released, the police officers of Vale would get their hands on blessed, cursed, and magic-sucking bullets – something for every occasion.

It rarely happened that they would need them. It had only happened to Ebony three times. Once when a madman had somehow gotten hold of a banned book of spells and had held several people hostage. Another time when a powerful demon had attached itself to a cursed family ring. And once when someone had tried to kill a witch. Ebony shivered at the mere memory of it.

“We don’t have much time. Here’s the quick version.” She began to half-walk, half-jog over to the van. “When you summon Death through someone who has died, you are replacing the magic of their life with the magic of Death. Death is a permanent, overwhelming fixture of the universe – it is powerful, powerful magic. And when it is summoned in place of someone’s life, it trumps it. You remember what I told you about stories? Well, this is the same thing. Rather than living for their life, if you summon Death through the dead, you rewrite the ending of their story. No longer did they live for what they achieved, what they meant – they now lived for death.” Ebony flexed her hands inside the sleeves of Nate’s jacket, trying to ensure the blood kept flowing to them. “But no soul would sit by and watch that happen. That’s where the ghosts come in. They arise from the body, trying to protect the lives they lived from being rewritten.”

“So they attack the guy, right? Whoever is trying to summon Death—”

“Yeah. But not if the maniac is smart enough to have collected enough meaningful objects from the ghost’s life. If you have a beloved wedding ring, a journal, a necklace – anything that strongly connects to some memory of life for the ghost – they won’t attack because they simply won’t let such a memory be destroyed. And heaven forbid if the dark practitioner manages to get their hands on a loved one....”

“You mean a person?” Nate said quickly. “You mean that maniac could have an actual person in there with him?”

“I don’t think so, not on this occasion. We would have been told – though don’t rule it out. Anyhow, the ghost usually becomes enraged as it watches helplessly as its life is rewritten. And, well, the ghost loses its head, figuratively speaking, and flies off on a path of destruction.”

“So just to clarify, we’ve got a madman in there, potentially with a hostage, trying to summon Death through the dead. And we’ve got an enraged ghost who’s going around trashing the cemetery, to boot?”

“And maybe other ghosts.” She shivered as the cold from the sodden ground pressed up through her feet. “They always tend to band together at times like these.”

“So an enraged ghost and his ghost friends?”

“Yep.” She pulled Nate’s jacket closer around her.

“Jesus.”

“No, he shouldn’t be there.”

Nate looked down at her. There was an odd expression on his face. His chest was puffed out with his usual Chevalier strength and arrogance, but there was something else at the edge of his crinkled eyes. “And you are going to go in there and take this guy down without any shoes on? Are you sure there’s no one you can call for backup?”

Ebony decided she didn’t like Nate’s tone – it was too nice. “What, you don’t think I’m capable?”

“No,” he said evenly and honestly. “Believe it or not, I don’t want you to get hurt.”

## Chapter 6

Ebony didn't have a great deal of time to ponder Nate's once-in-a-blue-moon kind words. As soon as she angled her face toward him to try to figure out if he was being genuine, a chunk of gravestone came hurtling over the cemetery wall, striking the windscreen of a cop car. The screen buckled and shattered on impact, the car's alarm going off with violent shrieks that pierced through the muffling rain.

She ducked to the side, breath caught in her throat, tugging Nate's arm as she went.

"Alright," she heard Ben scream from beyond her. "It's time to move out."

She immediately sprang forward to follow his words, her lips drawn thin with her ever-dimming mood. This situation was becoming ever more serious, she realized as her face paled with stretched but unnerved determination.

Ben didn't have his usual sarcasm. More often than not, the detective would chortle in the face of danger, declaring something along the lines of, "Obviously, someone's having a hell of a party in there, and we weren't invited – so let's show them gate-crashing, police style." Though she always knew Ben was serious, he had this wonderful charm about him that somehow made situations manageable. But now he was as tense as everyone else.

"We've got four points to cover." The water no longer dripped off Ben's face, as he'd managed to borrow a stiff-brimmed police hat from someone and had crammed it over his abnormally round head. "Front gate, southern gate, main path, and, of course, the crypt. I've got officers on a perimeter watch around the walls, and I'll have backup at both of the gates as soon as you can blink. Inside, I want to keep it to a minimum. There are too many gravestones, trees, crypts, and the like to cover – I don't want people being attacked from behind. If anything decides to jump the walls, we'll deal with it. But the main team will have to make their own way to the crypt."

Ebony pulled her hair from her face, trying to gather it into a bunch so she could have half a chance of running without wet tendrils slapping against her eyes and obscuring her view.

"Once inside, head straight to the crypt. If you meet ghosts," he shrugged, "try to be polite. Don't shoot if you don't have to. But if you do..."

If they did, Ebony picked up the abandoned sentence in her mind, she'd have to answer for it later. It wasn't just her duty to protect herself, the police, and the citizens of Vale. Wherever possible, a proper witch had to protect all magical creatures in need. It was all about keeping the balance – protecting the legitimacy and sanctity of the stories of all life.

"We don't know what else might be out there. Could be anything. Now, this I don't have a problem with – if anything unidentified comes your way, use your discretion. But I'm telling you, if it has ten tentacles and flaming eyes, I doubt it's just going to stop and ask for directions."

Nate nodded. It was a quick nod, but it wasn't nervous. It had tension in it, sure, like a spring under pressure, but it wasn't twitching. It was perfectly controlled.

Ebony tightened her lips around her teeth. Once again he was completely okay with the situation.

"You go to the crypt, Eb removes the protection spell, and—"

"I go inside alone," Ebony finished.

"What?" Nate's voice was sharp. "You aren't serious?"

She nodded, head so wet the move sent water cascading off her nose and chin. "I go in first, and you wait until I give the all-clear."

"Why?" Nate obviously wasn't going to give this up. For all his painful arrogance and sarcasm, he still fancied himself a chevalier underneath. And knights might stare down at the



world from atop their dazzling steeds, but they don't leave women alone in danger. "That's unacceptable."

"It's the only way. I go in first in case our madman has succeeded and is midway through a chat with Death itself."

Nate's face stiffened.

"And believe me. You don't want to interrupt Death. I'll do that bit. But when I give you the all-clear, you get to rush on in and take down the bad guy. If I haven't already done that myself, that is."

"Okay," Ben cut in immediately. "So we're clear now. The team is going to consist of Eb, Officer Andrews, Phil and Grant from the Special Weapons and Tactics Unit, and me."

It took barely a second for Nate to realize he hadn't been picked for the team. "Hold on, why not me?"

"Because you've never done anything like this, and we need experienced people right now." Ben sucked in his bottom lip, his chin dimpling like soggy cardboard rolled into a ball. "But you'll get your call one day."

"With all due respect, I'm the best shot in this department." Nate's hands stiffened by his sides.

"Accuracy doesn't mean anything if you come up against something that snatches your gun from you," Ben warned.

Nate took a breath, obviously readying for another volley.

"That's enough," Ebony cut in, her hand rising with the speed of a cobra strike. "Let him come, Ben."

Ben turned to her, his face muddled with confusion.

"Look, the team's there to get me to where I need to be. So I should have a word about who goes. Just let him come. He's annoying, but he is still a good shot." She couldn't believe she'd just said that. She'd just stood up for the annoying detective when she could have left him hanging. But she couldn't shake that niggling feeling that, regardless of the fact he irritated her, she still wanted him by her side on this one.

"If you're sure, Eb, then you're sure."

"I am, but we don't have much time." She looked hesitantly at the black clouds above. "We need to do this before this storm breaks completely. Powerful storms, graveyards, and pointless magic are never a pretty mix."

It barely took three minutes for Ebony to strap the bulletproof vest around her, grab a gun, and reach the imposing iron gates of the cemetery. She'd taken the vest, even though it would count for diddly considering what she was up against.

She wiped her free hand under her nose, the other hand firmly pressed around her gun. Usually Ebony, as a witch, was bound not to use her magic in relation to things like guns. The arcane reason was something along the lines of guns, to humans, were a bit like magic, giving whoever wielded them a shot of inhuman power. And a witch, if she was careful, never mixed her magics.

But this wasn't an ordinary day, and it wasn't an ordinary gun anymore. The gloves were off, so to speak, and Ebony now had the blessings of the Coven, which was going to make her a crack shot in the graveyard, if you'd pardon the pun.

The rest of the team assembled around her. The other officers of Vale Police Department were set at strategic points around the perimeter wall. Ebony would take the lead, not because she was the most skilled at combat/weaponry/command – but because if you were running an incursion into a ghost-infested graveyard, you wanted the witch at the lead.

When she was confident everyone was ready, she opened the gates. There was a basic protection spell in place on them, but it wasn't hard to break. Someone had tied a red cloth around the closed gates, weaving it around the metal rods and tying it carefully in the middle.

Though it didn't look like much, no ordinary human would be able to break through it. Scissors would somehow lose their ability to cut when pressed against the fabric, hands would lose their grip, and matches would simply fail to ignite.

Ebony yanked on the damn thing, tossing it to the side with a mumbled curse. While it was an okay spell, it was still basic, which simply served to irk her even more. If whatever maniac had chosen to perform such a dangerous spell didn't have the ability to set up a proper safety perimeter, then it was becoming all the more likely he was weaker than Ebony had hoped. Weak idiots form soft targets for stronger idiots, she reminded herself with a cocked eyebrow.

With her gun still in her hand, she pressed a shoulder into the iron gates, muttering a short motion spell that propelled them open. They made a sound like aching metal – groaning open with creaks that could wake the dead, but hopefully wouldn't.

The graveyard was dark, the growling storm offering just enough dim evening light to see the white stone-path that led through the grass. Headstones of varying sizes and styles were laid out either side of the path with such regularity and geometry that they looked like lines drawn with rulers. To the back, interspersed among the gravestones, were ancient trees, gnarled and giant. They were like sprawling, knotty guards standing in silent duty in the most silent of all places.

Just the sight of the trees gave her the jitters. Ordinarily, such trees would function as guards, keeping the graveyard rooted to the ground. They would stand for the great cycle of life – the symbolic growth of the living among the dead.

Now the trees were cast into such darkness from the billowing skies above, they could easily be mistaken as lifeless marks on paper.

Her group took the white path with quick, careful steps. Ebony was always at the lead, her senses feeling out before her in great arcs of concentration.

The path led up the softly ascending hill, the interspersed gravestones giving way to the older section of the cemetery. It wasn't so ordered here. It wasn't so neat and nice. It was like walking back through the past. The gravestones on the perimeter were from more modern times; for, as Vale had changed over the centuries, so had her aesthetic, her ideal. Town planners now liked neat, orderly, countable rows. The same couldn't be said of the inner section of the cemetery. Things were older here, less maintained, more chaotic. Gravestones were littered about as if someone had gathered them together and thrown them into the air – not bothering where they landed. The headstones weren't all turned in the same direction, either. They were all erratically placed, with stone angels turned to face winged cherubs and statues with their backs to each other.

Something came at them suddenly from behind a broken, aged headstone. It ran low along the ground like a cat at full speed. It was dark, quick, and fat and had a touch of red.

Before anyone else reacted, Ebony spun to the side, gun at the ready. She waited until the creature, whatever it was, was almost on top of her. The beast leaped into the air, aiming for her throat.

Ducking, she rolled to the side, coming up right beside the creature. Rather than shoot it on the spot, she flicked her gun around in a circle right above its head. A blue light appeared in a blazing circle of powerful magical symbols, both at the foot and above the head of the creature, trapping it in place.

Ebony, her breath stuck in her throat, let it out in a gasp. "What have we got here?" she asked through clenched teeth, gun grasped tightly in her grip. "Come for a magical feast?"

The thing, whatever it was, wasn't fond of talking and replied with a violent, primal hiss. Its fat, wide jaw snapped open, its lips stretching back to reveal row after row of dented yellow fangs.

“Well, if you’re going to be like that, you can just stay there.” She turned back to the group, barely registering the shock on their faces before she motioned them on.

Her heart rattled around, shaking her chest like a prisoner at the bars. That was the thing about operations like this – you never got used to them. Yes, Ebony had worked for the police department now for a couple of years, and yes, her mother was a witch, and her father had always been sure to teach her what she needed to know. But no, that was never enough to make it easy. There were so many risks, so many unknowns, and the only thing it seemed possible for her to do was to keep on her toes and keep moving.

Up ahead, the path twisted to the side, more gnarled oaks standing sentinel at its edges. This would lead to the flattened top of the hill where all the crypts stood. It was perhaps another strange accident of Valian architecture, but it had never escaped Ebony’s attention that the cemetery was built as a circle within a circle. The wall that surrounded it was almost perfectly rounded, and within – separating the ordinary headstones from the crypts of the once-wealthy – was another small circular wall. While the wall was hardly an impediment and wasn’t intended to keep people out, it was still a low circle – which made the whole blasted place a circle within a circle.

She ran her teeth over her lip hard enough that her skin prickled.

She hoped with all her might that whatever loon had chosen to break into the cemetery on this terrible stormy evening hadn’t been dumb enough to draw another circle around the crypt. That would make a circle within a circle within a circle, which just so happened to combine two little things magic thrives on – circles and threes.

Could this day get worse?

She could now make out the sound of cracking stone filtering in from somewhere between the crypts. It was no doubt the ghost of whatever poor victim the maniac was using to summon Death. Deranged, frustrated, and pulled from its final dreams of life – the ghost would be seeking to destroy everything it could. Not because it was evil, but because it was confused. It had died and now was being called back to protect everything it had ever lived for.

Playing jokes on the sleeping was one thing, but what was happening here was playing jokes on life itself. Ebony was reminded of those frustrating movies or books that would end with the character either waking up and realizing everything had been a dream, or dying a pointless, soulless death. They were endings that rewrote a once meaningful story into standing for nothing. You thought it all meant something, but in the end, you were wrong.

An oak just off the path gave a peculiar shudder as if it was a cold security guard who’d stood too close to a gutter and received an icy shower down the back of his collar.

“Duck!” Ebony screamed, not waiting to find out what lurked amongst the branches.

As she flattened herself, collapsing her stomach onto the uneven stone path, a horde of birds erupted from the tree. These were no ordinary birds, she realized with a wince as she caught a glimpse of their glowing hollow eyes.

With a shudder that threatened to turn her limbs to jelly, she gasped, rolling to the side as the birds dipped low over the group. “Oh, no,” she said to no one in particular.

There was something off about this whole situation, something rank, something rotten. And Ebony was finally starting to realize what it was. Those birds, whatever they were, weren’t normal. It wasn’t their soulless eyes that gave it away. It was the way they moved. The way they felt. In fact, now Ebony took the time to feel into this whole situation, she realized none of this was normal. There was a strange magical fog sitting over the cemetery like a smothering blanket.

It felt as if something was here. It felt as if something was watching them. It felt as if

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Suddenly a hand descended onto Ebony's shoulder, and she realized she was still lying on the ground. Long after the strange birds had swooped off into some other part of the graveyard, she'd remained motionless on the sodden grass.

She pushed to her feet, trying to ignore the pressed, confused, worried look in Nate's eyes as she rose.

"You okay?" he asked.

Ebony dearly wished she had some gum, or candy, or a darn leather bit to bite down on. "Yeah," she said through clenched teeth. "They were just birds." She faked a dose of confidence and stared forward. "Good to go," she said as she started off again.

As they entered farther into the area of the crypts, the storm began to grow more intense. While it had previously only offered the occasional thunderous rattle to accompany the drenching rain – loud, frequent lightning now flashed in the distance, with deep claps of thunder punctuating the air with ear-splitting booms.

Finally Ebony caught the scent of ghosts. Though scent wasn't the right word, it was close enough. Ghosts left a trail that tickled the inside of your nose. It was as if your nose knew it should be picking up some smell but simply couldn't. It was the smell, she reasoned, of something that just didn't smell at all.

She motioned to the side at a darkened path that led between two close, low crypts. "The ghost," she turned and mouthed, "is that way."

Now she was aware of it, her eyes were starting to pick up the ubiquitous ectoplasm – a common residue of otherworldly creatures – covering the grass in clumps or sliding off the sides of gravestones.

She leaned down, running her drenched fingers through the yucky, sticky stuff. Though her mother had taught her everything she knew about ghosts, her father had taught her the patience and timing of a tracker.

"It has got friends," she said to the rest of the group, her voice low but still strong enough to carry over the calamitous sound of the storm. "Maybe three or four. They aren't powerful, though." She straightened and continued slowly toward the narrow space between the crypts. "They'll be ready to cross over."

Not that this would mean anything to the brash Detective Nate, but the rest of the group should understand. In ordinary circumstances, a ghost only ever hung around its body for a week. When the dreaming was done and the memories of a life were collated, the ghost would depart to the Other Side. The further into the process a ghost was, the less power it had. It was the memories of a life-once-lived and the emotions associated with them that still anchored the ghost to the body. The more memories it had been able to process, the less of a ghostly punch it could still pack.

Ebony carefully, silently made her way between the crypts. The space was barely wide enough for her to fit through, so she wasn't surprised when several of her cohort had to peel off to circumnavigate. Somehow, the broad-shouldered Nate managed to squeeze in behind her. Perhaps he was a cat, she thought in an inappropriate moment of levity, or an octopus, or maybe he was made of putty under all those chiseled features.

With a whoosh, which she felt before she could hear, a ghost emanated from the wall of the crypt to her left. Barely centimeters from her face, the thing flew out of the wall as if the once-solid stone was merely a hologram or an optical illusion.

Nate had a hand on her shoulder and yanked her back, but with nowhere to go in such a tight space, she fell against his chest like a maiden swooning at her knight.

"Get back," he hissed, somehow managing to position an arm around her, gun pointed at the ghost.

"Not yet." She clamped a hand over his arm. "Not until—"

The ghost was a mixture of colors, shapes, patterns – all whirling around in a disembodied swirl of wafting smoke. It was like someone was projecting broken scenes from a movie right onto the steam wafting off boiling water or the smoke from a raging fire. Somehow the thing managed to form a face and then a jaw that it opened to screech out a howl. The face wasn't biological. It was made of the coalesced smaller images of before. Each tiny memory as it played out on the wafting smoke moved together to form the outline of a human head.

The ghost didn't attack. It screamed its unearthly, deeply frustrated scream, and then disappeared into the wall of the adjoining crypt. Ebony, her heart pounding and arms still shaking, took a moment to steady herself. She was still pressed up against Nate's chest, but she was hardly in the mood to recognize the feel of his arms, the cut of his torso, or the cling of his wet shirt. All she was thankful for, and all she had the ability to concentrate on, was that she was somehow okay, for the time being.

She heard a blustered shout from beyond the crypts. She propelled herself forward, shooting from the narrow passage with the speed of a hawk on the hunt. "Ben!" she screamed, rounding the corner with her gun pressed into both hands.

She saw a rock hurtling toward the other four members of her team – a giant headstone thrown on a direct collision course with her teammates. Time slowed down, thankfully allowing her just the moments she needed to run into the object's path, firing off three rounds into the heart of the stone until it shattered into pieces.

As time righted itself seamlessly, the shattered chunks of rock erupted in her face.

Though the rocks were too small to do any real damage, she still reeled back, balance stolen as her eyes filled with dust, her cheeks and arms stinging from the impact.

After a blurry moment, she managed to shake her head and run a quick hand over her eyes, trying to rub out enough dust so she could see again.

"You alright?" Ben asked by her ear, clasping a hand over her shoulder. "Eb, that was close."

She nodded. Luckily time had stretched for her. Otherwise Ben and the others would be dead.

That was the funny thing about witches and time. Maybe it was due to all their magic, but time didn't always behave around a witch. For an ordinary, everyday, non-magical person, time was as steady and reliable as a Volvo. It didn't waver, only sped up sometimes, and only slowed down when you were bored.

For a witch, time would sometimes hiccup, slowing the world down to moment-after-moment as if it had shifted from a movie to a picture book.

At other times, time would shoot ahead like an arrow on its way to a target somewhere off in the distance. A witch might be carried with it, living a life that hasn't yet happened in a present that only has time for now.

But it was at those moments when time slowed down, allowing a witch precious few seconds to bring about some change in reality, that made time sacred. Though it didn't always happen, and you couldn't count on it, all witches would experience it on occasion. They would be granted just enough time, plus a little more, to do whatever they had to do.

Ebony spluttered through several deep coughs, running the back of her hand over her mouth. "We've got to keep going," she said through a rasp. "The crypt must be close by." She kept her gun at the ready. "So keep your eyes peeled. Things are going to get nasty now."

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, a tremendous clap of thunder roared from above. It shook the ground as the heavens shouted down in their powerful bellow. Several faint, wispy ghosts shot off the roofs or walls of nearby crypts, spiraling away on their paths of chaotic destruction. One ate into the side of a roof, spewing out a mouthful of

roofing tiles onto the ground below. Another delved deep into the earth, then reappeared, trailing long clods of dirt up into the sky.

Ebony could see things at the edges, too, both at the corners of the crypts and at the corners of her eyes. Various beings, attracted by the loose magic and the powerful storm – skulking at the edge of reality, waiting for the right moment to—

Nate slammed into her side, knocking her to the ground and firing off several rounds as he went.

She landed on the grass with a thud, breath escaping her lips with a gasp. Off to the side, she caught sight of Nate's target: a squat stone gargoyle. It was perched on top of a crypt gutter, staring down at them with its hideous head tilted to one side.

It swooped again, coming in much lower, its claws stretched out with the intent to rip, shred, grab, or all three.

Nate looped an arm around Ebony and pulled her up, pushing her to the side just as the gargoyle made its second dash. He managed to squeeze off another round. The rest of the team took up their positions as well, shooting with perfect accuracy at the demonic stone-creature. The bullets dashed into its wings, its face, and the sides of its outstretched legs. Though they ate away at the stone with each impact, they didn't stop the monster.

"Switch rounds!" Ebony screeched as she ducked to the side, barely missing another swoop. "Use the magic-sucking bullets."

Andrews and the two guys from the SWAT team seamlessly switched ammo, snapping up their guns quicker than a sapling recovering from a push. They emptied their rounds into the creature, letting the bullets eat into its earthy flesh – sucking the magic right out of it. Though the bullets weren't enough to kill it, they grounded it. Its flight began to slow, its height deteriorating until it landed, claws outstretched, onto the grass.

Ebony tossed her gun to the side, letting it fall against the grass. When she was sufficiently close to the creature to see its lifeless eyes, but far enough away so as not to have her own pulled out by its sharp talons, she fell to a knee.

With some of the magic sucked out of the creature, it wouldn't have its usual defenses, leaving it open to attack not just from Ebony, but from other creatures too. She didn't have the time to take this creature down herself – gargoyles were strong, lapidary creatures, after all. They weren't just lapidary in the sense they were layered like the very rock they were cut from – they had layers and layers of defenses that had to be whittled down over time.

Time, Ebony repeated to herself. Right now it was a blessing to be used wisely.

With her hands pressed together and one knee pressed into the wet grass below, she closed her eyes. Though anyone sane would think closing your eyes so close to a vicious creature was as dumb as wearing a dress made of money at a meeting of poor and desperate criminals, Ebony had a plan.

With a breath that rattled through her body, she let out a quick prayer. It wasn't something a witch usually did. Praying was something for Believers. But just because Ebony followed the creed, art, and religion of the witches, didn't mean she couldn't appreciate the realities that existed for others. So she said a quick but powerful prayer to the assembled angels, gods, saints, and whichever other beings looked over this cemetery. If the Valians buried underneath the grass were Believers – and their families had buried them under the auspices of their gods, religions, and hopes – then those very same gods had a duty to protect the dead.

There was a chance it wouldn't work, a chance the gods and angels would simply ignore her. They had every right to. They didn't owe her anything.

But there was still a chance they would come to the call of their dead.

Ebony snapped her eyes open just as the gargoyle swiped viciously at her, its claws catching her vest. She jerked back just as Nate fired a timely round right between the creature's eyes.

With the tingles of barely-avoided-death pumping through her, Ebony shifted forward.

"Are you mad?" she heard Nate spit. "What the hell were you thinking?"

Suddenly a single feather floated down from the storm above, its trajectory and speed unaffected by the violent winds and rain. It touched the ground in front of the gargoyle with the soft press of a tender kiss.

The gargoyle shifted its head down, staring at it, even though its eyes were hollowed out from Nate's bullets.

A circle opened out in the thick clouds above, a beautiful, clear light shining down with the strength of a dozen blessed candles. Even though she didn't Believe, Ebony couldn't help but let her heart soar with the sight. In a hushed second, an angel floated down from above.

Angels weren't quite the creatures humans envisioned them to be – there were no wings, halos, and flowing robes. While they had what could be recognized as a body, in the place of skin they had light. They were solidified, formed light, much like ghosts, but more solid and stronger. Light swirled beneath their forms with sudden flashes and bursts, like gas igniting in the night.

The gargoyle let out an ear-splitting howl as the angel descended from above.

Ebony turned, studying the faces of her teammates, watching their expressions as they saw an actual angel descending from the heavens. Ben's face was radiant, his eyes wider than a child who'd just found out Santa Claus was actually real. Andrews sported a similar look of adulation. But Nate, she realized with a strange kick in her stomach, just looked on. Yes, she could tell he was amazed, but not overpowered like the rest of them.

Somehow, the irritating detective was, once again, taking it all in his stride. It was as if he'd seen it all before.

The angel descended, clamping a hand around the gargoyle's wing. Once it had a firm grip, it leaped back into the air, unaffected by the gargoyle's lashings, and floated back up beyond the clouds. With a snap, the light extinguished, and the storm tumbled back in. It took several minutes of soaking rain, thunder, and cold before the wonder waned from the rest of the teams' eyes.

"God," Ben mumbled, his hand on his mouth.

"No," she corrected, trying to move them on. "Just a representative. But come on. There's no time left." She pointed forward, finally sure she knew which crypt they were after. "It's time to end this."

It was a curious word to use, she realized as she blinked back the rain and streaked toward the darkened crypt. Because endings, when Death was involved, tended to be final and forever.

## Chapter 7

Ebony, sure that everyone was behind her, ran toward the crypt. Her wet hair trailed behind her, managing to sprawl out like a half-hearted cape, even though the rain drove down in a vertical stream so strong it felt as if she was standing underneath a waterfall.

Amassing magic in her mind, she spread her fingers toward the chipped, white-painted iron gate.

A protection spell lay interwoven between the metal bars, unseen but crackling with zipping, invisible charges of magic.

As she snapped her outspread fingers toward it, the spell broke with an echoing crack like a whip by her ear.

This was it.

She had to be careful, not only of the crazed man at the foot of the crypt steps, but of all this purposeless magic.

Allow herself to be drawn in by it, and it could take her over.

As the protection spell broke under Ebony's effort, her mind went to the journal she kept by her bed. It was old and leather-bound, its only decoration a tattered red ribbon that marked the current page.

She wrote in that journal every single night. She didn't jot down the events of the day for the purpose of memory or nostalgia. She wrote down the contents of tomorrow, the next day and the next. She didn't try to foresee them; she simply wrote her wishes. She would have a good day, she might write on one page. On another, she would note how much she'd learn. Toward the back of the book, she might write about the wonderful news she would receive, and so on. But the trick, the absolute trick, was she did not write in order. She would turn to some random page and write a single wish on it. It was a way of writing her future while still keeping it a surprise. Wishes may indeed come to her as she'd written they would – but in the random, capricious order she'd decided. And she never kept track of old pages – once written, they remained unseen.

She had a very vivid memory of the moment her mother had given Ebony her Journal of Life. Avery Bell had sat on the edge of Ebony's bed, the light of a full moon filtering in through the half-open curtains. While journaling wasn't a necessary witchy activity, it was a Bell family tradition, one Ebony's mother had been sure to pass onto her daughter at just the right time.

Her mother handed her the journal, that old knowing smile on her lips. "Here you go, little witch. Here's a present for my daughter."

Ebony had been so excited, she'd snatched up the book and instantly leafed through the blank pages.

"This, my child," her mother tapped her fingers against the spine of the book, "is possibly the best gift you'll ever give yourself. But you have to promise me that you'll be careful what you wish for and especially when you wish for it. There are things, little witch, that everyone wants – love, wealth, a meaningful life. But as a witch, you have to be very careful when and how you form these desires, and especially when and where you write them down. I don't doubt that someday you'll form the thought of the man of your dreams, and with the carefully practiced words of a witch, you'll be able to write exactly what you want on the pages of your journal. But right now, little Ebony, you must wait. I'm giving you this journal now, because it is a tradition. But I want you to promise me that you won't start writing in it yet – not until you're old enough to know what you really want. The wishes and dreams of a child aren't the same as an adult, trust me on that."



Her mother left the room with one final warning, “Promise me, darling – promise me you’ll be careful what you wish for.”

Ebony had promised her mother, only to drag the journal out from under her pillow that very night and steal down to her father’s office to borrow one of his pens. She’d snuck out onto the porch, and under the full light of the moon scribbled down wishes on random pages.

As an adult, she could no longer remember what she’d written, but the moment haunted her to this day. Why oh, why hadn’t she been able to listen to her mother? Who knows what ridiculous things the young Ebony had written? She was a child, for crying out loud. She’d probably written about saving the world, riding dragons, and eating more cake than was humanly possible.

But what really irked Ebony was she was half-sure she’d written something terribly romantic in there. She’d formed some silly idea of her perfect match and had written it on some random page of her Journal of Life. Who knows what ridiculous man she’d written of, and who knows when she’d written it for?

Returning to the moment, she assured herself that her life had a plan – even if a random man would be thrown in there somewhere. And with that plan firmly in her mind, she could not be pulled in by the random, purposeless magic that swirled around her in great invisible blasts.

She flung the door open, her hand now hot where it had once held the handle. Her other hand was clasped around her gun, which she’d recovered from the wet grass after her altercation with the gargoyle.

The sound of a soft, stuttering moan met her ears. It brought her back to the here and now, pushing her off the path of memories and onto the road of magical policing. She had strengthened her memories, wishes, desires, and general life-purpose. And she hoped it would be enough to keep her from being magically rewritten.

As Ebony descended into the bowels of the crypt, she wondered how deep this thing was. Either this crypt was a giant basement, housing a whole lineage of some wealthy Valian family, or time and space were playing a trick on her. That was one of the things about magic. When a lot of magic built up in a place, it tended to stretch itself between the two pillars of time and space, until reality became thin, hazy, and different.

The chanting was growing louder, and regardless of how long these steps were or weren’t, Ebony had a job to do.

She rounded a corner, the body of the crypt opening out before her. It was a large room, but not as epic as she’d envisioned. There were six or seven stone coffins raised on plinths, all lined up in a row. Right at the end of the room, around the final coffin, sat a circle of flickering candles. The flames danced violently as if a vicious wind roared about the room. Yet there was hardly a breeze. The air of the crypt sat as still and stagnant as air trapped in a bottle and buried deep underneath the ground. The flames would be reacting to a different force – the welling, spiraling, breaking magic seeping up from the ground itself. It was hot, raw, and strangely ticklish – leaving Ebony with the feeling she was standing on a hot grill.

A man stood before the coffin, intoning deep, mournful words. His head lolled this way and that like a drugged snake. His voice occasionally peaked with a sudden, manic pitch, before drawing back to its steady drone. Before him, he had a book.

Ebony stared, trying to take in the whole scene before deciding how to act.

The book would contain the spell or the story the man would be trying to create. Whatever he wanted would be written on its pages. When Death was summoned and its magic released, that spell would be enlivened. She hadn’t been lying when she’d told Nate that Death was the force that kept things alive. Death kept things going by ensuring nothing truly stopped.

By writing down the present as he wanted it to be, ripped from the bounds of the past, the man would be hoping the power of Death would breathe life into the spell.

With a sudden spike, the light of the candles glowed as if ignited by a puff of gas. They illuminated the edges of the crypt, showing Ebony exactly what she didn't want to see.

There was a woman curled up against the far wall, her head tucked into the crooks of her arms. It seemed like she was trying to make herself as small a target as possible, or as if she was receding from the scene like a flower closing before the night.

Perhaps she sensed Ebony, or perhaps the flash of light awoke her, because the woman looked up and made eye contact. Even from a distance, Ebony could see the woman's eyes widening at the sight of someone unexpected in this terrible crypt. Her lips dropped open, a tiny gasp managing to escape.

The man stopped abruptly, furling on his foot, and faced Ebony.

Her stomach tightened.

This maniac had gone and done precisely what Ebony had assured Nate wouldn't happen – he'd kidnapped a nearest-and-dearest from the ghost's life in order to keep it in check. Whoever this woman was, she would be so important to the recently deceased that its ghost wouldn't dare risk attacking the crypt. It was a classic hostage situation. Well, a classic magical hostage situation.

The man had an ashen face with sallow skin that seemed to drip from his bones like rubber melting in the sun. His eyes were large – too large – and had the blue-gray tint of pale storm clouds. He was young, maybe in his late thirties or early forties. Whatever life he'd led, whatever horrors he'd subjected his body to, they'd aged him decades. He had short, cropped, black hair and wore a black robe to match it, the hems embroidered with silver symbols. He wore a medallion hung low on a gold chain that rested against his solar plexus. Ebony wasn't close enough to see what the medallion was made of or what symbols he'd managed to scratch over it, but whatever it was, it would be there for a purpose.

"What are you doing, you idiot?" she said viciously and as suddenly as a blow from a whip.

The man's medallion would be acting as a beacon – a gathering point for magical forces to be channeled through him and into the rite he was performing. But just like any beacon, the thing would be broadcasting on all signals – attracting to it, not just the magic of the void, but the magic of any creature nearby. In witch terms, it was the equivalent of painting a target on your head, walking up to a hardened criminal, handing him a gun, and insulting his wife. There was only one way this could end.

The man's expression soured. Maybe he wasn't expecting a woman to walk in wearing a sodden white dress and a police vest, and maybe he wasn't expecting she'd have just enough reverence for his magical rite to call him an idiot – but the man's expression only grew into a deeper, strange mix of anger, frustration, and hatred.

"Who," he said the word with a sharp exhalation of air, "are you?"

"You don't get to know that." Ebony leveled the gun. "All you have to know is I'm here to stop you."

The man didn't snap back and laugh like the maniacs always did in the movies. He watched Ebony, his eyes fixed on her with such concentration it appeared as if he'd never look at another thing ever again. "You can't do that," he eventually offered. "This is a magical rite. You cannot disturb the forces I have summoned."

She smiled, showing her teeth. "I'm a trained witch, Mister. I think I know a little more about magic than you do."

He snarled at her, yellow, irregular teeth jutting out between his thin lips. "A witch? A child of Hecate? A child of the moon? You are nothing—"

Ebony responded by firing off a round right into the ground by his feet. “I got through your protection spell, son, and now I’m going to cut through your lies too. Let the girl go, and we’ll have a talk about magic and cemetery etiquette.”

The man slowly shifted his gaze from Ebony, turning and staring down at the woman by the wall. He smiled. “What interests me,” his eyes widened until they were totally rimmed with white, “is how you got in here.”

“Your spell was pathetic,” Ebony said, voice quick. “It was easy, too easy to break th  
—”

Ebony frowned as the man reeled back with anger. It was too easy to break through – she completed the sentence in her mind. Way too easy. “You’ve done it, haven’t you?” she said, her voice a hiss. “You’ve gone and got the attention of something horrible.”

The man, whether he understood or not, simply laughed. “I will complete my rite – a new future will be generated.”

“You don’t get it. You have to stop this now. Something is eating your magic, you total fool. Can’t you feel it? Breaking through both of your protection spells was easier than blowing my nose. Something has got hold of your magic, and it’s weakening it as we speak.”

The man ignored her warning and laughed once more. “I am here to rewrite the universe,” he announced grandly. “To solidify in the minds of all a great new future—”

“Stop it,” Ebony pleaded. “Let the woman go, and just get out of here while you can.”

The man grabbed his book, closing it to reveal an emblem emblazoned on the back. It looked like a family seal of some description. It had two lions and a single sword. “My employers will have the future they seek,” he said through clenched teeth. “And my power will finally be realized, for I am the greatest of all wizards.”

“You aren’t a wizard,” she snapped back. “You’re an idiot. Now, I don’t know where you learned magic, and right now, it doesn’t matter. You have to listen to me. Don’t go through with this rite. There are things waiting to—”

“I am something greater than a wizard, you are right. But you are also wrong, for I will finish this spell. And you, witch, will finally witness true magic.”

Ebony, panic rising, tried to think of what to do. She couldn’t solve this situation with magic; it was way past that. If she added any more magic to this disaster, she’d only fan the flames of the fire. Whatever forces the man had attracted, whatever creatures he’d brought to him through his purposeless use of magic – she could feel them pressing in. If she cracked out a fireball now, she’d only invite their attention her way. No. She had to end this, but she had to do it without magic. She couldn’t even rely on her gun – the bullets were imbued with powerful runes, after all.

Could she call for backup? Could she turn around, run back up the stairs, and ask for a non-magical gun, or at least a really big stick? If she’d guessed this man would have been idiotic enough to call such powerful creatures his way and to have a hostage, she’d never have swapped bullets in the first place. But now here she was, without a weapon and without a hope.

The man smiled then gave a sharp laugh. Perhaps he guessed Ebony’s desperate situation, or perhaps he was just mad.

He opened his book and began to chant.

“No!” Ebony shrieked.

She did the only thing she could think of and ran for him.

Just as the man dipped a hand down to touch the coffin, to awaken the Death within the stillness, Ebony lunged.

She whirled at him with the back of her pistol, aiming for his temple.

But the man, despite his sickly looking state, snapped to the side with incredible speed. He brought up a sacred knife and slashed at Ebony.

She ducked back, trying to keep herself between the man and his hostage. She couldn't let him finish the rite, and she couldn't let him take out his frustrations on the poor woman.

"Do not interfere," he screeched. "The spell is almost complete. All it needs is blood," the word rattled out of his throat like a coin down a copper tube.

Blood would seal the spell, giving it life. The man had probably intended to open the coffin and use the flesh of the body – regardless of how disgusting it sounded. But in place of that, blood would do. The blood would bind with the spell, helping it to live. But the man wouldn't be foolish enough to use his own blood. He couldn't be that dumb, because the blood would transfer the life from one thing into another. It would absorb the story of the giver into the given.

The man began to slash at Ebony, his movements vicious and quick. She was more than agile enough to keep out of his range.

He slashed at her arm, but she managed to duck down and roll out of his way.

He turned his gaze to the woman. His yellow hands tightened around the blade, and his eyes narrowed to slits. "Time to finish this," he hissed.

Ebony, still on the ground, kicked at his legs. Her foot connected with the back of one of his knees and brought him down to the ground with a thud.

He screamed at her, twisting her way and trying to grab her arm.

Ebony began to scream. "Backup! Help! I need backup down here." She had no hope that her voice would reach her friends. There was too much magic around for sound to travel in a straight line. So she kept fighting. She angled a kick right at the man's arms and managed to connect with the book. It spiraled out of his grip and off into the darkness of the crypt.

The man let out an aching scream.

So did the woman. She screamed right in Ebony's ear, and right at the wrong time. It shocked Ebony, and the man lunged forward.

His sacred blade sliced across the top of her arm, sending blood splattering out in an arc.

Ebony screamed, arm bursting with pain.

She grabbed the man's elbow with her good hand and dug into the flesh. She twisted the arm forward and away from her. She brought up her knee, right into the soft flesh under his chin.

Her knee connected with a satisfying thud. The man's jaw made a clicking sound, and he fell down, unconscious.

....

Ebony lay there, motionless.

Then the cavalry came.

She turned to see Ben, torch in hand, its beam lancing around the cold stone room. "Ebony," he said with a choked breath, "what's going on?"

Ebony took several shaky inhalations. "It's okay. The guy's down." She managed to get to her feet.

In the torchlight, she could make out Nate's distinctive form. Her stomach kicked, but she quickly dismissed it as leftover adrenaline.

She couldn't stop her eyes from locking onto him.

"Are you okay?" he said quickly, carefully, kindly. His voice was strong and, for once, she was overjoyed to hear that unmistakable hint of control.

She put a hand up to her profusely bleeding arm and was about to mutter a reply when he walked straight past her. He rushed over to the woman by the wall, kneeling down before her with an expression that would set any lady at ease.

Ebony had barely a moment to register the deep disappointment flickering through her chest before it ignited with rage. “Why you complete—” she began. Before she could get the words out, a circle opened beneath her. Clear white symbols formed along its edges, its girth growing and growing with power.

“Oh, no,” she choked out the words just as a hand emerged from the circle and latched onto her ankle.

This time Nate did look over at her, his face filled with confusion.

The hand began to pull. With a tremendous force Ebony couldn’t fight, it yanked her through the floor of the crypt.

“Ebony?” Nate screamed, lurching toward the circle.

It was too late. The hand had her.

Ebony Bell disappeared completely, leaving the crypt full of police, candlelight, and a blood-spattered book no one would notice.

## Chapter 8

Ebony didn't scream. She didn't have to. She knew where she was going, so she just let the fear ride through her like a wave on its way to shore.

She dropped through the circle as if it were a glowing tunnel through the center of the earth... quite possibly because that's exactly what it was.

Witches used several ways to transport themselves – not just cars, trains, feet, and all those other mundane forms of locomotion. Witches had several more tricks up their sleeves. While site-to-site transport was something you were more likely to see in a sci-fi, there were other ways to get someone from A to B without having to fork out a couple of bucks for a bus ticket.

The circle of light she was now breathlessly hurtling through was just such a way. A witch would create a magical symbol at the intended destination, careful to write down all the right runes along its circumference in case the transporter accidentally turned into an incinerator. Then, at the location you were trying to transport to, you would draw another magical circle. While an ordinary witch couldn't do it, if enough powerful witches gathered in one spot, they could use their combined magical force to write a circle anywhere, without being physically present.

The two magical circles would connect, temporarily emptying out the space in between, whether it be earth, building, sky, or forest – and create a perfectly straight, perfectly neat tube. The witch or the intended target for the transport would hurtle along the magical tube at fantastic speeds to her destination.

Witches rarely used this type of locomotion because, not surprisingly, it messed up their hair.

As Ebony spun further down through the earth, the strata of assorted colored dirt flicking past like lines on a motorway, she tried not to scream.

*Oh no, oh no, oh no*, she thought. What are they going to do to me?

In a snap, she arrived at her destination.

She emerged from the roof of some kind of underground cavern and headed straight for the ground at literally break-neck speed. Instead of crashing into the rock-hard ground, a magical circle on the floor sent out a wave of energy to slow her velocity. It wasn't like falling onto a pillow, or candy floss, or any other appreciably soft surface. It was more like having the acceleration literally sucked out of her. The magic was hard at work flowing through Ebony, convincing every one of her constituent particles they weren't in motion at all – instead, they were as still and safe as an undisturbed tree.

Ebony drifted down toward the ground, touching it like nothing heavier than a mote of dust.

She righted herself, ignoring the blood dripping from her arm as she stood to attention like a trained soldier.

Though her body still shook with the surprise of being sucked through the earth and the residual adrenaline of her fight, Ebony tried to remain as still as she could.

The cavern was dark and, as the light from the landing circle ebbed away, it became only darker. That didn't stop her from seeing. A witch learns very early on in her career that there are certain things that can be seen in the dark and be seen very clearly. Humans mistakenly believe you need light for the eyes to function and thus see, but they've forgotten some of their very own sayings. Because wasn't it true that you could also see with your mind's eye? And couldn't you see into the future? Couldn't you also see when things weren't going to end well?

From Ebony's landing spot, she began to see nine dark figures walking toward her. They were dressed in nothing but could hardly be referred to as naked. If being nude meant you lacked something – be it clothes, dignity, or warmth – then you couldn't use that to describe these women. They lacked nothing at all. Each and every one of them brimmed with enough magic to consume a city. But it wasn't purposeless, directionless magic. It was refined, determined.

That's why they all seemed so complete, Ebony knew, because they were. With the refined magic brimming through their forms, minds, and souls – these women had completed their Rites and had written their full stories of life. Each one was their own novel, their own epic narrative, and each complete without another word to be written.

They were power written into forms, contained in bodies.

They were also the Coven.

"You are before the Coven," one said, her head tilting imperiously to the side, "Ebony Elizabeth Bell."

Ebony dejectedly clutched a hand to her bleeding arm, feeling the wet blood slick through her fingers. She could feel her heartbeat beneath, rattling through her skin with a strong flighty shake.

She didn't reply. She couldn't – she hadn't been asked a direct question.

"You are here to answer to the Coven," another witch said, her long silver hair furling around her like a cloak.

"You have resisted your duty," another witch spoke. This time Ebony knew the voice. It was her mother, and the words she spoke had a tinge of emotion the rest of the Coven didn't share. "And you have been careless."

Ebony took another steadying breath, incapable of controlling how it shook through her chest. It came out in nervous puffs, like someone was at her throat, trying to find out what was inside by shaking it.

"You have breached a sacred rule. You have revealed your identity to a mundane." The witch with long silver hair remained still, but her voice grew louder as if she'd walked straight up to Ebony's ear.

Ebony's eyes widened. What? They were bringing her to charge for revealing she was a witch to a mundane? Surely, there were mitigating circumstances? She'd just saved that woman's life.

"There are mitigating circumstances," one of the witches conceded, "which we have already taken into account."

Ebony let out a tortured sigh that punctuated the air like a bullet in a library. She couldn't believe this. She'd done everything she could in that crypt, everything humanly possible. How was she to know he'd kidnapped someone?

Yes, she may have broken the rules. But she hadn't done it based on a whim; she'd done it to protect—

"But the fact remains," a witch with a crackly voice said, "that you revealed your true nature to a non-magical human."

"Such an event is unacceptable," her mother spoke again, her voice still a pitch above everyone else's.

If Ebony was an expert, and she was when it came to her mother, Avery Bell was viciously angry.

Why wouldn't she be? Her own daughter had been brought up before the Coven for punishment – one of the greatest insults a witch could receive. And though the blame would rest squarely on Ebony's shoulders, that wouldn't stop her mother from blaming herself. It was the mother's role, after all, to teach her little witch the ways of magic.

Ebony closed her eyes, feeling the pressure of her pain, shame, and fear welling like a balloon inside her. It pressed out at her skin like prisoners trying to escape jail.

"You have flaunted a rule and must pay the price," the gray-haired witch declared.

Ebony stopped herself from screaming back that this wasn't fair. The rule was there to stop witches from strutting down the street and blowing rubbish bins up in front of old ladies. It was there to keep magic hidden. But when the circumstances determined it, a witch could reveal her true nature, if lives were at stake. And lives had been at stake. Ebony hadn't done anything wrong. None of this was fair.

"We have decided you are punishable for this deed. And our decision will stand," the crackly voiced witch seemed to grate through her words like rusted-iron smashing together in a strong wind.

Ebony bit her lips hard, half to chase away the pain in her arm and half to stop herself from speaking. She knew the rules of the Coven.

She clutched her bleeding arm tighter, her head becoming lighter with every heartbeat. Magic was forbidden in the presence of the Coven, so Ebony would simply have to hold on to her wound until she was allowed to leave. If she was allowed to leave, that was.

She shuddered, sharp nausea blasting through her. She rocked back but managed to keep her balance.

If the other witches noticed her rapidly deteriorating state, they weren't letting on. They weren't about to speed up this meeting for anything as mundane as serious blood loss.

"We have taken your situation into account," the gray-haired woman said, her voice trailing off. "Your punishment will be submitting to magical restrictions for the period of one lunar month."

Oh, no. Ebony almost let her hand fall from her bleeding shoulder.

What kind of restrictions?

"All external performances of magic will be restricted."

Ebony put a hand up to her lips.

"For one lunar month, you will live as the non-magical do – you will not be able to summon, cast, curse, hex, or bless," the crackly voiced witch rattled off the list quickly.

"You will live as a normal, in punishment for not being able to keep your magical side hidden," her mother said, her voice bottoming down from its once high pitch. "It is hoped that such an experience will give you the understanding to try harder next time."

Ebony rocked on her feet. She couldn't believe this... she just....

"You will find, I fancy," the gray-haired witch tipped her head to the side, "what the important things in life are when you realize you do not have your magic to protect them."

Ebony didn't respond; she couldn't... she was beginning to feel numb – her hands, her fingers, her heart.

"Once the period of a lunar month is complete, your magic will return, and your lesson will be complete."

Ebony opened her mouth, her lips as heavy as anvils. Though the situation was perilous, and she shouldn't make it worse by speaking out of turn, she had to know one thing

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Before she could push the words out of her sore and tight throat, her mother cut in. "Your work with the police force will be unaffected. We will send a replacement. It will be up to the police whether they allow you to retain your position for this month as a normal."

The word normal rang in Ebony's ears like a bell, louder and clearer than anything else that had been said so far.

"You will go now," her mother said, "to begin your punishment."



The gray-haired witch stepped forward, two golden bracelets and a choker appearing in her hands. They were plain, but Ebony knew the inside edges were engraved with precise, powerful symbols.

The woman clicked her fingers, and, in a flash, the bracelets snapped around Ebony's wrists and the choker appeared about her throat.

They weren't tight enough to cut off her circulation, but they would be impossible to get off.

"We will inform the department as to your punishment," the crackly voiced witch said through a breath. "And furnish them with their replacement immediately."

"You will go now," her mother said. Though it was probably Ebony's imagination, she fancied her mother's eyes were hooded with something other than shame and anger.

"You will be sure to seek medical attention," she added forcefully.

Ebony had just enough humor left somewhere in her to offer a snort. Though her mother had just sentenced Ebony to a month of being at the whims of reality, she was still a mother. And Avery Bell wasn't about to let her only daughter bleed to death.

"Go now," said the gray-haired witch with finality. "And experience a month of a normal life. Experience the fear, uncertainty, and helplessness with which a life can be rewritten – and overcome it. With this new appreciation, you will better fulfill your sacred task as a witch of Vale."

The circle of light that had signaled Ebony's landing barely several minutes before opened up again. The portal appeared above Ebony, and she had a fleeting glance of her mother's face before being transported away.

With nausea, fear, shame, and the horrid prospect of a month without magic dawning on Ebony, the final portal opened above. With a sound like someone plunging a drain, she erupted out of the floor of the crypt. Her landing was soft but sudden enough to send her head reeling.

The crypt was now bustling with activity, bodies, and movement. Thankfully, the bodies were alive and very much police.

Someone had set up a light. It was all the better to see the shocked expressions on everyone's faces as she sprang from the ground as if she was simply too unpalatable for the earth to swallow.

"Ebony!" Ben raced over to her. "I just got the call from the Coven." He had his phone in his hands.

Two hands grabbed her shoulders, pulling her gently to her feet.

They weren't Ben's hands, Ebony realized, mind slowing down with every second. Ben had a mobile in his hands, and he was standing... over there.

With her blinks slowing and her mind grinding to a stop, she realized who had pulled her up. It was Nate. He wore an expression she'd never seen. It reminded her of the time her father had gotten home to find Ebony's mother at the center of a messy magical explosion. It was pressed, tight, wild... caring.

"Ebony," someone said. "Hey, get a hold of yourself; you're bleeding everywhere. Use your magic to heal yourself—"

She replied by lurching forward and throwing up all over the flattened tie of a certain Detective Nate.

She didn't have the time to track his expression, humorous though it would've been. She fell forward and into the arms of unconsciousness.

## Chapter 9

Ebony woke slowly. She climbed up into consciousness like a person scrambling from a deep well.

She started to notice the light on her face, then the feel of the soft sheets underneath her and, finally, the strange, vague fog filling her body like mist in a bottle.

“You’re awake,” she heard Ben’s voice from somewhere by her feet.

What was Ben doing in her bedroom? She wondered sleepily.

“Finally,” Nate chuckled through a short cough. “We don’t have to listen to you snoring anymore.”

What was Nate doing in her bedroom? She thought with rising alarm.

It wasn’t until she managed to blink through the awful daze surrounding her that she realized she wasn’t even in her room.

Ebony was in the hospital.

She tried to sit up so she could get a better look at her surroundings before leaving the building promptly. Witches, as a rule, didn’t like hospitals. They never needed to visit them. There was nothing magic, herbs, tinctures, candles, and a few blessings couldn’t cure. If the magic didn’t work, you could be darn sure ordinary human medicine wouldn’t, either.

Her arm would hardly move. So she just tried harder until a dull, overpowering ache erupted through it. “Owww.” She blinked, trying to summon enough magic to cut out the pain.

The magic wouldn’t come.

“Hey,” Nate put a hand on her arm. “You just got stabbed. You might want to take the time to lie down. I’ve had enough experience with heavy blood loss to know it’s never a good idea to do a marathon afterward. You’re in the hospital for a reason, Ebony.”

Ebony attempted it again, more desperately now. She struggled to push the magic into her wound, tried to encompass it, tried to seal it off – but the magic wouldn’t come. It was useless, like pumping at a bone-dry well.

Ebony Bell didn’t have any magic.

“What the,” her voice wobbled like a thin sheet of unsupported metal, “wh... what am I doing here?”

Ben offered a barely reassuring smile. “You don’t remember? You went Rambo on that criminal in the crypt, dealt with Death, and then...”

Got sucked into the earth to meet the Coven – Ebony finished in her mind.

She squeezed her eyes tightly shut. She didn’t want anyone to see her like this. And if she couldn’t hide from them, at least she could hide behind the thin wall of her eyelids.

“You got, um,” Ben’s voice was more uncomfortable than usual, his brash joy gone, “punished.”

Ebony remembered, alright, and blimey it hurt. She could feel the bracelets around her wrists and the choker about her neck. These things were going to be with her for the next twenty-eight days, come rain, shine, or magical storm. No matter what happened to her, they would ensure she couldn’t fall back on her magic. She would have to, as the Coven told her, spend the next lunar month like a non-magical human.

Oh, no. How did they do it? How did humans—

“Don’t you go beating yourself up, Eb,” Ben chuckled tenderly. “You’re already pretty injured, kid.”

Ben hardly ever called her kid. He’d stopped just after she started working for the police department – just after she’d saved him from a cursed rubbish bin. Ebony fancied that at that point, Ben had realized she was old enough and powerful enough to look after herself.

Now the word stuck out like a bloodied sword in a patch of pansies. She was a kid again in his eyes – small, vulnerable, and not to be trusted with sharp things and responsibilities.

She had to change the subject. “Do you have your new witch yet?” She made her voice as strong as possible, but it came out harsh and cutting.

“Yeah. Name’s Chalcedony, I think.” Ben smiled awkwardly. “She’s nice, I guess. But, Eb, we don’t blame you for what happened. I mean, I don’t even understand it. You didn’t do anything wrong. You took that guy down. That lady was fine—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Ebony said sharply before falling silent.

Chalcedony, why had the Coven picked her? If Ebony was flamboyant but likable, Chalcedony was everything but. The woman was direct, efficient, powerful, and to-the-point – like a sacred knife to the throat. She was tall, like Ebony, and slender too. But her eyes were a brilliant green and her hair a shocking blond.

Ebony didn’t usually feel jealous of other women’s looks because there was much more to beauty than attractiveness. But Chalcedony... she was different.

With a thought that boiled unbidden from her unconscious, Ebony realized Chalcedony was just what a certain Nate would like. Finally, a witch who did her job, did it quickly, and did it right. The long legs and bright smile would help, too.

“But I don’t know, Eb – what’s going to happen to you?” Ben patted the end of her hospital bed, his smile making him look more and more like a comforting teddy bear.

“It will only last for a month. And then, well, I have a contract with the police department. So unless you terminate it, I’ll go back to work.” Ebony kept her voice even, but it had as much force as a baby punching a wall.

She’d go back to work. That was if the police didn’t realize Chalcedony was everything Ebony wasn’t – a witch who showed up to work, didn’t steal coffee, and liked to work long, unreasonable hours.

For the first time in her life, she was starting to feel vulnerable. Not just that fleeting feeling of displacement she sometimes got when she’d take the long view of her life and look at all the things she should have achieved by now. No, this was deeper. This was real. This shook her insides like an earthquake, leaving her unsure she’d ever find her feet again.

Was this what humans felt all the time? Was this how Ben would react if the same thing happened to him? Not that he would have quite the same worries at being replaced by a leggy blonde, but would he feel just as lost in the face of this uncertainty?

As a witch, Ebony had always been able to call on rites, blessings, spells, and magic. If something went wrong, she knew ways of righting it – usually by writing it, or rite-ing it. Now she didn’t have such tools, she felt like a child floundering in the ocean. *How did ordinary people do it?!*

“What happens now?” she asked her life more than the two men in the room.

Nate smiled. “That’s up to you.” He had that curious, unreadable expression on his face – the one that was starting to make Ebony suspect there was far more to him than met the eye.

“You can stay on and still be a consultant.” Ben smiled. “But it will have to be in the office. I mean, I can always use another trained eye looking over the files. You still know more of the magical criminals than I do.”

Ebony raised her uninjured arm and looked at the bracelet. “But you won’t let me outside, right?”

“Eb,” Ben sighed, “look, it’s more for your protection than anything else. I don’t want you to get injured. It’s just for a month. It’ll be like a holiday. You’ll be in the office, stealing doughnuts and coffee and getting on my nerves.”

She couldn't stop herself from chuckling. "You have a strange idea of what counts as a holiday."

"Twenty-eight days," Nate said from beside her. "The time will fly."

"It better not." She settled into her pillow. "I'm too injured to chase after it."

She was surprised to hear Nate give a chuckle.

Could she do it, could she actually live for a lunar month without any magic at all? How would she decide what to wear, for one thing?

Just as Ebony allowed herself to fantasize about the month that might be, the image of the cowering woman from the crypt leaped into her mind. "The woman – the one from the cemetery – what happened to her?"

"She's fine." Nate shrugged, receding back from Ebony slightly. "We took her home, and she's sleeping it off as far as I can tell."

"Will she get counseling, reparations—" her voice felt stiffer than usual.

Ben laughed, though it sounded more like a hiccup. "Oh, she doesn't need reparations, Eb. That was Cecilia Grimshore – of the Grimshore legacy – the same family that owns half of Vale."

"Oh, right," Ebony conceded, her voice quiet. "But, she... ah... it would have been stressful for her," she said blankly, not able to think of a better way to put it. Stressful? Being kidnapped while a madman performed a magical rite on the grave of your dead father? Yeah, traditionally quite stressful, that. She kept trying to search for a way to say what she had to. "I – look, she would have seen some stuff; she probably needs to be watched over or something."

"She was debriefed by the Magical Counseling Unit," Ben reassured her. "She understands what has happened to her. And we'll keep an eye on her – it's department policy after something like this – you know that."

Yes, she did know the standard procedure, but it didn't matter. She was trying to tell Ben, without actually telling him, that she had the strangest feeling about that woman... about the whole situation, in fact. It was the way the woman had screamed just as the book with the lion crest had been kicked out of the man's hands. The more Ebony thought about it, the stranger it seemed. That scream – it hadn't been one of fright... it had been one of loss, of shock.

She tried to run after the memory in her mind, tried desperately to recreate the scene from the crypt so she could remember the exact pitch and timing of the woman's scream. "It was strange," she said in a crackling voice, "really strange. You need to look into it."

"It's all been dealt with, Eb." Ben tried for a smile. "The guy's in prison, Cecilia is fine, and everything is sorted out. The Coven has assured us it is all done and dusted."

Ebony didn't reply to that.

Silence began to stretch between them. Usually, she was skilled enough to read the different levels of silence – hearing all the sounds that filtered from the in-between. Now she just heard the lack of conversation, as if that was all there really was.

"When do I get out of here?" she asked, realizing the only way to break a silence of voices was to speak yourself.

"Depends on how many bench presses you try to do," Nate quipped. Though his usual sarcasm was there, it had a warmer, friendlier, lighter edge to it.

It wouldn't last, she assured herself. She couldn't see the arrogant detective leaving her alone for too long. But for now, Ebony didn't mind so much. "How about I promise to do zero bench presses and only a couple of sit-ups?"

Nate shrugged. "Just as long as you don't take up boxing in the interim, you should be out by tomorrow morning."

Ebony glanced at the clock on the wall behind Ben. She usually instinctively knew the time, but without her magic, she was finding it hard to know where she was, let alone when she was.

According to the clock, it was eleven. Judging by the light filtering in from outside, it was morning, which meant she had been knocked out most of the night.

She put her good hand up to her head. "How long was I out?"

"You lost a lot of blood." Ben patted the edge of her bed again.

"And you were sucked through the ground, which didn't help," Nate assured her with a grin.

"But tomorrow morning? I can't get out until tomorrow morning? I feel fine," she lied.

"No, you don't." Nate picked up on the lie immediately. "You feel terrible, and you look worse."

"But what am I meant to do? Just lie here?" Ebony's mind couldn't begin to adjust to the zero possibilities that presented themselves to her. Lying in bed all day without any magic sounded like a death sentence.

"Yeah, you lie there." Nate crossed his arms and looked down at her as if daring her to jump out of bed. "You need to recover. Now, I know you're new to this whole non-magical world, but when we humans are knocked down, we need to rest for a bit."

She shook her head petulantly. "No way. I know that saying – when you're knocked down, you get back up again."

Nate smiled through his teeth. "Yep, but it doesn't tell you when to get back up again. Don't worry, Ebony. You will get up and then race around in your usual sugar-filled craze. But it's just going to take time."

She felt a pang at the way Nate had said her name, but she dismissed it with a loud, obvious sniff. "I don't know how you humans manage it."

"*We* humans," Nate corrected her. "For the next twenty-eight days, you're going to be just like Ben and me."

"You mean I have to wear a tie and scratch my crotch when I think no one's looking?" she asked, a cheeky smile spreading across her lips, despite the cutting pain from her shoulder.

Ben snorted. Nate just shook his head.

"Okay, fine." Ebony adjusted her hair, making sure it tapered off the pillow to one side. "I accept the challenge. I'll be a human for a lunar month. But I'm warning you – I'll do a better job than you do."

"You're on." Nate uncrossed his arms and nodded his head.

At that moment, Ben got a call. He grabbed his phone, answering it as he walked from the room.

It left just the two of them.

That silence came back, but it was different now. Without her magic, she couldn't tell why or how it was different – all she knew was that for some reason, it was... important.

"Whose desk am I going to sit at?" she asked, arching an eyebrow and trying to sound as sassy as possible. Whether it was due to her new non-magical status, or something else, Ebony couldn't manage her usual aloof tone.

"It depends if you want to sit on anyone's lap," Nate said, face blank.

Ebony sucked in her lips and looked at him askance. "I think the police department would frown upon that."

"Oh, it wouldn't be mine." Nate kept his easy, blank expression going.

She was starting to wonder whether he'd trained as an actor, judging by the impossible cool he'd assume while teasing her. Yet at other times, the frustration would

break through the surface, furrowing his brow and drawing in his lips. The only possible analogy Ebony could come up with was that Detective Nate had a lot of masks, all for just one face.

"It would probably be Frank's lap," Nate continued.

She rolled her eyes. Frank was as old and brittle as bone left out in the desert. He was still on the force because he was a juggernaut when it came to filing and could remember the criminal history of Vale better than any one of Ebony's books. Still, the reason Frank could remember so much about Vale was he'd been there for most of it. The guy was pushing eighty. "If I sat on Frank's lap, I'd break it," she said coldly, trying to lift her chin, even though she was lying down.

"Your words, not mine. But are you calling yourself fat?"

"I would curse you, you little—" Ebony said through gritted teeth.

"But you can't." Nate shrugged. "That's the thing about being human – no hexes."

"Don't worry. I'll just remember." She used her good hand to tap the side of her temple. "And as for whose desk I'll sit at, well, I'll sit wherever I want when all you detectives are out of the office." She stretched her good arm and smiled.

His jaw dropped.

"I wouldn't leave any doughnuts, coffee, or anything else at all sitting on your desk if I were you." She kept up her smile. "I've heard Frank gets peckish these days."

Before Nate could reply, Ben walked back into the room. "The color is back in your cheeks, Eb," he announced happily. "You're looking more and more like yourself with every moment."

More and more like herself? Ebony tried to suppress a shudder. She'd never been less like herself – she had no magic, no purpose, and no power – and yet, somehow, she still managed to look like Ebony. How did that work?

"We've got to go now." Ben motioned to Nate. "We've had something come up down-town – another bust-up between the Maldini brothers."

Nate unfolded his arms and nodded automatically.

"As for you, Eb," Ben's usual smile was now back in force, "I want you to promise me two things. Number one – don't check yourself out of the hospital until you're allowed to leave. If you do, I'm going to send Nate here to track you down and drag you back, even if he has to arrest you."

This brought an enormous grin to Nate's face, one Ebony couldn't share. "What—" she began to protest.

"Two," Ben rolled on, "I want you at work on Monday, 9 A.M. sharp."

"Nine in the morning?" she repeated, incredulous at the very suggestion.

"Yeah, regular hours for you now. And you have to stay at work until five-thirty. No ducking off because you'd rather have a nap."

Nate chuckled.

Once again, Ebony didn't join in. "But—" she began.

"No buts, Eb. You're human now – and this is how we do it. Now we've got to go. You know what you've got to do, and you know what will happen if you don't do it." Ben waved a short goodbye and ducked out of the room.

Nate followed, but not before peaking his eyebrows at Ebony and smiling sardonically.

Just as she was looking around for something to throw at the departing detectives, Ben ducked his head back around the door. "One more thing, Eb."

"What?" she spat back.

"I'm glad you're okay."

Slightly disarmed, Ebony nodded at him. She listened to their departing footsteps echoing through the corridor.

They had answered some of her questions but posed others. She now knew what she was going to do for the next twenty-eight days: look through old files while stealing what scraps of food she could off the desks of others. She knew what she was supposed to do, alright, but how she was supposed to do it still baffled her.

Did humans really just throw on their clothes in the morning and go out to meet the day with no idea what it would bring and no real way of changing what they didn't like?

Another thing bothered her. Just what was she supposed to do after being beholden to the confusing Nate for so long? She knew he would hold her currently magicless state over her – like a child ogling at the once proud butterfly trapped in a glass jar.

Just how was she supposed to deal with him? And how – Ebony gave an involuntary shiver – was she meant to deal with Chalcedony?

Though Ebony wouldn't admit this to Nate, or even Ben, she had a history with Chalcedony. And that was putting it mildly. They'd once been best friends.

And when witches are best friends, they tend to form the types of ties that can moor a relationship through even the most tempestuous emotional storms. Yet Ebony and Chalcedony were no longer on speaking terms.

It was to do with a silly plastic toy.

She forced her eyes closed. It would be alright, she tried to assure herself as she surrendered to the weakness at the edge of her consciousness. She would make it through this month.

But would she be the same at the end of it?

...

Ebony checked out of the hospital when she was permitted to leave.

She sighed, trying not to look too sheepish as her father pulled the car up in front of the hospital doors. His face had worn precisely the same expression since he'd come to see her yesterday. It was the same look he'd given her when she'd wandered off into the city as a child; the same look as when she'd fallen off her bike and broken her leg; and the very same look as when she'd been magically mugged on her very first day of police work.

He hadn't said a great deal. He was a man of few but great words when he spoke them, but he never said anything needlessly.

When she piled into the car, accidentally banging her shoulder on the door mirror, he hissed. He sounded like a steam-pipe ready to burst. Sure enough, as he started the engine and drove the car slowly out of the hospital grounds, the pipe began to rupture, "You should have been more careful," he said off-hand as if he was lecturing the traffic ahead.

She grinned, lips pressing into her teeth. Unlike her mother, Ebony's father always meant well. Not to say that Avery Bell was malicious, but you couldn't be sure what she was thinking, let alone planning. Reading her was like reading the weather a year in advance – a pointless exercise that always underestimated just how much rain would come.

Ebony's father was obvious – he said what he meant, and he meant what he said. He was plain and open in his intentions. And right now, he intended to give Ebony a piece of his mind. "I don't get it. I've taught you about combat. What were you thinking letting that guy get a hold of his knife?"

"I wasn't thinking, Dad," she said in a small, somehow cheerful voice. There was something truly amazing about parents – no matter how old you were, they would always still be older than you – and thus fully capable of showing you the rashness of youth. Putting you in your place was the perennial right of all parents everywhere. "It all happened too fast, in the dark, and with Death in the room."

“No excuse,” he said briskly as if he were talking to a recruit. “If the guy has a weapon, you get the weapon off him. None of this letting it fall to the floor – you hurl it across the room if you have to, but you get it out of their reach.”

“I know, I know. Things just happened too quickly. I’ll do better next time.”

“Yes, you will,” he agreed.

That was the great thing about her dad – yes, he had rules; yes, he had standards. But he never set them at a height you couldn’t reach. What’s more, he never once doubted you had the courage to leap that high. He believed in Ebony with the type of strong, hard, well-learned belief that only an ex-detective-inspector could muster.

She waited for the question she knew was coming.

“So, you want to go home? You know... your mother would like to see you.”

She stared ahead, pretending she was more interested in the traffic. It was a curious thing, for sure, but her parents still lived together and were still happily married, despite the fact Avery Bell was a witch of the Coven. You make choices, her mother always told her, and sometimes they seem ridiculous to other people – but you still make them, and they’re still yours.

Her mother had made her choice. Even though she was on call for the duties of the Coven, she always came home to Ebony’s father. They didn’t go out to the movies, to restaurants, or take short walks in the park anymore, though. Avery Bell was far too powerful a witch, with too much magic in her veins to be able to walk down an ordinary street. Avery’s skin, eyes, expression – the lot of it – reflected the magic within. Symbols were etched into her skin with magical, glowing runes. Her once dark hair now shone as if each strand was made of a pure string of light. Her eyes glinted – sometimes blue, sometimes red, sometimes white.

There was no way Avery Bell would not be recognized for what she was – a witch – and as such, she just didn’t go out much. That didn’t matter to Ebony’s father. He’d go out to do his shopping in the morning and come back to Avery’s stories at night.

They were happy, and somehow it worked out. But as for whether Ebony would like to go home now? There wasn’t a chance.

“No. I’m busy,” she said, her voice stiff.

“Busy?” Her dad looked over at her with the same piercing gaze that had cut through more criminal lies than Ebony had sucked down sweets. “Have you got great plans to sit on your couch and mope for the next month?”

“Look,” she didn’t fancy having her intentions pried apart by the ex-detective, “she almost let me bleed to death.” Her voice peaked. “And she shackled me.” Ebony brought up both her wrists. “I can’t say I’m looking forward to having a cup of tea with her.”

“Now, Eb, don’t you be that way. You know the rules of the Coven well enough. Your mother did what she had to—”

“Had to? I didn’t get a chance to defend myself, Dad. There wasn’t any due process. They convicted me well before they dragged me underneath the earth.” She turned away to stare at a passing building as if it offered far more interest for her than the current conversation.

“Look, I ain’t saying you shouldn’t be angry. But be smart and angry. Your mother did what she had to – I know you know that. But I also think you know that there is no point shutting her out. She’s your mother. That doesn’t change just because you have some more jewelry to wear for the next month.”

“*More jewelry?*” her voice was high. “These are powerful charms that prevent me from summoning any magic. And she didn’t even try to hear my side of things.” The emotion started to crack through Ebony like heat over ice. “There was something up with that woman in the crypt, Dad, something really weird.”



“Okay, Eb, that’s a place to start from. And I always taught my daughter to go with her instincts. If you think there was something up, then you find out just what that is, and when the time comes, you tell your story—”

She flung up her good hand. “I was ready to tell them, but they wouldn’t listen.”

“Because you didn’t have any evidence,” her father said flatly. “It’s all about evidence, Ebony. You think I haven’t been dragged up before the Commissioner or a judge and been raked over the coals for a mistake I knew I didn’t make?”

She flicked her hair over her shoulder, pulling it out from behind her to play with it sullenly.

“Because I have. And now you have. But there’s only one place to go from here. You get your evidence, and then you make your case again. You think there’s something up with this woman, Eb? You think you’ve been unfairly punished? Alright then, you prove it. Now, Ben’s already called me, and I know you’ll be working down at the department for the month —”

She rolled her eyes.

“Okay,” her father kept on going, “you’ve got an opportunity. You have a month to find out what really happened. You stay late if you have to, but you do it. Now,” he turned to her as he drew up at a set of lights, “you do not, under any circumstances, go looking for trouble.”

Ebony huffed but still kept quiet.

“But you use the opportunities that present themselves to you, and you find your case.”

“How am I going to do that if I’m locked up inside that department all day long?”

“During the day, you use what’s at your disposal. Start with Frank, start with the files – and then move on. Most police don’t realize this, but most crime repeats itself. In those files, somewhere, will be what you need. Trust me. Then there’s the phone, Eb, and it’s a great invention.”

“Hardy ha,” she intoned dryly. “But surely I can only get so much done by sitting around and staring at paper.”

“Well, you knock off at 5:30. What you do after that is up to you.”

She turned to face her father, surprised at what he’d said. “You aren’t suggesting I go investigate this woman at night—”

“No, I am not suggesting you break any police rules, any Coven rules, or in any way put yourself in danger. What I’m suggesting is that you use your imagination to find another way. There’s always another way. You just have to find *your* way.”

She took a breath, turning back to the window. Shocked, she realized her father had just turned down the street that would take Ebony to her childhood home – and right to her waiting mother. “Dad!” she protested loudly. “I told you not to take me home.”

“You’ve got to find your way. But right now, we’re going my way.”

## Chapter 10

Ebony awoke suddenly, with the distinct impression there was something she had forgotten to do. She remained there for several minutes, surrounded by her many plush, painted-silk cushions, her hair in a muddle as she tried to sift through her memories.

It was Monday, wasn't it? Or was it only Sunday?

She clutched her wounded shoulder, muttering a quick but entirely ineffective curse at the man who'd done it. It was taking quite some time and quite some effort to adjust to not having magic. While she hadn't always been a powerful witch, never in recent memory had she felt so lost.

She had to relearn how to do the most basic of tasks. It was as if she'd lost the use of both her legs and her arms. She'd told Ben, who'd snorted at the very idea. Which was the other problem. No one appreciated how hard this was for her.

They all thought it would be a breeze – a walk in the park. No magic for a month? What's the big deal?

The big deal was she didn't know how to decide anything anymore. All through her adult life, she'd used magic to help her decide what she wanted, what she felt like doing, what she needed. In the morning, it helped her decide what to wear. During the day, it helped her with every decision. It told her what the weather would be like. It suggested which streets to walk down. It decided which friends to drop in on.

Now she didn't have a scrap of it. *What was she meant to do?*

Ever since she'd returned from the hospital, she'd been loafing around in the same sweatpants and t-shirt, eating exactly the same meal all day long (pizza from the takeaway across the street), while sitting on her couch watching TV. By the end of the month, she fancied her friends and family would instigate a search to find her cuddled among the sofa cushions, crushed by a mountain of pizza boxes, but still with one defiant hand on the remote.

Ebony rarely watched TV, only owned said sweat pants and t-shirt because she'd mysteriously found them in her wardrobe, and only ate pizza when her tempestuous fridge decided to turn down its thermostat and freeze all her vegetables.

It had only been a few days, and she'd already changed so much, she realized with a shiver.

None of this was helping her remember precisely what it was she was meant to do.

She pushed at her wall of decadent cushions, causing them to spill out onto the floor of her spacious bedroom. She stared over at the clock her father had given her when she'd gotten out of the hospital. Ordinarily Ebony didn't need a clock. As a witch, she knew enough about time to know what time it was. Not anymore. So her father had shoved the clock in Ebony's hand, muttering something about remembering to set the alarm.

She stared at the clock, hoping it would jog her memory. It was a squat little thing with bucket-like '50s styling. It was made out of a hideous orange plastic that probably predated Ebony by a good thirty years. It was the same clock her father had used all his life to make sure he was never late for work. She could still remember the incessant shrieks of its alarm from her childhood.

Oh.

The memory came back to her like a hand slapping against the window.

*Work.*

This was Monday morning, wasn't it? According to the clock, it was 8:55.

Ebony lay in bed, that slow realization dawning on her. She was meant to be at work in five minutes. The police department was halfway across town.

She pushed up, cushions falling by the wayside. She swung around, feet hitting the plush carpet with soft thuds.

Something strange was happening, Ebony could tell. There was this weird tightness knitting around her stomach. It felt expectant in an entirely unpleasant way.

She was going to be late, really late. And while that prospect rarely bothered Ebony, it was having a strange effect on her today. In the past, if she'd found herself munching on a pastry too late and had only an impossible amount of time to make it to an important appointment, she would have relied on her magic, letting it clear a perfect route to get her wherever she had to go.

Now she was on her own.

She danced from foot-to-foot, staring at the clock as it flicked another minute by. She'd never seen time count down like this – push ahead like it was a mean old grandmother trying to get to the front of the line. It was enough to make her gulp, her throat growing ever tighter with nerves.

She ran over to the wardrobe, her face pressed into the kind of twisted expression you have before you get hit by something hard, heavy, and painful.

She grabbed whatever clothes came to hand. First, a blouse that looked like it belonged in a rendition of an '80s musical, with kaleidoscopic colors and sleeves so puffy you could comfortably hide whole sandwiches in them. Then she snatched a skirt – a svelte little thing cut above the knee, made of beige satin. It looked more like it belonged on a bed in a questionable hotel and less like a functioning piece of clothing, but she didn't have time to question it. She didn't have time to question anything.

She threw on the clothes, stooping down to grab a pair of shoes on her way. Her shoes were low, manageable, careful little items that looked like, and probably were, hand-me-downs from a grandmother somewhere. They were low, brown, and had fake crocodile skin running down to the toe. They were, however, exceedingly comfortable.

Ebony didn't have time to look in the mirror after she'd thrown on her curious ensemble. If she had, she'd have thrown up. But she did think to herself how curious it was that she even owned these clothes. She didn't remember buying them. It was as if things were now popping up in her wardrobe, unbidden, from some great resting place of hideous, unloved clothing.

She thundered down her stairs, wondering what she'd do about breakfast. Did she have time to go to the pizza place? Would they even be open?

She shook her head, flying toward her door and pulling it open. She needed to move onto cooking again. She was an excellent cook – all witches were. Ebony would make the kinds of soups, stews, sauces, puddings, cakes – and various other delights – that would set a person's mouth watering and heart overflowing. She could cure your cold with a pancake, give you a good night's sleep with a chocolate brownie, and mend a broken heart with a full glass of home-made lemonade.

But that was all magic stuff, and she simply wouldn't know where to start now. So she'd stick with pizza and maybe branch out to other takeout cuisines later in the week.

She'd try to steal whatever she could from the police station for breakfast. Ben always had chocolate bars secreted about his jacket and his desk, like a squirrel preparing for winter.

Five minutes after she sprang through the door and down the street, she was back again, face a picture of ashen annoyance. With teeth biting her make-up free lips, she went back for her wallet and her house keys. With the frustration making her want to punch a rubbish bin, Ebony locked up her house. It wasn't something she ever did as a witch. Why use a lock as a deterrent when you could cast a proper protection spell on the place? And the same with her wallet. She very rarely carried it unless she knew she was going to do human-style shopping. For the day-to-day business of a witch, she didn't need the ordinary currency

of people – the magic world had a far more direct system that didn't involve silly paper notes and plastic cards.

Ebony struggled, trying to get her key to work in her lock. She hadn't locked the damn house since she'd bought it three years ago, and now the thing seemed rusted over. But she persevered, teeth clenched so hard she was sure she was about to break her jaw.

Finally, she set off to work. Who knew what the time was? Certainly not her. Maybe 9:15 already? Maybe even 9:30?

As she rushed down the street, she realized with a horrible jolt she didn't even know the bus schedule, the train schedule, or any other useful tidbit of information about the public transport system. She didn't even know where to wait for a bus. While Ebony didn't have a car of her own, she hardly ever took public transport. It was another thing about being a witch – she would find a way when she needed one. She would ask politely, and the universe would deliver.

Now Ebony was streaking down the street, her comfortable granny-loafers padding along while her giant, paint-accident hippie sleeves streamed behind her in the wind.

Her mother had always had a theory about witches and clothing, though Ebony had ignored it up until now. What a witch wore showed more than her mood. What a witch wore showed the condition and expectation of the mind. The shape, the color, the contour, the pattern – all revealed the harmony within.

If her mother was right, Ebony was as discordant as a bunch of three-year-olds hammering out a self-composition on upturned pots and pans.

Finally, she found a bus stop. She tried to not be bothered by the odd looks she received from the people around her. One woman stood politely to one side, seeming to concentrate entirely too hard on keeping her mouth in a straight line. A young kid just cracked a grin wider than the Pacific Ocean and pulled his phone from his pocket, pretending to key in a text message while he took several photos of the hilariously dressed, temporarily magic-less witch.

Ebony was about ready to throttle them all, or just go home and return to her sweatpants and t-shirt, when an old lady drew up beside her. She took one look at Ebony's fake crocodile skin granny-loafers and cooed. "Ooooooh, those look so comfortable, dear."

At first, Ebony looked at the woman carefully, trying to check the old-timer wasn't about to crack a joke.

"I haven't seen those for years." The old woman seemed truly delighted. "They're so stylish and yet so comfortable."

Ebony took a breath and released herself into the confusing, irritating, uncontrollable situation – like a person shrugging their shoulders and jumping off a cliff. "Thanks," she looked down at her loafers, twiddling her toes. "They are pretty comfortable, actually."

The kid to Ebony's side guffawed with laughter, being more open about taking photos of her now. He even muttered a quiet, "Freak."

Ebony tried to mumble a curse back, but stopped, realizing it had no chance at all of working. So... she just stood there. The once proud, saucy, confident witch simply stood there and took the insult.

"You ignore him, dear," said the old woman, still admiring the loafers with obvious appreciation painted over her elderly face. "He's wearing silly shoes that hardly fit him. In sixty years, he's going to have bunions all over his toes and arthritic joints. Then we'll see who's laughing."

Ebony couldn't help but smile. It was a different smile to her usual grins. She usually peeled back her lipstick-clad lips to reveal her teeth gracefully – like a proud queen surveying her kingdom. Now... it was hard to explain, but she was smiling for the woman, not at her.

She was smiling because of what the woman had said, for the brief moment of camaraderie that she'd afforded Ebony on this apocalyptic morning.

It sent a flicker of something unrecognizable through Ebony. Before she had time to wonder about it, the bus pulled up. The bus driver gave Ebony a thorough look – starting at her unkempt hair, lingering at her tight satin skirt, and ending at her commendable granny-loafers. “Red light district?” he quipped. “Or you doing the rounds at the nursing homes?” His face scrunched with a frankly awful, objectifying look.

Ebony, once again, opened her mouth to proudly hex the blighter right in his face – but stopped. She didn't have magic – *she didn't have magic*. All that confidence, all that power, it was gone.

So she stood there, looked to the side, then took her ticket and moved to the furthest end of the bus. She sat carefully, wrapping her arms around her middle as she tried to make as little of herself seen as possible, considering her impossibly colorful get-up.

Why were people so cruel?

It wasn't a question she'd ever asked herself. Well, she had, but not in the same way. Ebony had watched the news sometimes, seen the terrible things people could do to each other. She'd heard stories too. And hell, she worked for the police department. She knew the great potential of people to hate their fellow humans... but never in this way. It seemed so useless, so pointless. Why objectify someone for the way they looked? Why ruin their day? What were the kid and bus driver thinking they'd get out of dragging Ebony down? A pat on the back? A sweetie? A feeling of accomplishment?

She saw her reflection in the glass of the bus window. She stared at it, but not like she usually did. Now Ebony saw the lines, the marks, the shadows, the imperfections.

She became increasingly aware of the bracelets about her wrists and the choker around her neck. They felt like shackles, like chains securing her in the worst of prisons. She longed to rip them off and toss them out the window. Then she could return to her ordinary life. There would be none of this self-doubt, none of this uncertainty and confusion. She would be a witch again – a cut above the rest. She would understand, unlike these idiot buffoons. She would know the ways of the universe in its entirety.

But the thought, which she hoped would rally her, soon fell back against the melancholic mood swirling within. Somehow, the knowledge that she was a witch seemed far more fragile than usual. It was filled with less of the power that had once enabled Ebony to sing through her life, hair sparkling, smile twinkling.

By the time she reached her destination, she trundled off the bus with dejection sinking right through her. It felt like rain clouds descending from above – clouds that were going to signal a heavy and unrelenting downpour of hideousness for the next month. The sun seemed all but gone from Ebony's life right now.

The old woman leaned over the railing just as Ebony trundled down the stairs, her mind set on ignoring the bus driver's back-shivering glances. “Dear, you have a good day, won't you?”

Ebony looked up. Was that a question? And if so, how was she to answer? “I'll try,” she said after a pause, smiling back at the old woman.

“With shoes like that,” the old woman settled back into her seat, her handbag clutched before her, “nothing will get in your way.”

Ebony laughed gently, finally stepping off the bus. As it pulled away from the curb, she felt even more confused than before. How could this be? How could her mood change so quickly, with such little reason? Seconds before, she'd been ready to crawl back to bed and camp under the covers for the next several weeks. Now Ebony could see the barest crack of light on the horizon.

As Ebony walked through the great big doors at the front of the department, she noticed the swelling uncertainty in her stomach. She felt like rubbing her arms and cuddling into a jacket. But with nothing to cuddle in sight, she walked on.

Several passing officers gave her curious looks, but they lacked the edge of objectification she'd just experienced.

Officer Barnes cracked into a giant grin, waggling his eyebrows as she passed. "That's quite a statement you're making there, Eb."

Ebony sucked in her lips, not sure whether to try to defend herself, ignore it, or tell the officer to get stuffed. "This is how ordinary people dress, right?"

The officer nodded. "If they're from an '80s b-film about grandmas on crack."

She felt her heart drop, her usual defenses abandoning her like cats in the rain.

"But you know what?" he tipped his head to the side. "If anyone can pull it off, it's you." He gave her a final flash of his smile before disappearing down the corridor.

Once again, she was left feeling thoroughly confused. She just couldn't get a handle on this situation. One moment she was being torn down by what people thought of her, the next she was being rebuilt anew. How did people manage it? How did they negotiate the depths of their own identity while they were constantly being remade in the eyes of others?

With heavy, melancholic, but philosophical thoughts whirling in her mind, she took the stairs up to her floor. Not that it was her floor, not that she even had an office there, but it was where she had to be.

She walked in to see a room full of people hard at work. All faces she knew, she assured herself, and thus, all people she was comfortable with. But whether it was her peculiar mood or the fact she rarely came into the office to do anything other than swan about and joke with people, she was starting to pick up details she'd never noticed before. She saw the photo of Percy's dead wife on his desk – always reverently set to one side while the rest of his desk drowned under paperwork. She saw the coffee cup on Shirley's desk – the one with the crazy happy face painted on it. Ebony made out the desktop background image on Michelle's computer – a photo of a squirrel holding a nut, looking wide-eyed and shocked as the caption confidently announced it was about to get its nuts busted.

Little details of personality now blinked out at Ebony like brightly wrapped Easter eggs hidden in a familiar room. She'd never seen these things, but now she couldn't help but notice them.

"Ebony," Ben marched up to her, eyebrows peaking at the sight of her strange clothes, "were you mugged by hippies? Is that why you're so late?" he quickly added, pointing at his watch.

Ebony didn't have an immediate response. She shrugged, tipping her unkempt hair over one shoulder. She was suddenly noticing how comfortable her shoes were again. She usually wore the most ridiculous, toe-incarcerating shoes because they looked good. Now, well, she just stood there with nothing to say but at least with happy feet.

Ben ground his teeth, narrowing his eyes. "How many days has it been since you brushed your hair? It looks like rats are living in it."

Ebony shrugged.

"Okay." A careful look grew in his narrowed eyes. "So, are you feeling okay?" Ben's voice had an unusual edge.

"I guess." Ebony patted her hair away from her face with a heavy swipe of her hand. Her hair was usually as well-behaved as a police dog – now the stuff was as wild and impossible as silly string. "They gave me drugs for the pain." She shrugged again, starting to realize she must look like a disaffected youth. That, or her shoulders were attached to strings like a puppet. "The drugs are pretty good," she added with a smile.

Ben's eyes widened, but only slightly. "Right," is all he could manage.

Before he could drag Ebony down to the drug squad, Nate walked up behind him. Nate's expressions ran the full gamut, just like Ben's had, but did so quicker. It was like watching a mime in fast forward. Finally, the gruff detective's face settled on raising an eyebrow and looking unimpressed. "Are you trying out for the police musical?"

Ebony didn't quip back; she simply stood there. Her shoes were comfortable, she reminded herself, *very comfortable*.

"Or did you cut up sheets from a cocaine party at an art college?" Nate smiled at his own joke, his chin dropping and cheeks fattening.

Once again, Ebony didn't answer.

Blinking, Nate narrowed his eyes.

"So, Eb," Ben tried carefully, "what was your prescription again?"

"I haven't overdosed on drugs."

Ben shook his head like a long-haired dog trying to get its fur out of its eyes. "Right. I mean, of course you haven't. Anyhow, ah... we've found you an office."

"Okay," Ebony's voice was light and barely there compared to her usual punchy tone. "Where's my office, then?" she asked with an awkward smile. "I'm here to work, aren't I?"

Ben's top teeth were sunk so deep into his bottom lip, the skin had turned a mottled white and pink. "Eb, are you sure you're feeling okay? I mean, are there any side effects from those bracelets, or the drugs maybe? Did you get a good night's sleep?"

She sighed, realizing Ben probably thought she was a drug-addicted, insomniac ex-witch. But her shoes were so comfortable, she reminded herself again, so very comfortable. "Don't worry," she said honestly, this time not shrugging. "It will take time to get used to. Plus," she found herself grinning, "I've never had drugs before."

She meant it as a joke, but Ben's expression became all the more pained. "Okay, I'm going to set you up in your office," he said clearly as if talking to a three-year-old. "There are some old cases I thought you could look at for me – but no pressure." He raised his hands quickly. "You get to them only if you feel you can."

"Okay. I don't have anything else to do. And I can still read, I think," she tried for another joke, this time adding a grin to make sure it went down right.

But once again, Ben looked pained. "You can't read? I mean, that was magical too?"

"No," she said blankly, "I can read, Ben."

"Okay, okay, I'll take you to your office, then." Ben looked and acted like a worried aunt.

Nate opened his mouth to say something, then just blinked heavily. "Glad to have you back," he eventually offered.

"I didn't go anywhere," Ebony added, a spark of her usual spunky nature returning. But the spark was still dim against her current mellowed state.

As Ben turned, ushering her on with a flick of his hand, a tall, leggy, stunning blonde walked into the room.

Chalcedony.

She was wearing a very smart, very stylish black skirt, an expensive looking white shirt ruffling out from it. She had high, but smart, black heels on. She had a gray handbag hanging over her arm, her usually dead straight blond hair looped into an exacting bun at the base of her neck. She wore make-up, but with the ease of someone who didn't really care.

Ebony saw more than a couple of appreciative glances slip Chalcedony's way from the men in the room. Even the women looked awed.

Chalcedony cocked her head to one side when she saw Ebony, her electric-green eyes glinting. She didn't say anything, but she didn't have to – it was plastered over her face like a ten-meter billboard.

“Glad you’re here,” Nate said, rushing up to the new witch. “We’ve got a situation downtown—”

“I’ve read the report, Detective Wall, and I am ready to go. This situation should be easy to control, but I suggest we move now. I never like to delay.”

Was that admiration flickering in Nate’s eyes, or something else? Was the efficient detective admiring Chalcedony’s graceful go-get-‘em attitude or just her figure?

Ebony bit her lip, an unusual frustration seizing her gut, as sticky and slow as melted treacle.

Seconds before, she’d been detached and philosophical, and now she was itching with frustration. Being human and without magic was like being a flag in a hurricane. You turned this way and that entirely at the whim of the wind whipping around you.

And the winds, apparently, had just changed. Ebony felt the annoyance slamming into her with the ferocity of a gale.

She tried not to meet Chalcedony’s gaze. Her former best friend may have been many things, but she was still a witch and a very powerful witch at that. Ebony could glare at the blonde bombshell all she wanted, but Chalcedony could reply with a witch’s gaze – and Ebony would rather not grow a boil on the end of her nose right now.

So Ebony stared down at the floor, chewing her lips like they were leather bits.

Ben tried to get her attention with an awkward wave. “Ah, Eb? Is there something on the ground? Anyhow, we’ve got to go now. Frank will show you to your office.” With that, Ben, her Ben, turned to follow a different witch out the door.

Nate grabbed his jacket off the back of his chair, throwing it on while offering Ebony a calculating look. He checked his badge and gun were in place, still not taking his eyes off her. “I think I know what your problem is,” he said eventually.

Ebony wasn’t so far gone that she didn’t notice the sarcasm brimming in his voice, and she mustered just enough energy to stare back at him with a slightly defiant look. “Is it the fact I’ve been unfairly punished for a crime I didn’t commit?” her voice had half of her usual pluck, but she still managed to find something in her reserves of defiance to meet his unyielding gaze.

“Hmm.” He nodded and then broke into a proper grin. It was the kind of grin you reserved for when you found out you’d won the lottery – it was surprising, jubilant, and....

Ebony’s eyebrows descended, her teeth clenching. What was this guy up to?

“I definitely know what your problem is.” The smile stayed on his lips as he turned to follow the others through the door.

“Hey,” she said, her voice cracking louder than it had been all morning. “What are you talking about? I don’t have a problem.”

“Yeah, you do. And I know what it is.” He turned to face her, walking backward, his grin as wide as the Milky Way.

“What is it, then?” Ebony crossed her arms and flicked her hair to the side.

“Oh, no, I figured it out – now you’ve got to figure it out on your own.” He turned from her and disappeared through the door without another word.

If she’d had a lollipop in her mouth, it would have fallen out, hitting the floor and smashing into little pieces.

What was that idiot up to? She didn’t have a problem. Well, apart from the obvious – but it was just cruel to point that out.

Ebony stood there, fuming like a chimney that had caught fire. It wasn’t until Frank walked up behind her, offering a shaky cough, that she snapped back to reality.

“Oh, Frank,” she said, unclenching her jaw.

“Hello, Ebony Bell,” he used her full name, which summed Frank up completely. He’d been here so long, he’d seen Ebony grow up from a little bub. He still saw her father



regularly, too, and would always emphasize to Ebony, at any opportunity, how good her dad had been as the Detective Inspector. He'd had class, Frank would say, and heart.

Ebony offered her own small cough. "So, where's my office? Ben said you'd show me there."

Frank nodded, his graying hair flopping on his head as if it was more of a cushion and less like it was actually attached to his scalp. "You are looking very nice today, Ebony Bell," he commented with a gentlemanly nod. "You're usually in those terribly big and pointy heels – but those are very fancy shoes you've got on there – very nice."

Ebony felt like taking a step back and shaking her head in disbelief. What on earth was with these shoes? While the rest of her outfit was attracting more boos than a pop song at a death metal concert, old people thought her shoes were the second coming.

Was she missing something? Were these the shoes of God? Had they starred in an awesome film in the '30s? Were they the shoes everyone simply had to have back when Frank was a boy?

"Umm," Ebony put up a hand, making a strange face, "o... kay," she said, not wanting to be rude. "Thanks... these shoes are pretty good."

She made a mental note to go home and search through the rest of her wardrobe. There was bound to be an imp in there casting curious spells on her clothes. It was the only way to explain this.

"Alright then, you follow me, and I'll take you to your office. I'll warn you, though – it's a bit of a walk."

She scratched her nose, confused. "I thought I was just going to get a desk in here with you guys. So I could stay close to the action—"

"Oh, never any action in there, Ebony Bell." Frank sniffed heartily as if that fact was a grim burden. "Just coffee. Anyway, I thought, seeing as you are here to look through some old files for a while, that I'd put you with the files. Seems right, doesn't it?"

Ebony made an unpleasant face but quickly shifted to a polite smile. "Really? There's an office down there?"

"Oh, no, not down there. The basement is where we keep all the mundane files. No. Ben wants you to look through the unsolved magical cases. And we keep those up on the top floor."

"Top floor? But there's nothing up there but equipment, storage, and—"

"Files," Frank finished off her sentence with his bland but direct tone. "And there's an office, too. Back when this place was built, when we had a bit more magical crime doing the rounds – we had a full-time witch on who just used to do the filing. Margaret was her name." Frank's gaze took on a far-off look, with a smile playing at the edges of his usually drawn lips.

"Really, I didn't know this." She followed close behind Frank as he slowly took the stairs. Though there was an elevator, Frank always took the stairs.

"There's lots you don't know about this place, Ebony Bell. It's full of secrets. Lots of files too. But you'll know that by the end of the month, I'm sure."

Ebony smiled wanly. Yes, that was definitely one lesson she was going to learn, not that she'd ever wanted to. Filing, researching, and general paperwork were not fun. Though she worked in a used bookstore, she still hated that side of police work. She didn't care too much about what some half-drunk university student had summoned on the morning of the 25<sup>th</sup> of December 25 years ago. It was water under the bridge.

Ebony cared about the present. She still loved her books and loved to read. But she was no history buff, unlike a certain Detective Nate, who had now borrowed so many books from her, she was thinking of giving him a library card.

As they ascended the stairs, she let her gaze wander to the windows neatly placed along the back wall of the stairwell. The stairs were big, long, tall, and strong. They were the backbone of the department, her father had once said, like the spine sending messages to the rest of the body. If they were the backbone, then, technically, at their top should be the brain. Instead, the top floor was full of old equipment, dust, and more yellow files than the eye could see.

Unlike ordinary files, magical cases couldn't readily be typed-up and shifted onto computers. There was something important that was lost in the translation. So the witches had always encouraged the police department never to get rid of their old files pertaining to magical crime. As such, they'd just shifted them up to the top floor.

No one liked the top floor. It has a draft, her father had once grumbled to her, an uncanny draft that always found a way of chilling the back of your neck, even if you were wearing a scarf.

Now Ebony was expected to work up here for the rest of her non-magic sentence. Not only would it take her ages to get here in the morning, but she would have to work alone all day without the prospect of stolen coffee or doughnuts.

Or Nate, a little voice said in her head. But Ebony quickly laughed the little voice into submission, ignoring the kick of disappointment at the idea she'd hardly see the annoying detective for the next several weeks.

When they reached the top floor, Frank let out a heavy sigh. "I like that walk," he said with a toothy grin. "It's good for the heart. And," he pointed behind them to the giant window that sat at the top of the stairwell, "the view is the best in the building."

Ebony stared out of the window, her head tilting to one side. It was a good view – an amazing view, in fact. You could stand there and watch the rest of Vale go about its business, with the keen gaze of a hawk from above.

Frank hardly paused, and she followed, legendarily comfortable shoes slapping on the dusty marble floor. It seemed as though even the cleaners didn't come up here anymore. She shuddered at the thought of all the cobwebs and dead insects she'd have to blow off the files. Ebony would probably come home from work looking like she'd been crawling through ancient caves every day and smelling like it too.

The architecture up here was different. On the floors below, the central staircase of the department would lead into long, wide corridors that spanned the length of the building – rooms branching off them like capillaries off a vein. Up on the top-floor, everything was open. There were no offices and rooms – just the one wide, open room that stretched the length and width of the building. It was huge, or would have been if it weren't jam-packed with old, rusted shelves, which were, in turn, jam-packed with old, yellowed boxes and files.

At least there were windows, which meant there was light. In fact, there were a great deal more windows here than anywhere else in the police department. And none of the windows had blinds, which was odd, considering all the sun-bleached files that littered the room.

Then again, these were magical files. No matter how much sun, dust, age, or moths they endured – they wouldn't deteriorate.

Maybe the light was a good thing. With all this magical history pressed into one room, you wouldn't want it to get too dark. Darkness tended to attract strange things....

She sighed as she ran a finger over a dirty, old, brown box that sat close to the stairwell. In a way, she was thoroughly at home. It reminded her of her chaotic store.

"Your office isn't so much an office." Frank confidently wended his way through the shelves. "It's more of a desk." He eventually found a squat, old, wooden desk up against a far wall. It had its back to the files and faced toward one of the large windows, a magnificent view of the mountains beyond.

Gosh. You could see the weather rolling in off those mountains a treat from this window.

“You might need to give things a dust.” Frank coughed. “But there’s everything you need.” He pulled open a drawer, the wood grating unpleasantly, and grabbed out pens and a pad of old paper. “Now I don’t know precisely what Ben wants you to do, but I reckon he just wants you to give the unsolved cases a once-over. Doesn’t matter if you don’t find anything, but you might. Benefit of hindsight and all that. You might have come across something in the last couple of years that could put these old files to rest.”

Ebony nodded, taken by the silent room with the incredible view of the city.

“Anyhow, I had better go back down now, but you let me know if you need anything.”

She smiled. She tried to rack her brain, wondering if she needed anything else up here – a heater, a water cooler, a phone, a computer, a pot plant to talk to?

She couldn’t think of anything essential. Plus, the place was starting to have an effect on her. A curious effect....

She felt the hair on the back of her neck prickling. She felt her hands moistening with sweat. She felt her breath quickening as her mind sharpened to the situation. Was this anticipation or something else?

Was she starting to settle into her month-long sentence? Was she starting to feel comfortable with her lot? No, that wasn’t it. It was more than that.

It almost felt like something was unfolding before her – like a book that had fallen unbidden off a bookshelf, only to open at a certain page.

Well, if that was the case, Ebony would have to stoop down, pick it up, and start reading the new story.

## Chapter 11

Ebony almost got to work on time the following day. That is, she was only late by an hour-and-a-half. Due to her previous experience on the bus, she opted to take a cab instead.

A mistake.

Once again, she woke late and threw on whatever her hands could snatch from her wardrobe. Which left her standing in a pair of brilliant white pants and a top that looked like it was made out of rubber straws – making it either a blouse for wild dancers in peculiar clubs or something to clean the floor with.

She grabbed shoes, only to find her trusty, fake crocodile-skin granny-loafers. She smiled to herself as she crammed them onto her feet.

As she called the cab, she felt proud she'd get to work on time. Thirty minutes later, when the cab finally rolled up to the curb, she was spitting sparks. She waited there the whole time, ignoring the stares from passing pedestrians. Unlike the creepy, frankly rude looks she'd received yesterday, today Ebony had apparently crossed over the threshold of funny to weirdo. One gruff-looking bin man with a limp cigarette hanging out of his mouth gave her such a confused but intrigued look, he obviously thought her top was a spaghetti monster from Mars.

Ebony shook her head. Tonight she was definitely going to get into her wardrobe and see what was going on. Where had all her real clothes gone? And where were all these hideous, peculiar, downright bizarre clothes coming from?

When the cab finally rolled up, she piled in, a stiff smile on her lips.

The cab driver was chewing gum, very pungent gum. He gassed Ebony as he chuckled in her face. "Sorry, love," he said with a voice that was half a laugh, half a snarl. "Traffic's bad. Been an accident or somfin." He gave another chuckle as if accidents or somfins were commonly funny things. "So, where you off to?"

Ebony, who'd finally remembered to take her bag, clutched it like a riot shield. "The police station," she said, fingers digging into the red and yellow leather like someone holding onto a rope in a blizzard. If her outfit was wild today, then her bag was more so. Once again, she wasn't sure where it had come from. She didn't remember buying it or laughing at the person who gave it to her. The bag was less of a bag and more of a gag. It was big – as if Ebony intended to carry around the kitchen sink, tissues, her wallet, and a buffet for thirty. It was also louder than a barrel full of monkeys. The exact hues of the yellow and red leather clashed so much they might as well have been titans in an epic battle for Earth.

"Police station?" His face scrunched up so tightly it seemed as if his nose was a black hole sucking the rest of his features in with a slurp.

"Yes, I work there."

The man shot Ebony a look that said more, and in a more eloquent way, than the man was capable of phrasing. His eyes narrowed, pressing in at the sides as if he was in pain. His bottom teeth pressed over his yellowed lips, and his cheeks twitched like a rat with a knot in its tail.

She turned, wondering if she could get out of the cab. She didn't want to be stuck with this man for the ten minutes it would take to get to work. Before she could mutter a sorry and leave, the cab pulled out from the curb with a splutter of its engine.

She chewed her lips, clutching her bag to release the tension building in her hands.

You have combat skills, her rational brain tried to convince her. Your father taught you everything you need to know about self-defense.

Yes, her emotional mind conceded with a shudder, but that was no comfort at all. While academically she knew how to flip a man – how much of the practicality of that relied

on magic? Her senses, her intuitions, her gut feelings – how many of them had been regulated, modulated, and enhanced by magic?

“Where’s your uniform, love?” The driver looked over at her, taking his eyes off the road without apparently caring about the circumstances.

Ebony wanted to ignore him. But with only the two of them in the cab, she could hardly play deaf. “Oh, I don’t have one. I’m not an officer...” she trailed off, immediately cursing her honesty. She wanted to add that she was, however, a witch, or would be again in a month. If the man tried anything, she’d hex him so badly, his teeth would fall out over his steering wheel.

“What are you then, love?” The way he said *love* was reminiscent of a dog growling at intruders.

She started to rub her bracelets. “I’m a... secretary.” It was far from the truth, but ironically, the closest description she could give for her current job.

“Well,” the man said with a disgusting leer erupting over his face like a rash, “that’s okay, then.”

No, Ebony told herself, it really, really wasn’t. “How long until we get there?”

The man didn’t answer straight away, just found some part of his mouth to chew on – as if he were some hideous zombie digesting itself. “Traffic’s pretty bad.”

“Oh.”

At least the traffic was actually bad. It wasn’t like the guy had driven up to a wall and announced he couldn’t go on because there was something blocking the path. They were, in all honesty, in a traffic jam.

Ebony receded into her seat, the feel of her rubber top against her hands sending shivers down her spine. Maybe it was her and not the situation at all. Her mother constantly accused Ebony of overreacting.

Her gaze jumped to the traffic ahead. There’d obviously been an accident, as the cars were changing lanes whenever they could. Between the lanes of cars, she could make out two cars turned around in the street as if they were gates for the rest of the traffic. She couldn’t see the flashing lights of ambulances or fire trucks, so hopefully whatever had happened hadn’t been too serious.

“You’ll be getting to work late, love,” he growled again, sounding more and more like a frightful dog at a gate. “Might be another half-hour at this rate.” He ended with a hiccup of a laugh.

Ebony twisted in her seat so he couldn’t see her expression. Oh, lord, could she actually spend the next half-hour in a car with this man? She might not have magic anymore, and her usual intuitions were shot to pieces while these bracelets were on – but something told her she didn’t want to be in this car that long.

At the same time, indecision reigned. It was a curious feeling – being pulled between the two poles of indistinct intuition and cold rationality. Her logical mind told her there was nothing to worry about, while her feelings tumbled around like a moth being shaken in a bottle. Rather than make a decision to stay or to go, she just sat there.

With a weird detachment, Ebony suddenly remembered a lesson her father had once taught her. There were three physiological responses to fear: fight, flight, and immobility. A bird that has been taken by a cat, but not yet killed, will lie still and stiff to appear dead. “Humans do it too,” her father had said, one hand on her hair as he’d walked her home from a hard day at school. “And not just around proper trauma,” he’d added as he’d piled her into the car. “Sometimes they just think themselves into a corner, like a trapped animal, and then give up.”

That was what was happening now, she realized with a jolt. Here she was, in a car that was hardly moving, with every right to get out if she wanted to. There was nothing

stopping her. The only thing preventing her from leaving was this newfound distrust of her feelings.

Ebony took a breath, pulling her purse from her bag and checking the amount due on the electronic display above the dashboard. She pulled out the exact amount and handed it to the man quickly. "I'll just get out here, then."

"What?" he spluttered.

"I'll walk." Ebony turned around, checking the traffic before she opened the door. But with the traffic still in gridlock, she'd be safe for now. "Thank you," she said automatically as she pulled herself from the seat and finally left the situation.

The man muttered something as she left, but she chose to block him out, concentrating instead on crossing the four lanes of traffic to get to the sidewalk. As she did, a peculiar sense passed over her. It felt like an accomplishment but came with an edge. It was more than just getting top marks in a quiz or succeeding at tracking down the right criminal for the right case.

It felt like Ebony had just learned something.

The wind picked up as she mounted the curb, her hair fluttering over one shoulder. She still might have no idea how humans survived considering their hazy mix of feelings, reason, doubt, and uncertainty – but at least she'd just had a breakthrough. As pathetic as it sounded, Ebony had just made a decision.

"Hey, Ebony?" someone called from behind her.

For a brief moment, she feared it was the cab driver coming to drag her back to his creepy car of awkwardness, but the voices were a world apart. While the cab driver sounded like rusted metal cracking under pressure, this voice sounded like—

She turned, a smile on her lips.

Nate walked up to her, his head on the side. "Shouldn't you be at work by now?" He blinked, taking in her whole outfit. "Or out clubbing with the cleaning ladies?"

"I just got out of a cab. The guy was really creepy," she said honestly. In fact, it might have been one of the most honest and direct things she'd ever said to Nate.

Nate nodded smoothly. "Okay, that's a good excuse. You alright?"

Ebony released her iron-fisted grip on her bag. "Getting better. But now I have to walk to the police department." She made a show of turning around to look up and down both directions of the street. "But I don't actually know where it is."

Nate cocked an eyebrow, crossing his arms. The humor was there, but the sarcasm wasn't, yet. "You've lived here your whole life, right?"

"Not my whole life, but close enough."

"I've only been here a month and a bit, and apparently I already know the city better than you do." He shrugged, smiling. "I call that a win."

"It's a fairly mild win."

"But every win is a win." He spread his arms, trying to make his point. "And I have a car."

"Those statements are unrelated." She found herself smiling again.

"True, but I can use my car and my apparently excellent knowledge of the streets of Vale to successfully transport us from this street corner to our intended destination."

"Are you offering to give me a lift?" She cocked her head to the side. "Because I know how you drive, Detective, and I'd really like to get there before the end of the day."

He crossed his arms again. "Ever heard the saying about not looking a gift horse in the mouth?"

"Is that because they have bad breath?"

Nate shook his head. "You really know how to lay on the charm." He pulled his keys from his pocket and motioned her down the street.

She became lost in her thoughts as they walked together.

"You're doing it again," Nate said suddenly.

"What?" She looked across at him, pulling her hair behind her ears.

"You're spacing out."

Her cheeks warmed. "Just thinking."

"Right."

Right? What did that mean? That spacing out was the right thing to do, considering the circumstances?

He laughed. "And again, you are spacing out."

"I am not spacing out. I'll have you know that I am quite in control."

"Right." This time there was no mistaking the sarcasm. Nate clearly meant *wrong*, not *right* at all.

"Where's your car, anyway? I have to get to work at some point." She stretched her neck to the side. "Someone's got to leaf through those files."

"While the rest of us do the real police work," he added, motioning her over to his car and opening the door for her.

"I thought you were obsessed with history and getting things right?" She sat down, buckling herself in before whipping her long hair over one shoulder so it didn't get messed up behind her. "Well, there's a lot of history up in those files and a lot of wrongs, too. There's a whole wall of shelves devoted to cold cases spanning the last 90 years – and some going back even further. I would have thought, for a square like you, it would be a wonderland."

"A square? Did you just hop a time machine from the '90s? I haven't heard that word in years." He started the engine, carefully checking around before he pulled away from the curb.

"You obviously don't hang out with geometry students, then, or builders, or framers." Nate paused, either paying attention to the traffic, or to the insult. "No, I avoid them all."

"You're weird, Detective, very strange." She repositioned herself in her seat, feeling far more comfortable in Nate's car than she had in the car of the super-creepy cab driver.

"Is that your opinion as a witch, or as an ordinary person?"

Ebony didn't answer.

"What's it like, anyway?" Nate broke the silence, his interest subtle, but there. "How are you adjusting?"

"Oh, alcohol, drugs – the usual."

"Hmm, lucky I'm taking you to the police station, then. But seriously?"

"Seriously? Look, do you actually care?"

Nate replied with silence.

"Fine. It's hard – harder than it should be."

"You mean you're finally learning to cut us humans some slack?"

"I don't know." Ebony sighed, more confusion swirling around her like poison in once clear water. "It's all just so hard."

"I don't get it." Somehow Nate was paying equal attention to Ebony and to the road – without either task subtracting from the other. There was something very odd about the way he managed to streamline tasks like that – how he took everything in his stride like an accomplished master or an unwavering knight. "Is it hard being a human, or hard not being a witch?"

Ebony sighed. He was asking questions again, and she knew from previous experience that Detective Nate never let up. "Okay, look at it like this. All my life I've known what I'm meant to be – a witch. And all my life I've known how to secure that goal –

through magic. Now, suddenly, I'm not a witch, and I don't have any magic. I don't know what to be, and I don't know what to do. I'm lost. And it's hard." The words settled into the car like sediment settling into murky water. Ebony was starting to feel itchy all over as it dawned on her just how uncomfortably honest this conversation was becoming.

Nate was paying attention to the traffic, or at least she hoped he was. She didn't want his keen concentration directed at her fumbling admissions instead.

"Right."

"It doesn't matter, though, because it will only be like this for another couple of weeks. Then everything will return to normal," Ebony said quietly, possibly more for her own benefit than Nate's.

"I don't know, a lot of things can change in a short time." He angled his head away, checking his driver's side mirror.

"Well, I guess. But I won't change." She swallowed. "I'm a witch...."

"Right."

Ebony curled her toes. She wanted to reach around, grab his shoulders, and shake him. What was he trying to say?

"I'm curious, though," he said as he turned down the street that housed the police station. "Why did they take away your magic in the first place? Seems like a bizarre kind of punishment, especially considering the crime was pretty minor."

She pressed her lips together. She'd gone over this, surely. She was starting to regret getting in the car with Mr. Curious Questions. "Because that was the punishment they had determined."

"You haven't explained anything. Why would they take away your magic – why not slap you with a fine, or make you do some time? If it's anything like ordinary police work, it's like they've impounded your car for doing one kilometer over the limit."

"Impounded my car for speeding," she repeated, voice brimming with disbelief. "It's nothing like that. There simply isn't a connection."

"Okay, so you are saying they randomly assigned you a punishment, greatly disproportionate to the crime?"

"No, I'm not saying that, either." Ebony was aware that she could hear her heart beating in her ears. "The Coven is composed of the wisest, most powerful witches. If they make a decision, there's usually a very good reason for it."

"Okay, so then, taking away your magic had a reason, right? Something more than punishment?"

She felt like she was a cow being led around by a farmer, chain tugging at her nose every time she didn't walk fast enough. "I don't know. I mean, I guess so." She had a vision of her mother and swallowed hard. Her mother had never done anything on a whim. Nor had she ever done anything for just the sake of the rules. Every witch knew the rules were there only to modulate power – never to direct it. A witch couldn't let herself become the tool of anything or anyone, and especially not a set of laws.

That's how you created your destiny – by following the rules as a guide, like the lane lines on a road, but never as a route.

"So what do you think their reason was? I mean, I've been talking to Chalcedony, and it seems the Coven rarely give out such punishments, let alone for—"

Her mind suddenly became hazy. It was stuck, like a scratched record, on three little words: talking to Chalcedony.

Ebony tried to steady herself, not wanting to be drawn into the hurricane of unpleasant memories associated with her former best friend. What with everything else going on in her life, she had relegated Chalcedony to a corner. Now she was back, swanning around in her fancy high-heels and designer skirts.



“Ebony? What do you think?” Nate asked, voice more insistent as he pulled into a carpark at the base of the police station. He turned to look at her and rolled his eyes. “Spaced out again? You really are hitting those drugs hard.” He tilted his head, eyes narrowing with keen analysis.

“Nope,” she said levelly, opening the door quickly.

“Right.”

Ebony wanted to scream but settled for closing the door too hard.

Nate appeared amused and opened his door, leaning comfortably against the frame as he looked over at her. “So, what do you think?”

“About what?”

He shook his head. “About the fact the Coven rarely hand out punishments like this, let alone for the tiny little crime you supposedly committed?”

She frowned, finally listening to what he’d just said. She’d gone over and over this in her own mind and had only managed to come up with one answer. “The ways of the Coven are mysterious.”

“That’s a convincing answer, thanks for that, really makes things clearer. Seriously though, don’t you think there’s something very strange about the way you were punished and the timing?”

She felt herself spacing out again. She thought about the Coven, the crypt, and Chalcedony. She thought about the past several weeks and the pain of having to rebuild herself anew. If she had to admit it, she would – yes, there was something strange about how she’d been punished. And yes, there was something strange about when she’d been punished – smack bang in the middle of the Month of Rites. It was almost as if someone was setting her up for magical rewriting....

“Are you serious?” Nate’s voice was low and brimming with disbelief. “I can’t believe it. You just spaced *again*. What are you even thinking about?”

“Ha?” Ebony snapped back to reality.

“I’ve mentioned Chalcedony twice now. Both times it shut you down. I call that a pattern. So, what’s the deal between you two? Not to try to drive a wedge between you, but you don’t seem like friends.”

She just wanted to get to work, as strange as it sounded, and retreat to her new castle of files and windows. She’d have to make it past the Questioning Knight first. “You really want to know? We used to be good friends – best friends.”

“What happened?”

“She stole my toy.”

Nate tried not to laugh, but his bottom lip wobbled. “She stole your toy. How old were you?”

“Twenty.”

“Right.... What kind of toy was it?”

“It was a plastic figurine.” Ebony took several steps away from the car, trying to signal to Nate that the conversation had run its natural course.

He closed the car door, automatically flattening his tie. “A plastic Figurine. You, a witch, ended a friendship with another witch over a plastic toy.”

“It wasn’t over the plastic toy,” Ebony corrected, her voice terse. “It was over the fact she stole it.”

Nate’s expression was priceless – a mixture of confusion and amusement that made his usually strong chin dimple. “Right. What did this plastic toy look like? I mean, was it a limited edition Darth Vader or Barbie?”

“It was a little plastic knight,” she said with a vague smile. She’d loved that knight, she really had.

A very peculiar expression crossed Nate's face. But it was gone quickly, and in its place came derision. "You ended a friendship over a plastic knight... okay. I don't get witches."

"No," Ebony said, turning on her heel, deciding the conversation – or interrogation – wasn't going to end until she ended it herself. "You don't understand women. There's a difference."

He tipped his head to the side. "Are you sure about that?"

Before Ebony could ask what that meant, he turned, waved a brief goodbye over his shoulder, and walked off.

She stood there, watching his departing form with confusion, annoyance, and frustration.

Argh! What an odd man. And what an odd morning. This no-magic thing was proving to be way more trouble than it was worth. It was making the once proud, beautiful, elegant, sassy, and in-control Ebony, a clumsy, spacey, eccentric, emotional wreck.

Three more weeks of this, and she'd be a completely different person.

Feeling sick at the very thought of it, Ebony Bell walked into the station, arriving for her second day of work later and more confused than ever.

## Chapter 12

Ebony was having a strange day. It was a Friday and technically the end of the working week, but that didn't stop it from being strange.

She'd finally figured out this whole public-transport thing and had settled on walking to work instead. She'd found a route that managed to get her from her own door and up to the dusty top floor of the Vale Police Department in 45 minutes. And while once upon a time, she wouldn't have ever bothered walking such a distance, this was no longer a strategy she could afford to enjoy. It had taken her three days to realize that if you knew how long it took to walk somewhere, you had to give yourself that much time plus a little extra in order to make your appointment. No longer could she rely on some handsome wizard zooming past on his Harley, just in time to whip her across town.

Despite having finally calculated the distance and time it took to walk to the police station, she was late again that morning. She didn't allow enough extra time for the extraordinary. Despite no longer being a witch and consequently being incapable of sensing or overtly attracting the magical – that didn't mean she wasn't a magnet for the weird and unexpected. It just meant the weird that did come her way wasn't waving a wand, chanting spells, or throwing lightning bolts. That still left a whole universe of mundane-strange to get all up in her face.

On one street corner, while she silently walked past – her pink polo shirt and Christmas red-and-green slacks making her stick out like a nude in a nunnery – a couple burst out from the restaurant behind her. They proceeded to stand either side of Ebony, as they all waited for the lights to change, and continue their incredibly loud domestic.

"Well, what do you want?!" the woman in tights and a puffy chiffon top screamed at the man. "You don't know, do you?"

The man, who was wearing a well-cut suit, but whose breath smelled like cheap and nasty alcohol, scoffed. "Sorry?" he snapped, his hand patting his chest like a one-armed gorilla asserting dominance. "I don't know what I want? Are you for real?"

Ebony stood there, concentrating on the set of traffic lights.

"Of course I'm for real, you idiot," the woman spat back, her large hoop-earrings dangling around her neck like insects around a light.

"You're not hearing me," the man said, louder than a foghorn. "You don't know what you want," he repeated.

The woman rolled her eyes, crossing her arms with such a labored expression, it seemed as if she was dragging shut giant, cast-iron gates. "Mark, you've never known what you want."

With that, the lights changed, and Ebony shot forward like a horse at the races.

Must beat them, she thought with primal urgency. She didn't want to be dragged into this hilariously uncomfortable fight.

So Ebony powered on, thinking the worst was behind her when she made it to the police department. Before she could spring through the doors, she was dragged into another pointless dispute that had nothing to do with her.

A homeless woman, with a wild crop of perennially unkempt hair, rushed up to Ebony and put a hand on her sleeve.

Before Ebony could look around and ask what she wanted, a uniformed officer marched up, expression as pained as a man who'd just lost his house, his dog, and his leg.

"Look," he shook his head. "You need to start behaving."

"Behaving?" The woman snapped around with a wide-eyed gaze that looked like the tracking lock of a homing missile. "Don't you tell me how to act – I haven't broken the law."

The officer took off his hat, scratching his head with a quick, tired move. "Yet. But you've got to calm down. If you want this case looked into, you've got to cooperate," the man sighed heavily, "ma'am," he added as a hasty afterthought.

"They stole my stuff." The woman's wild hair matched each wild dip and turn of her head as she emphasized her points with the body language of a snake.

"I know, and we're looking into it. We really are. But the way you are behaving now, you have to ask yourself – what do you want?" The man took a peculiar pause. "Is this what you want? Do you want to be arrested for being a public nuisance and harassing a police officer? Or do you want us to do our best and contact you when we know anything? It's your choice."

Somehow, inexplicably, the woman's hand remained on Ebony's arm throughout the entire conversation – as if Ebony was a still, silent, and steady rock that could easily be used as an anchor. And even though Ebony couldn't have helped but hear their entire talk, being tied to the conversation by the woman's gnarled hand forced Ebony to take even more heed.

What did the woman want? That was a peculiar way to put it. Surely, it would be better to point out she was walking the fine line between public tauty and public nuisance. Why ask her what she wanted?

The situation quickly resolved itself or, rather, Ebony extricated herself and finally managed to make it to work – only a tiny ten minutes late.

Then her odd day, well... it just kept getting odder.

She was stopped on the stairs by Frank. Ebony's father's birthday was coming up, and Frank wanted to know what to get him.

"What does he want?" Frank asked, his frail frame somehow managing to lithely stand on two steps without the strain crumpling him in two. "What does he really want, Ebony Bell? I've known your father for some time, but I can't keep getting him pens for his birthday." Frank laughed in a way that summed him up perfectly – through his nose in rounded hiccups that pulled at his aged skin like rain hitting plastic wrap.

Ebony shrugged. "Get him... a book, or a watch, or a pen – he likes pens."

"Come on, Ebony Bell," Frank shook his head. "You can do better than that. There must be something he really wants."

"I guess, but I don't know what it is. I always just give him a basket of random books so he can pick and choose or find something he didn't know he wanted."

The conversation quickly petered out, and Ebony ascended the stairs to her new peaceful lair. She was starting to think of it as a home away from home. The equivalent of a comfy jacket she could climb into to escape the weird, cold world around her.

She'd dusted on Tuesday – going down to the cleaning closet and dragging a broom (even though she hated them), a mop, and various other cleaning implements up to her new office. Though she was technically meant to be reading the files and not cleaning them, she'd justified it by pointing out to Ben there was enough dust in the room to kill an entire convention of asthmatics. Ben had grumbled, but she'd done it anyway.

By Wednesday, when Ebony had actually sat down to start reading the files, as her actual job specified – she'd found them quite interesting. She wasn't a history buff, and she hated paperwork – but these spoke to her in a different language – the language of stories. Each and every cold case was like an unfinished novel, crying out for a poignant resolution that usually left Ebony completely invested in it by the end. How did they all fit together? Who had been responsible for the crime? What had happened to the victim afterward?

She pulled file after file out from their homes on the shelves, tenderly opening each one and leafing through the case-summaries, reports, and photos inside. Once upon a time, as a witch, she would have been able to sense the magic coming off them, and she would have read it like you would the files themselves. The magic would give an added layer of meaning

to the situation – revealing previously hidden details, motives, and themes as if the person were able to step into each photo and search the scene on their hands and knees with a looking glass.

Now, without a drop of magic at her disposal, all Ebony had was her memory, her intuition, and her imagination.

She looked at the pictures in each case, looked at the suspects and victims – and tried to see if she could remember any of them. She attempted to draw patterns between the crime she'd experienced in her own tenure and the crime she was reading about now.

She started to make three piles on her desk. One for cases she had no clue about; one for cases that fanned her interest; and one for cases she had a strong feeling about. There were only two cases so far that she was sure she could give worthwhile information on. That being said, she'd only managed to sort through a single box on the cold cases shelf.

The day was beginning to wear on, even though it took her some time to notice it. It wasn't until the long beams of light struck her desk, illuminating her glass with a soft sparkle, that she realized the sun was setting. She looked up at the windows above her desk and watched for several minutes as the dusk seeped down from the mountains as if the dark were liquid pooling into the city from above. It was beautiful, haunting, and silent.

With a sigh, she stood up, grabbing her bag and turning from the beautiful windows at the last moment. The combination of the move and the last dregs of light drew her gaze to one of the boxes on the shelves. The last light of day struck the box all at once, maybe bouncing off the reflective surface of the floor or something. How it was happening didn't matter. All that mattered was the curious sensation in her gut.

She walked up to the box, her bag still on her arm. She leaned down so she could see the name written across the cardboard haphazardly in a big black marker.

Grimshore.

She frowned, getting closer to the box and running a hand over the name as if giving the letters a chance to reassemble.

Grimshore. That's what it said.

Before Ebony could pull the box out and discover what was inside, she heard the sound of feet pattering up the stairs, then a muffled curse as someone ran into something.

"Ebony," Ben called from across the room, "are you in here? And if you are, why on earth aren't the lights on?"

Ebony stood up. "Ben? What do you want?"

She heard Ben fumbling around in the dark until he finally hit a switch. The great big lights strung along two perfectly straight, parallel beams across the ceiling all turned on with a buzz and a click. "I'm here to take you home, kid."

"Oh," Ebony turned her gaze back to the curious box, "I was going to stay a little longer – there's more to do."

Ben gave a gruff laugh. "I don't think so. It's 8:30 already."

"It is?" She was surprised. Though she academically knew the sun went down at about eight these days, she hadn't put the two together.

"Yeah, so you're going home," Ben said with finality.

Ebony didn't shift her gaze from the box. She wanted to know what was inside. Why would there be an entire box sitting in the cold cases section with the name Grimshore written across it? Was it referring to the family, or something else?

What with all the things happening to Ebony this past week, she'd almost forgotten about her fiery conversation with her father. She'd told him she'd been dead sure Miss Cecilia Grimshore, the cowering woman from the crypt, had been up to something. Her father had encouraged her to investigate it, as best and as legally as she could.

Now Ebony remembered. She remembered the way that woman had screamed as the book of spells had been kicked from the man's arms. She'd shrieked, not from fright, but from something more like anger.

The more Ebony thought about it now, the more things didn't fit....

She heard Ben start to make his way toward her. "I'm going to give you a lift," he said with a sniff. "I've heard about some of your recent spectacular experiences with public transport, and I'd rather take you home myself."

She was torn between the conversation and the overwhelming urge to tear open the box and see what was inside.

"Whatever you are doing now can wait until Monday," Ben cautioned. "Right now, you should go home and get some rest." Ben cast an eye over the files on her desk, then back to her.

"I have to go to Harry's first." Ebony smiled politely, trying to control the urge to stay here all night and devour this box completely.

"I figured. The old codger mustn't be too happy with all the time you're spending away from him."

"Not too happy at all." She fixed her bag back onto her shoulder, making it comfortable. "Okay," she said with a breath, trying to put the box out of her mind. She'd come back to the box first thing on Monday. She might even get here early. "I'm ready to go."

Ben nodded and led the way.

...

It didn't take her long to make it back to Harry's. After she plunged a hand into the bowl of sweets on her counter, tossing several to Ben as a thank-you for the lift, she was finally alone again.

She pottered for several minutes, tidying up books and talking to Harry.

"You wouldn't believe the week I've had, Harry, you just wouldn't believe it." She picked up a box and shifted it to one side, making a wider avenue for customers to walk toward the red banana lounge at the back of the store. "It's just been so... different."

Harry didn't reply, or perhaps he did, but Ebony couldn't pick up on it anymore. If he'd chosen to speak to her through the whirling dust motes sifting through the air, she couldn't hear. If he'd spoken through the creaking old floorboards, again, she wouldn't be able to make it out.

She wasn't magical anymore. If Harry wanted to talk to her, he would have to speak.

She continued on in silence for a while, pottering while she muttered and sighed to herself. The edge was gone from her week. And though she still resented it, she was starting to become used to not having magic.

Still, she felt adrift, lost in an ocean that was too large, too deep, and too everywhere to get away from. Perhaps a better way to describe her current state was not one of being comfortable with her lot, but one of resignation. She couldn't change it, could she?

As Ebony leaned down to shove some books onto a shelf, she heard the door opening gently and the bell tinkling several times.

Confused, she bolted upright. She'd left the closed-sign on, right? And she'd locked the door behind her? Was it Ben? Was it her dad?

She strode into the center of the store. She still had a book in her hands and was clutching it far tighter than it needed to be held, her knuckles popping against white flesh.

"Hello?" someone said from the vicinity of the counter. The voice sounded female, old, and about as threatening as a kitten in a cage.

Shaking her head, Ebony walked for the counter, loosening her grip on the book when she caught sight of the woman – an old dear in a light coat, a sweet hat, and beige granny-shoes.

She sucked in her lips and tried for a smile. “Sorry,” she said, flicking her gaze to the door, about to tell the woman the shop was closed. But Ebony stopped. The shop-sign had been turned to open, and the door was quite clearly unbolted from the inside.

Rather than jumping to the conclusion that the woman had broken in from the skylight above and then bolted downstairs to unlock the door and turn around the sign, Ebony simply shook her head.

Harry.

Even though she didn’t have any magic at the moment, Harry still had plenty – more than enough to shift around the things in his store. He would have opened the door and turned the sign over as punishment for Ebony being so absent in the past week.

She looked brightly at the dear old lady while keeping the curse she wanted to hurl at Harry shut tightly behind a smile. “How can I help you?”

“Oh, no, you can’t help me,” the old woman said with a sweet chuckle. “But I can help you.”

Ebony tried to look polite, but her brows scrunched with confusion. “Sorry?”

“I’m here to help you.”

“Ah... I don’t think I need any help.” Ebony cursed Harry louder and louder in her mind. Not only had he left the shop open at nine o’clock at night, but he’d let in a nutter.

“I’m from the Church of Wanting,” said the woman, pulling out a pamphlet from a pocket and depositing it on the counter.

Ebony sighed. Well, this was great. Now she’d have to find a polite way of telling the lady she wasn’t interested and sending the old-timer out into the night – probably to trip over in the dark or get mugged.

“The Church of Wanting is an ancient sect,” the woman started to get rolling like a boulder down a hill.

Really? Ancient? Ebony had never heard of it.

“We believe the Creator gave man one single gift and one single curse – wanting.”

“Wanting?” Ebony repeated, not because she wanted the conversation to go on, but because the entire concept seemed incongruous. Sects like this were always about blind faith and complete devotion.

“Yes. To want is a gift, and yet it is a curse.”

“I don’t get it. If it is simultaneously a curse and a gift, wouldn’t it just cancel itself out?” Ebony asked, her magical knowledge coming to the forefront. She might have lost her actual ability to sense and conjure magic, but that didn’t mean she’d forgotten about the Lore. And if you cursed and blessed the same thing at the same time with the same power – they both canceled each other out.

The woman put up a gloved hand and nodded sagely as if she got this question all the time. “It is a curse when you do not know what you want and a blessing when you do.”

Once again, Ebony had no interest at all in keeping this conversation going. She wasn’t in the mood to be proselytized to. But there was something about the odd way this woman was describing things that irked Ebony. “That’s not the usual way people see it.” Her face tightened as if she was having a hard time explaining something simple to a child. “Surely, it’s a blessing when you get what you want and a curse when you don’t get what you want?”

“Oh, no, dear.” The woman shook her head emphatically. “That’s just silly. Because sometimes you get what you want and realize you don’t want it. In which case, what you wanted wasn’t what you really wanted, so getting what you wanted was a curse.”

“Okay, say I want this lollipop.” Ebony reached over and grabbed a blue lollipop from her bowl. “I’ve got it now, and I’m feeling pretty good about it – which is a blessing.”

The woman shook her head. “It’s all in the pamphlet. But really, dear, it’s knowing what you want that’s important. The getting of it is the second step. It’s the knowledge that’s the blessing.”

Ebony sighed, feeling tired from her day, her week, and her general condition. She didn’t want to have this conversation now, especially when the woman was quite obviously mistaken. Trying to convince her of it, however, would be impossible. “Look, thank you for your time.” Ebony tried for a concerted smile. “But I’m actually just about to close.”

“Oh, of course, dear; it’s very late,” the woman said earnestly, then smiled a very friendly, very grandmotherly smile. “You have a good weekend. And I’ll leave the pamphlet here for you.” She patted it down onto the counter. “Goodbye, now.” She gave a cheerful wave and walked out the door.

Ebony shook her head, not grasping what had just happened, but too tired to care. She quickly marched over to the door and locked it, taking the open sign off completely.

“Thanks for that, Harry,” she quipped as she tossed the sign onto the counter. “Just what I needed.”

Harry didn’t respond.

She took a long, tired breath. Okay, enough of today. Time to go home.

She’d have to walk. And though her house was remarkably close to the shop – it would still be dark outside.

You’ll be fine, she told herself with a small smile. “I’m going home now, Harry, you have a good night.”

Harry responded by tipping over a box of books in the corner, several heavy tomes spilling out and piling over Ebony’s feet.

She rolled her eyes. He was like a child who didn’t want to be left alone and who knew the best way to punish his parents was to destroy their stuff. Still, at least he was communicating with her, she realized as she stooped to pick up the books.

She looked down at the books as she gathered them into her arm and piled them neatly onto the counter. They all had decidedly odd names, like “Death in the Middle: When You can’t get from the Beginning to the End,” and “What a Girl Wanted,” and “What do You Want? A Powerful Self Help Guide to Writing Yourself Anew.”

Ebony frowned. Obviously, Harry was playing some kind of joke on her. She’d never seen these books before, and judging by their ridiculous names, they probably weren’t real to begin with. They were just strange tomes Harry had conjured up to make some point.

What that point was, she didn’t care. She didn’t have the energy to deal with today anymore. So Ebony finished arranging the books and quickly marched out the door, locking it behind her but still remembering to give it an affectionate pat.

She walked off into the night, her arms closing around her to keep the cold out. But no matter how much she tried to huddle into herself, she couldn’t shake the cold that settled in her stomach as if she’d just swallowed a kilo of ice.

As she turned down the laneway that cut across to her street, the chill only grew thicker – more smothering, as if she was buried deep under a snowdrift with little chance of ever escaping.

It wasn’t until she was halfway down the dark laneway that she heard the heavy steps behind her.

Thud, thud, thud.



## Chapter 13

Ebony's heart began to pound, but not in the usual way. Usually, when you were scared or startled by a sudden noise, your heart might rattle in your chest or thump in your ears. Now it pulsed like a nuclear core ready to blow.

The footsteps continued behind her, getting louder and heavier by the second.

A hand reached out of the darkness, grabbing her shoulder and pulling her with a powerful wrench.

Out of the darkness, a fist swung at her head, angling down from the arm of an awful, gruff, broken face. The shadows of the barely lit laneway coalesced under his eyes, giving them the depth of caves.

She ducked back, body moving on its own, lips splitting open to let out a sharp gasp.

She missed the first, but barely.

The man came at her again, not letting up either his speed or the ferocity of his attack.

Ebony wasn't thinking – she couldn't think – which some part of her knew was for the best.

No thoughts meant no restrictions, and no restrictions meant pure action.

He tried to grab her, lunging forward with his hands outstretched.

She backed up, twisting her bag off her arm and trying to wield it like a bat.

She struck the man with her bag, pivoting on her foot to push maximum force into the move.

But the bag just impacted the giant man as if it were no more forceful than a kitten batting someone's face with a soft paw.

Ebony ducked under another grab, tank-rolling to the side.

What did this guy want?

She shivered at the possibilities.

The man roared – the first noise he'd made.

He shoved a hand into his pocket and pulled out a switchblade.

Click.

He flicked it open, his expression a mixture of pure aggravation and primal anticipation.

Ebony ducked back. Despite her training, she was too small to do anything to this man. Her well-placed blow had been like a drop of rain trying to fell a mountain.

He lunged at her, quicker than his build should allow.

She twisted, turning her back to him as he grabbed for her arms. She darted forward, falling to the ground but managing to roll forward to escape another grasp from the deadly, silent giant.

Just as she stood up, deciding to make a dash for it, the man managed to get hold of her. One of his massive hands latched onto the ends of her ponytail, like a climber grabbing a safety rope. He pulled her back with a yank, viciously snatching her bag and pulling it from her grip.

As his form cast her into a cold shadow, and Ebony's heart sank into a pit of no return, she made out the sound of another set of footsteps. They were light but solid, and they were heading toward her faster than a cheetah over the savannah.

Someone knocked into the man, rugby tackling him and pushing him onto the ground with a solid grunt. The man's knife spiraled out of his grip and into the darkness.

Ebony scuttled backward, like a crab before a crashing wave, pulling herself to her feet and resting her back against a cold brick wall.

From the glint of the moon barely making it through the cracks between the buildings, she saw her knight in shining armor.

“Nate!” she screamed.

There he was, her once annoying Detective Right, engaged in an epic wrestling match with her attacker.

She pushed off the wall, wanting to do something, wanting to help him, wanting to reach down and snap off these damn bracelets so she could—

The man managed to stand, driving a powerful punch into Nate’s side. But the detective didn’t blink. He just twisted to the left, lessening the power of the punch and replying with one of his own.

For the first time in her life, Ebony stood on the sidelines, watching as the action happened elsewhere. One of the lessons for young witches was to learn that it was always best to be involved – it was only from within a situation that you could change it.

Here she was, the wind knocked out of her, her scalp tingling with powerful pain from her hair being tugged, and her mind cold with dread. She wasn’t involved, and there was nothing she could do but watch.

Nate’s punch connected with the man’s jaw, pushing him back, but it wasn’t enough to bring him down. While Nate was large and knew how to handle himself, her attacker was titanic. He looked like some kind of gladiator – impossibly strong, relentless, and violent.

The man brought a knee up, trying to connect with Nate’s ribcage to knock the fight right out of him and possibly his teeth, too. Nate ducked to the side, trying to grab the man’s leg to pull him off balance.

It didn’t work, but Nate didn’t get hurt, either. The man was simply too relentless, too concentrated on his task – whatever that was.

Ebony ducked forward, picking up her bag, which had tumbled out of the man’s hands as Nate had tackled him. She started to scream, finally finding her voice. “Someone help!” she screeched. “Help!” she repeated over and over again.

Her screams sounded weak for some reason, muffled as if someone had thrown a blanket over this whole laneway, ensuring the grunts and wretched screams wouldn’t make it out into the streets beyond.

She began to get an awful, apprehensive feeling in her gut. Was this man magical? Was that why her screams wouldn’t carry? Was that why he seemed to have the strength of ten men? Was that why the relentless glint in his eye glowed like a forever-burning fire?

If that was the case, she and Nate were in rather a lot of trouble. Without magic, how were they going to bring him down?

Ebony put a hand on one of her bracelets, trying to pull it off with all her might. She dug her fingers in, trying to wrench herself free from her magical imprisonment. But her nails just scratched into her skin, drawing blood from her frantic efforts.

She wanted to scream out Nate’s name again, but she didn’t want to distract him.

What was she supposed to do?

Unbidden, her father’s words came to mind, “The winner is always the one who can hold their concentration.” Making the loser the one who allowed themselves to be distracted. And while her father’s words didn’t constitute a universal law – with people managing to get lucky all the time – trying to distract the man seemed to be Ebony’s only hope.

She ducked down, tipping her bag out before her as she desperately searched through the contents for something she could use.

Anything. *Anything* at all.

She looked up to see the man land a glancing blow to Nate’s jaw, the detective’s head snapping to the side, his eyes blinking from the pain. But he kept on fighting, equally relentless and determined as Ebony’s attacker.

Her top teeth bit so hard into her bottom lip, it felt as if she'd bite her lip right off. She searched through the contents of her bag, discarding her wallet, tissues, and various paraphernalia. Finally, she clutched a small vial of perfume. It wasn't much, but it was all she had.

As Nate tried to tackle the man again – Ebony saw her opportunity.

As the man's face descended, his titanic height cut in half as Nate powered into his side, she ducked forward. She quickly, elegantly, and expertly grabbed the lid off the perfume and threw the lot into the man's face – right into his wide, rage-filled eyes.

He screamed in agony, clutching his meaty hands over his face, finally allowing Nate to knock him off his feet.

Ebony swallowed hard, realizing that if the man truly was magical in some way, then the alcohol would have been a blow to him. And if he wasn't magical, well, it would still sting a treat. Alcohol was used in a lot of magical spells to dilute them. If you had a powerful herb concoction but didn't want to burn someone's head off from all the concentrated magic, you'd dilute it in a solution of alcohol. Water wouldn't work. Water had exceedingly special magical qualities, being one of the necessities of life. But alcohol – alcohol was a known diluter.

Nate tried to land a blow to the side of the man's head. Before he could, something started to happen.

The air around them pinched as if a giant mouth was trying to suck in all the space.

A crackle blasted through the air.

They were all signs of magic, she realized detachedly. She couldn't sense the stuff, but she still knew all the symptoms of it. To someone who didn't have her magical past, it might seem as if their surroundings were growing harsher, more erratic, or their minds were frazzled with the adrenaline of the situation. But Ebony knew what was going on.

Something was being called back.

She streaked forward, grabbing Nate's arm just as he tried to get the man into a headlock. She pulled him. "Nate," her voice was desperate, "get back!"

He was surprised by her intervention but allowed himself to be pulled backward. Just as he did, the pinching around them became concentrated. She could feel it playing against her skin as if she were being dragged through the air at the back of a plane – rushing, pulling, ripping.

The pinching congregated on the man, making the space around him twist. In a snap, he disappeared completely.

For several seconds, Ebony and Nate stood there, Nate slack-jawed and Ebony shaking.

The ordinary sky filled in above them. The suffocating blanket that had covered the laneway lifted to reveal the real world.

Her hand was still on Nate's arm, her body still shaking from the shock.

Nate put his hand over hers, gently pulling it from his arm but still holding onto it. "Are you okay?"

No, she wasn't. She'd just been attacked by magic when she was as defenseless as a newborn baby. She wasn't okay at all.

"I'm going to call the police," he said quickly, reaching a hand into his pocket.

"We are the police," she replied bitterly, trying desperately not to cry.

Just as the situation threatened to overwhelm her, her attention was drawn toward Nate's hand. It was warm, strong, and very real.

As Nate reached into his pocket, Ebony looked up quickly. "Hold on, we can't wait here—"

"You mean that guy is going to come back?" Nate stiffened.

"I don't know. We have to get somewhere safe. I don't know where that guy came from. But we didn't beat him. He was just called back from whence he'd come."

"My car's out by your shop. I'll take us to the station." Nate, hand still over Ebony's, began to pull her forward.

She found herself running with him, her steps falling perfectly into sync with his. "No, we don't have the time. That thing could easily come back while we're driving or pop right up in the car—"

"I'll call for backup immediately—"

Both of them burst out of the laneway, the much-needed light of the moon and the street lamps enveloping Ebony in a comforting glow. From the desperate darkness and shadows of the laneway, the street seemed like a palace of refuge. "We've got to go to Harry's!" she realized, chiding herself for not thinking of it sooner.

"Harry's?" Nate kept hold of her hand, even though Ebony was having no trouble keeping up.

"The store is very powerful. I don't have any magic, but Harry does. No matter who sent that thing, they'll think twice about trying to break into a possessed store."

Nate didn't question, though the thought of taking refuge in a store that had already tried to kill him twice obviously didn't sit well with him.

It took them less than a minute to run across the street and make it to the outside of Harry's Second-Hand Bookstore. Nate finally took his hand off Ebony's and walked toward the boot of his car.

"We have to go inside quickly." She was desperate as she went for her keys. She realized with a broken, crestfallen feeling that all her belongings were still strewn over the laneway. She sucked in a sharp breath as if someone had just stabbed her from the side. "My keys – I left them back there."

Nate didn't reply. He just hauled open his trunk and grabbed the locked gun-case in the back. "I'll go get them," he said gruffly, snatching the gun and holster from his case and fixing them around his hips with quick, practiced ease.

Ebony shook her head. She didn't want Nate going back there alone.

Just as she began to freak out completely, the door behind her opened.

Harry let them in.

Nate's eyes narrowed, but she rushed inside immediately, beckoning him in with quick flicks of her hand.

"Oh, Harry," she said, her voice high and strained. "Thank you."

Nate didn't rush in. "You can't just leave your bag back there." He brushed his nose, one hand perpetually hovering near his holster. "I'll go back to get it."

"Nate, get inside. It's not worth it. It's just a bag."

"That guy wanted your bag, Ebony. We can't leave it back there." With that, he turned and ran back down the street.

"Nate," she screamed at him, launching toward the door, trying to follow him and drag him back before he got himself killed.

But Harry wouldn't let her. He closed the door with a bang, and no matter how hard she tugged on the handle, it wouldn't budge.

"Let me out, Harry."

The door just locked itself.

"Harry. Harry!"

No matter how much she screamed, banged, or sobbed, Harry wasn't going to do a damn thing. His will was as strong as iron, and his grip on his store was doubly so.

She sank to the floor, the situation banking around her like sand piling down from the top of an hourglass.

Though her breath slowed, her mind didn't. She tried to pray as hard as she could that Nate would get back here okay, that whatever creature had attacked her wouldn't come back.

Finally, *finally*, she heard footsteps outside, and she ran back to the door just in time to hear the key grind into the lock and the door open.

Though Harry hadn't automatically opened the door for Nate, it didn't matter – he had the key. And magical store or not, there was a universal law that if the right key was put into the right lock, said lock would open.

"Nate." For some reason, she was bouncing up and down on her toes.

He handed her the bag.

She took it, quickly dumping it on the ground. She tried to fight the urge to leap forward and hug him. Though she almost hated the guy, she couldn't think of anything else to do right now.

She wanted to feel his arms close around her....

Instead, she kept bouncing from foot-to-foot.

"Are you okay?" he asked again, clearly and slowly.

She shook her head.

"What kind of magic was that?" he asked, his voice as clear and calm as a summer stream and just as inviting to jump into.

"It was strong," she said, skin itching from the very thought of it. "Really strong."

He crossed his arms. "I've called for backup. They'll be here soon."

She nodded. That magic had been proper summoning magic. No wonder Ebony hadn't been able to slow the man down with her trained self-defense. But Nate... he'd managed to hold his own. How? Sheer determination? Sheer will? Or something else?

"Are you sure you'll be safe here?" Nate took a brief look around the store.

She nodded. "Harry was a very powerful wizard in his day. He's possessed the whole store, too – every light-fitting, every floorboard, every book. He's been here for years, and the longer he stays, the more entrenched he gets. Taking him on would be like taking on a squadron of wizards. No matter where you stood or where you turned, he'd be all around you, underneath you, and over you."

"So you're safe?" Nate repeated the question, obviously waiting for only a single answer.

"Yes."

Nate sighed heavily. "Wow, what a day."

Ebony tried to smile, but her expression was set into a worried frown. None of this made any sense. Why would she have been attacked by another magical creature? And why go after her bag?

Magical muggings were rare. Occasionally a wizard might throw a stocking over his face and stalk a lesser magical creature to snatch its Book of Spells or some such. But it was always a risk. Witches and wizards were regulated by their own governing bodies. If a witch deliberately and violently tried to steal something from another witch, the Coven would intervene. It was the same with the wizards. So who, or what, had attacked Ebony? And why run the risk of being caught and punished?

Ebony was still a witch, technically, so this constituted a crime of a magical creature against a magical creature.

"Don't think about it too hard." Nate walked over to her, picking up her arm and looking at a deep scratch along the skin. "This stuff never makes sense to begin with."

She blinked, his touch distracting yet more comforting than a room full of cushions and blankets.

"Have you got a first-aid kit in this place? Because I've got one in the car—"

“No,” she snapped, her voice about as strong as it had ever been. “You’re not going back out there.”

He pressed his lip into a small smile.

“I have some healing herbs and some bandages upstairs.”

“Okay, then. Do you have painkillers?” He flexed his jaw from side-to-side, his eyes crinkling with pain. “And ice?”

“I’ll see what I can do.” She turned from him to go upstairs, but once again, he followed right behind her. He was like a loyal dog or a bodyguard.

But would Harry see it that way?

“Maybe you should stay down here.” She turned to him at the base of the stairs as she unhooked the chain from one of the banisters.

“Nope, today’s been too strange. Plus, knowing your luck this week, you’ll probably drop a jar all over your feet and faint from blood loss.”

She rolled her eyes visibly. But she wasn’t annoyed by his words, even though they were cheeky. She was thankful for the warmth they brought to the situation.

Just as Nate put his foot on the first step, intending to follow right behind Ebony every step of the way, Harry put his foot down, so to speak.

A book shot off the top of the banister above, even though she would never leave one in such a dangerous position. It headed straight toward Nate.

Ebony saw it before Nate did. She twisted and tried to reach for it. She managed to catch it with a gruff, “Oooppph,” but overbalanced, careening toward Nate like a felled tree heading for the ground.

He caught her, his balance perfect. He didn’t teeter backward. The force of another human knocking into him didn’t seem to bother him at all. He just opened his arms like a sail opening to the wind and caught Ebony before she could slam into the stairs.

He arrested her. Though the notion was peculiarly ironic considering he was a detective, it was the only way her suddenly still mind could describe it. Her anxieties, worries, and fears stopped all at once. The sudden shock of catching the book and falling off balance stopped as well. Her problems with adjusting to a month without magic stopped. Her musings about what kind of magical creature was after her stopped.

Something felt right, deeply right. As if a long, powerfully important lost memory finally resurfaced.

Then the arresting moment stopped, and she found her own feet. She was still standing close to him, her feet positioned by his on the same step. She found herself looking into his face from such a close distance, it afforded a perspective she’d never enjoyed. No longer could she sum him up by his aggravatingly good looks, his annoyingly righteous expression, and the purely irritating look of disdain that would draw over his face each time he muttered, “Right.”

She was looking at him now in the way you might look at the Earth from its surface, as opposed to looking at it from space. The perspective showed the grooves in his skin, the close shave of his chin, the slight slick of sweat over his brow, and the keen look in his eyes.

For a witch who was meant to watch, Ebony was starting to realize she was just learning how to truly see.

Just as she pulled up a hand, intending to reach out and touch that solid jaw, he reached a hand out to her – stroking the side of her cheek with the tips of his fingers.

But then she heard the bell tinkling from the front door.

“Ebony,” Her father shouted from the front door, his voice brimming with that familiar grouchy but welcome strength.

Nate stood back, turning toward the sound – leaving her standing there alone.

Heart in her mouth, she responded. “Uh, Dad?”

She could hear him marching toward her.

"I rang your father," Ben's voice filtered through from the front of the shop.

Calling her dad was like fishing with gelignite. He'd try to mobilize the force to take the whole magical world on until he found and arrested whoever had attacked his daughter.

Only problem was, he was retired. Though he wouldn't see that as too much of a hindrance.

"And I rang your mother," her father said, bursting out from around the side of a bookshelf and rushing over to her.

He ignored Nate, who had shuffled further away from Ebony, and walked toward his daughter, shaking his head. "This type of stuff would never have happened in my day." He sniffed. "Summoning in the streets... we would have—"

"Acted according to the Pact," a clear voice said from behind Ebony.

Ebony turned slowly, like a pig on a spit, to see her mother standing on the stairs above her. How or when she'd gotten there, Ebony had no idea. Avery Bell was a witch of the Coven. She had more magic and more mystery than Ebony dared to imagine.

Her mother had her head cocked to one side, a knowing look in her eyes. Was that even a small smile growing on her lips as she flicked her gaze from Ebony to Nate?

Ebony, despite herself, blushed. Then she remembered the crux of the situation. She'd just been magically mugged by a summoned creature, probably brought into existence by incredibly strong evil. Even if Ebony hadn't been currently magic-less, this would still have been an issue for investigation.

Still, why was her mother here? Why now? What, had she finally felt a little guilty that she'd overreacted and sentenced Ebony to a punishment she didn't deserve?

Or was she here on behalf of the Coven – here to get all the facts from Ebony in case the being who'd attacked her had been summoned by a witch? Even then, Ebony assured herself, her mother would find some way of blaming it all on Ebony.

If Nate hadn't appeared, who knows what would have happened to her?

Her face became hot with sudden anger. She'd had no power to defend herself. Not because she was inherently weak, but because other people had snatched it from her.

"Is there something you want to say to me, my little witch?" her mother asked. "Or are you going to keep it bottled inside?"

## Chapter 14

Ebony's jaw set slowly, like water dripping onto a glacier. Her mother was goading her into having a fight, here and now.

"Come on, child, isn't there something you want to say to me?" Avery Bell leaned against the banister, her face angling down, her long, sleek black hair slipping over her shoulders with a swoosh. She was in an elegant blue flowing robe, its cuffs and collar embroidered with various symbols and runes. Her eyes glittered an inviting but treacherous gold, and her skin glowed a faint blue.

"Uh, darling," Ebony's father said from the base of the stairs, "maybe now isn't the time."

"There isn't any other time, only the time we have now," her mother replied cryptically.

"Fine." Ebony's lips smacked together too loudly as if she was making a verbal exclamation mark.

"You're angry because you were punished." Her mother blinked, her eyes suddenly changing to a shimmering green.

"Angry? Why would I be angry?" Ebony was becoming less and less aware of the three men in the room. For now, it was just her and her mother. She lifted up her hands, showing off her shackles. "What kind of punishment is this?" she spat, her words punctuated with emotion. "It doesn't match what I did – and you know that."

Her mother raised an eyebrow, cocked her head to one side, and waited.

"I did whatever I could to save that woman." Ebony bared her teeth. "I fought that guy off with all I had. I saved that woman. And you punished me for revealing myself to a human? I don't get it. It's just not fair. I did the best I could—"

"It is forbidden to openly admit that you are a witch in the presence of a mundane," her mother automatically replied as if she was reading an entry from a rulebook – which, in a way, she was. It was a fundamental tenet of witch-law.

Ebony shook her head, her cheeks and face now as hot and ruddy as boiling tomato sauce. "There was something strange about that woman, really strange," she repeated, voice high. "Has she been investigated? Has she been looked into? Or have you just concentrated on disproportionately punishing your own daughter for a crime you know she didn't really commit?" Ebony's voice was getting louder and louder.

"And yet, the punishment stands." Avery leaned back, pulling herself into a ramrod straight but elegant position. "You can argue all you want; you can throw around as many excuses as you can find. But you cannot change the fact you were punished."

"Why?" Ebony's mouth formed around the word, pushing it out with a great rush of air. "It doesn't make any sense. Rather than look into the real situation, you're distracting yourselves with me. Well fine, see if I care."

Her father swallowed heavily but didn't for a second admonish her for shouting at her mother. He wouldn't dare. This had now become a full-blown witch domestic. As such, it was lucky for everyone involved that Ebony didn't have any magic, or fireballs and lightning-strikes would be bouncing off the walls.

"You're a foolish child." Avery's eyes flashed a deep purple, the hand that clutched the banister tightening visibly. "You have no idea what you've walked into, and now you are looking around for someone to blame while you ignore the real cause – you."

"Hold on," Nate said from down the stairs, his voice laden with his usual authority and righteousness. It didn't matter who he was talking to – lowly criminal or super-powerful mega-witch – Nate always spoke in the same tone. He obviously stood for one thing, a thing



he repeated over and over again – right. And he wasn't ever going to let anything stand in his way.

“Shut up. Leave it to them,” Ben warned.

“No,” Nate said with greater force this time. “This isn't right.”

Avery Bell fluttered her eyes toward him. She appeared to give Nate a long, calculating look. “What isn't right, little Chevalier?”

“Ebony was just attacked,” he said clearly and forcefully, his tone unforgiving – even in the face of Avery Bell's magical gaze. “This isn't a good time for a domestic. We have to find out who did this and why.”

Avery Bell smiled mysteriously. “No, those are things to find out later.” she dipped her head to one side as if trying to see Nate from another angle.

“Later?” Ebony shot back, her voice arcing with anger. “This means nothing to you, ha? Your only daughter is mugged by a magical creature, and you just don't care. I couldn't defend myself, because you took away my magic. What the Hell kind of mother are you?” Her tone was venomous – poisoned with deep, frustrated anger. How dare her mother? *How dare she.*

Suddenly Avery Bell's face changed. Her eyes became darker, almost black. Her skin began to crackle with an electric blue, and her lips drew into the thinnest line. “You invoke Hell,” She put a bony hand up, touching her chest, “against your mother.”

Ebony sucked in a breath, watching the anger and power crackling over and through her mother, like thunderous water engulfing a ship sinking into the sea. She wasn't going to back down, though. “Maybe you don't give me any choice.”

“Choice?” Avery's voice sounded like a bone snapping. It crackled and punched out of her throat with a snap. “That's exactly why you are here now doing this and that.” Though her words sounded peculiarly melodic – like a nursery rhyme – they were anything but. Each was steeped in a grave, deep anger that rumbled like a volcano. “Have you forgotten everything I ever taught you? Do you think something like this can happen without your permission? Do you think you can ever be punished, ever be affected, ever be changed by another without first giving your consent?”

Though her words might have been mysterious to some, Ebony knew precisely what her mother was talking about, and she didn't want to hear it. “You're trying to shift the blame. Nice. You think this is my fault?” She put a hand up to her chest. “You think I'm the only one involved in this story?”

“No, but here you are at the center, confused, delirious, and completely out of your depth.” Avery's expression, though angry, was still controlled. That was the defining thing about her – everything she did, everything she said, everything she thought was controlled.

“Thank you so much.” Ebony shook her head, sucking her lips in as she tried not to be torn apart by the dual forces within her – vicious anger and a shaking sorrow. It wasn't just her anger at Avery's actions – Ebony felt abandoned. “You are a true witch.”

“Oh, yes, I am.” Avery didn't react to the implied insult, just tapped her hand on the banister, her numerous rings clicking softly. “As such, I can read you like a book.” Her gaze darted over Ebony as if she were literally trying to read her daughter. “You are so blinded by your little fantasies of righteousness, justice, and sorrow that you can't see what is before your eyes.”

“Oh, go on then,” Ebony took a deep, rattling breath as she threw up her hands. “Enlighten me. What's so obvious?”

“You're being rewritten.” This time there wasn't a drop of anger left in Avery's voice. No gravity, no frustration.

Ebony stopped, frozen.

“Surely you must have realized, little witch. The signs are all around you.”

Ebony's breaths became shorter, tighter. Her skin flushed with intense heat, before turning pasty white with fear.

"You're no longer in control. And you cannot blame me for that." Her mother's voice was much softer now, much kinder. It was also filled with a poignant sorrow Ebony hadn't heard before. "Though, perhaps, I could have been more careful. I could have taught you more – tried to impress upon your growing mind the importance of making your own path, taking your own chances, and finding out what you truly want."

"I'm not being rewritten," Ebony said out loud. "I'm just—"

"While I sit on the Coven, I only follow their rules. I do not lead the Coven. Nor did I vote against you," she admitted. "Others did. Regardless, I cannot change their ways. Nor do I decide what direction they travel in. I lend my power to their will. The Coven is beyond the individual's story. It stands for the collective force, direction, and energy of all witches, past and future."

Ebony tried to hide a shiver.

So her mother hadn't voted against her and wasn't directly responsible for the punishment Ebony now weathered? Even so, Avery was hardly on Ebony's side. She was hardly rushing to her aid here.

Ebony wanted to stay angry, she really did. But she also wanted this conversation to stop now. Somehow all the fight had left her. In its place, all she found was shivering, icy coldness. She wanted to go home, have a shower, have a cup of hot chocolate, and crawl into bed.

She didn't want to hear this. She didn't want to be here.

"That you came to us for the supposed crime that you committed and were punished in the way that you were – is a part of your own story, child. That it does not make sense, that it does not seem right – these are all forces you have allowed to enter your life. You have invited chaos and injustice into your life, and now they sit at either side – confusing, containing, and maiming you. You look outside for the blame and cause, but you fail to see the origin."

Ebony fought against the urge to turn around and walk away – to leave everyone and everything behind and run back home. Her mother couldn't be right. Ebony would never have allowed such forces into her life. She was boisterous, yes, and sometimes foolish. But Ebony Bell still understood enough about the true power of a witch to control her own destiny.

Why, she had everything she wanted, didn't she?

Yes, she hadn't thought about her Month of Rites yet, and yes, she hadn't written in her Journal of Life for some time. But that didn't mean anything. Ebony still knew what she wanted... she still knew what kind of story she wanted to write for herself... she just couldn't remember what that was right now.

"You languish in life, in work, and in spirit. Your story has no power, no direction, no will. You do not know what you want, so you cannot find it."

"Now hang on," Nate said from behind, his voice brimming with defiance. He was about to call her out about this entire business, knowing him.

Avery Bell flicked her hand, and suddenly he was as silent as a still night.

For a fraction of a second.

"Life isn't that easy," he continued.

Avery's eyes opened wide. "How are you speaking?"

"With my voice," he answered plainly. "But that doesn't matter right now – though I'll tell you what does. I don't care if both of you are witches, if you've got magical rites and your own magical ways of doing things. It doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is that Ebony was attacked, and we don't know why or by whom. You can talk all day about stories

and choices and knowing what you want – but the more you talk, the less you act. Now we've got a crime scene that's getting colder by the minute. Shouldn't we do something about that?"

"You curious little man. You think you can tell a witch that the way she sees the world doesn't matter? We have magic and power – both things that depend on our perspective, rites, and rituals. And yet you maintain this is of no consequence? By the history, law, and way of the witches, Ebony has kept herself open for an attack, letting her story flounder until a greater, more powerful purpose came to rewrite her. And yet you maintain this does not matter. Tell me, little Chevalier, why such hubris?"

Ebony looked behind her to see Nate with his arms crossed in front of him. If the thought had crossed his mind that he was baiting an incredibly powerful witch, he didn't show it. He looked stony, determined, and very, very Nate. "Hubris? You think I'm being arrogant here? You sure it's just me? Here you are, telling us all how to explain the world – with your stories, and magic, and your universal forces. Well, I'll tell you what. There are a whole lot of people out there who aren't magical, a whole lot of people who don't share your outlook. So, who's right? You or me? And who has the hubris now?"

Avery smiled, but it wasn't entirely nice. She was slightly amused, Ebony could tell, but just as confused by the plucky, determined detective.

In a strange moment of detachedness, Ebony realized just how different Nate was. He wasn't bothered by anything magical. It didn't surprise him, didn't sway him, didn't move him.

"You don't understand," Avery said, eyes turning red.

"Don't I?" Nate countered, his arms still crossed.

"She doesn't know what she wants, my poor little witch. So how is she to find it? Magic, little Chevalier, is possibility turned on its head – the ability to make the unlikely likely and the likely impossible. But in order to use it right, you must use it with focus. Unless you use it with a purpose in mind – unless you know precisely what you want from it – then magic becomes random. It becomes chaotic, unruly, and dangerous, destroying what little purpose you have in your life until you become an easy target to be rewritten by other forces. And my poor little child, for years she's done just this – muddling along with no distinct idea of what she truly desires. She used magic for immediate purposes, but for no long-term goals. And with no length of time in mind, with no grand purpose in sight, magic has now left her. What force she's had has now been taken by a greater purpose. She is caught up in someone else's greater, more powerful story – a pawn in the game of another."

Nate just shook his head. "And? You think that's it? You think it's over now? You're talking like you've given up hope. Like no amount of magic in the world could change what you think is already going to happen. You talk of magic like it allows you to get the unlikely – to make the impossible real. Well, pardon me if I'm wrong," he said forcefully. "But that doesn't make any sense. If magic can make the impossible possible, then that thing wasn't impossible to begin with."

Avery waved a hand at him. Her expression remained a picture of controlled yet edgy politeness. "You do not understand magic, mortal."

"No? Then maybe I don't want to. In fact, there are only two things I want to understand right now, and one of them is why someone mugged Ebony."

Whatever the second thing was, Nate didn't say.

Avery threw up her hands. "It doesn't matter. My little Ebony needs to understand herself before she can try to understand the world."

"You think she should take a nice long walk in the woods and do a bit of self-reflection, while an unknown, unquantified power is out to get her? That's madness—"

“Your mundane human beliefs cannot match the reality of the magical—” her mother began.

“Enough,” Ebony intervened with a heavy breath. “That’s enough.”

Her thoughts tormented her, screaming in her mind like an unruly crowd.

She had no idea what to do, no idea who to believe.

She let out a desperate sigh, ready to melt onto the stairs and sit there with her head in her arms.

Suddenly the staircase rattled, and a book tumbled down from above, coming to rest at her feet with a thump.

She knelt down and picked it up, hardly aware of the people around her anymore.

It was a book on adventure – some kind of novel or something. The cover was bright, colorful, and exciting.

“This store is a danger,” Nate said from behind her.

“Harry,” her father admonished, “are you trying to get us all killed?”

“This store has always been irreverent, uncontrolled, and mischievous,” Avery noted, staring around at the shop.

Ebony ignored them all. She picked up the book and turned to the first chapter. It was titled, “To Boldly Go.” She ran a hand over the words, the paper old but still smooth.

“What are we going to do, Ebony?” Nate asked from behind her. “Time’s ticking. We really need to find out what’s going on.”

“You need to withdraw.” Her mother’s voice was keen, the edge of anger lost. “You need to find out what you really want before you try to face the rest of this.”

“Eb,” her father’s voice was gruff, “is that a cut on your arm? You should really get that looked at.”

Ebony turned to a random page in the book. She glanced down at the contents. The heroine of the story was in some kind of trouble, she read. There was action, movement, and energy.

She flicked to another page later on, eyes scanning it quickly. Now the heroine was undergoing some great trial, some epic task that required strength, determination, and guts.

Ebony kept flicking on.

“Hey, Ebony, are you listening to me?” Nate said from behind.

“Stop being distracted, child,” her mother admonished. “You must concentrate; this is critically important.”

Now the heroine was up against the greatest force imaginable.

But no matter how far she flicked through this strange book, Ebony couldn’t find out what the plot was. The heroine fought things – facing off against dangers, but not for any great purpose. Ebony had no idea why the lead character was doing any of the things she did. The book simply concentrated on the how: the determination, the courage, the steel, the concentration.

“Ebony,” her mother’s voice was now pitching high, like a kettle boiling, “put that book down and face the situation like a witch.”

Ebony closed the book with a snap and tucked it under her arm.

Everyone wanted to tell Ebony something, whether it was that she was treating this situation too lightly, or what to do to fix it.

Everyone had their own opinions.

And here was Harry’s: an adventure book, with, ironically, a heroine who didn’t appear to have any purpose. But it didn’t matter for the arc of the story – it moved on, and she moved on, simply by virtue of feeling.

In the absence of purpose – courage, determination, steel, and guts would do the trick.

Harry, unlike everyone else in the room, wasn't trying to tell Ebony what to do. He wasn't suggesting she do the impossible – find out what she truly wanted with a snap of her fingers or throw herself into finding out who was after her, without a care for her true problem.

Harry was suggesting she go ahead and act. No, she couldn't see far enough into the future to know what she should be doing. And no, she didn't have any magic to try to force her way through.

All she had were the same things the heroine in Harry's story had – the courage to dare and the will to act. Acting on what didn't matter now.

"Ebony," her mother's voice was pleading, "pay attention to what is really happening here. I don't know why the Coven made the decision it did. I am part of it, but not all of it," she said, her voice growing quiet. "I can't speak for the rationale of the other members. But I can speak with the understanding of a witch. Things are happening to you in too quick a succession and with too much danger to be ignored. You must wake up to this—"

Ebony tapped the book again.

"Ebony," Nate's voice had the same edge of pleading Avery's had, "we have to figure out what to do. We can't just stand here all night."

Okay, Harry, Ebony thought to herself, reaching out a hand and tapping the banister. You're on.

"I think," she spoke, the book still in hand, "there's more to Cecilia Grimshore than meets the eye."

Her mother sighed. "This again? You must find out what you want—"

Ebony put up a hand. "Maybe you're right – maybe I don't know what that is right now. But maybe Nate's right too, and that doesn't matter. But maybe Harry's just as right as the both of you," she tapped the book again, "and all I should do is press on and try to find out both things at once."

Before either Avery or Nate could start up again, her father cut in. "What are you thinking, kid?"

"I'm thinking there is a box of files in the cold case section that reads Grimshore. I'm thinking those files pertain to magical crime, and I'm thinking that's important."

"But—" her mother began.

"I'm thinking I'm going to stay in the shop for a while, just until I know what's going on. Harry's strong enough to protect me."

As if in answer, a breeze fluttered the ends of Ebony's hair appreciatively.

"I'm thinking I'm going to go to the police station tomorrow morning, even though it's a Saturday, and I'm going to go through those files, one by one."

"But we need to find out who is after you," Nate began.

"Probably. But this is how I'm going to do it – bed and then files. I'm also thinking," she took a long breath, "that this conversation is now done."

And the thought proved to be a reality.

## Chapter 15

Ebony lay on the couch, snuggled under a patchwork quilt as she stared up at the ceiling above. It was the early morning, and sunlight filtered in between the slats in the blinds, slicing up the room with bars of illumination.

True to her word, she'd stayed in the shop last night. In fact, she'd be staying in the shop until this whole mess was sorted. She'd always had this beautiful old lounge on the upper level, upholstered with a lovely, soft, rich-patterned fabric. It was old and had been worn-in until its cushions and back were as soft as feathers. She'd managed to find a quilt or two in the back room, leftovers from a midnight winter's séance. And she'd rustled up some pillows from downstairs.

Really, it was quite comfortable.

And safe, very safe.

It had been a lusciously quiet night. Even though Harry's store was right on a main road, no noise made it through his thick old walls – just the pleasant sounds of birds twittering, or the wind rustling through the trees outside. No traffic, no creepy creaking from the iron roof above, no rats scratching the walls, and no unsettling city sounds.

It half felt that Ebony and her store had somehow been transported into the peaceful countryside somewhere, with nothing but pleasant pastures and wise old oaks to keep them company.

She sighed as she kept staring up at the ceiling. Ordinarily, as a witch, she would never have slept upstairs with all these magical books. They would have given her frightful nightmares, or simply kept her awake with all their crackling and buzzing.

It didn't matter to her now. In her current state, all Ebony was aware of was the comfortable, warm couch and the peaceful silence.

All her problems were far away and somewhat intangible as if she were viewing them through a smokescreen.

Finally, she extricated herself from the covers, throwing them off with a sigh and jumping off the couch.

Someone was meant to come to pick her up today to take her to the police station. While Harry's was safe for her right now, so was the station. With the number of magical defenses built into that place, the Devil himself would think twice about taking it on without at least a couple of hexing rocket-launchers.

She headed downstairs.

There was a knock on the door, and she glanced up at the clock to see that it was indeed eight o'clock already.

"Come in," she called, hoping Harry would be polite enough to let the person in. It would be one of three people: her father, Ben, or Nate. She'd lost track of the conversation last night.

As she stood, she realized she looked like a slob. While her father wouldn't notice and Ben would just shake his head, Nate would....

She searched around. Did she have any clothes in this damn place? While she could run home and try to find something nice, sleek, and sassy, it was a risk she couldn't afford.

She could go out the back and get one of her ceremonial gowns, but it might look like a bit much.

The bell tinkled, and the person, whoever they were, walked in.

Crap! It better not be Nate—

"I brought you some clothes," someone said from behind her.

Ebony stopped freaking out with all the speed of a bullet train hitting a mountain.

She turned to see her mother.

Avery's face was strangely controlled. Her eyes weren't glinting gold, and her hair wasn't whistling around her like blossoms on the wind.

Ebony swallowed. Of all the people who could have come—

"You weren't expecting me, were you?" Avery had two bony hands clutched over a large, painted-silk bag.

Ebony shook her head.

"Really," Avery took a breath, "who else could it be? Do you think either Ben or your father could protect you from a proper magical attack? While your father would certainly put up a good fight, I'd rather he not stress his joints."

Ebony hadn't thought, had she? It wasn't as if having a detective with a gun was going to be any deterrent to a proper magical onslaught. You could shoot at the apparition, but that would only make it angry.

Still, her mother....

"And as for that other one, your little Chevalier, well." Avery seemed to roll the words around in her mouth as if savoring the taste. "While it seems there might be nothing he can't do, I'd rather do this one myself."

Ebony nodded, staring down at her feet for some reason.

Ebony hadn't ever had a particularly bad relationship with her mother. While the whole no-magic punishment thing had certainly been a blow, there hadn't been too many witchy domestics in the past. For the most of it, both of them went their separate ways. Avery was a big believer in a witch finding her own feet, on her own ground, in her own time.

Avery handed the bag over to Ebony, a crackle of electricity escaping along her skin.

Ebony peeked inside, her face lighting up. It wasn't a rubber-tubing top; it wasn't happy Christmas slacks; it wasn't a paint-accident top from the '80s. Nope. Inside was a gorgeous flared white skirt. It had delicate cherry blossoms embroidered along the hem and light netting to give it a touch of volume. There was a soft cream silk blouse as well. It had slight ruffles, dips, and twists – but looked as elegant as anything you'd find in the pages of a vintage Vogue. There was a pair of sweet high heels, too, in soft lavender with white trimming.

Ebony couldn't help but smile.

"I figured you wouldn't mind looking good." Avery kept her straight, elegant pose, her mouth softer than usual – less drawn and formal.

Ebony clapped her hands. Finally, finally, she could walk into the police station and not care that she might look like the patched remnants from a costume train-wreck.

"Time to go." Her mother dipped her head to one side.

Ebony nodded. "I'll just go change."

Her mood shifted the instant she put on her new clothes. She ran a hand along the soft fabric of her top, drinking in its quality. She didn't have a mirror in Harry's shop, so she was using the reflection off one of the back windows to check herself out. Even though her reflection was blurred and pinched by the old, warped glass – it didn't matter.

"You have a long day ahead of you, little witch," her mother called out. "Come on out and face it."

Ebony, though having not entirely forgiven her mother yet, still smiled as she walked out. There was something about the gift of wondrous clothes, especially at a time when Ebony felt her most vulnerable and frumpy, that was the greatest peace-offering a girl could get.

Her mother winked and smiled. "Beautiful."

Ebony patted down her skirt in reply and resisted the urge to do a twirl. It was odd, but the only thing that popped into her head was Nate. She smiled to herself. "How are we going to travel?"

"Why, my dear, we're going to walk." Avery clasped her hands in front of herself in her usual careful, proper manner.

"Walk?" Ebony repeated, lips jutting open. "But you're a Coven witch. Don't you think the bin-men are going to get a little shocked when your hair starts turning blue and crackling?"

"I will control myself. It is a nice day. And I haven't simply walked for..." Avery's irises shifted, finally returning to their original blue-gray, "years." She looked back up at her daughter, her expression unreadable.

Was this a peace offering? The clothes, the offer to walk Ebony to the police station? Was Avery saying sorry without actually going through the formality of using the word?

Or would she start haranguing Ebony the moment they got through the door? Would Ebony have to put up with 45 minutes of, "You don't know what you want to do with your life, and now terrible magical creatures are after your soul."

"... Okay, let's go." Ebony headed to the door.

Her walk with her mother was... pleasant. She wasn't worried. You would have to be a ballsy or totally crazy magical fiend to want to take on a Coven witch. Nor did her mother use the opportunity to bat her ears about not finding a greater purpose in life. In fact, the sun shone, the scent of brewing coffee and baking bread filling the air without a cloud on the horizon.

"So, little witch, tell me more about the mysterious Detective Nate."

Ebony's stomach kicked. "What about him?"

"Something very peculiar, I think. He has an unusual presence and an unusual will."

Ebony chuckled. "He's like a dog after a bone. He doesn't let up, ever. And he asks questions all the time. And he begins every single statement with a dry 'right.' It's so infuriating." Ebony found herself talking non-stop as if Avery had popped a water balloon with a pin.

"Indeed."

"And he always seems to be at the right place at the right time." Ebony scratched her neck.

"Go on," Avery prompted quietly.

"I don't know... the first second I saw him, I thought he was just annoying. Someone who was so wound up by the rules that he'd just burst if he found someone flaunting them." Ebony kept scratching at her neck.

"I see. And now what do you think of him?"

Ebony ran her teeth over her lip. "Oh, I don't know. He's just so different. He's not bothered by magic at all, not by anything really. I used to think I could wind him up and tease him, but now I realize he was always the one playing me."

"And? What do you mean? How is he different?" Avery's pace slowed, even though the police station was now in sight.

Ebony shrugged. "I don't get a bad feeling about him, not at all. I just—"

"Want to know more." Her mother smiled carefully. "Well, he is very curious... very curious indeed. So, tell me, do you like him?"

Ebony started to realize this was no normal itch. She stopped suddenly, turning to her mother, her face steely. "You didn't," she admonished harshly, "you didn't cast a speaking-hex on me, did you?"

Avery cocked an eyebrow. "It is always a mother's prerogative to know what her daughter is thinking."



Ebony protested, "You *can't* do that."

Avery fobbed her off with a wave, but then her expression turned serious. "I am still worried about you, little witch. Do not forget that. And I will do everything in my power to find out who is after you, even if that requires hexing my own daughter – the very creature I am trying to save."

Ebony took a breath, ready for another fight.

But then... she just let it go. She didn't want to keep fighting with her mother. It didn't make Ebony feel good. In fact, it made her itch with frustration and deep dissatisfaction. She sighed. "Please don't do it again," she managed.

Avery dipped her head elegantly. "As you wish. Though, as mother to daughter, let me offer you the following advice: while you're investigating the Grimshores, keep an eye out for Mr. Nathan Wall. I think you'll find that would be," she looked to the side and smiled, "a rewarding search."

Ebony sucked her teeth and shook her head. She got the innuendo and didn't appreciate it much.

They finally arrived at the front doors of the station.

"Well, here I am. I suppose you'll be picking me up tonight, then?"

Her mother nodded.

"I feel like I'm in primary school," Ebony sighed.

"In which case, I will be sure to pack you a snack for the return journey. Chopped fruit and a muesli bar."

"Goodbye, mother," Ebony said sarcastically, but she still offered a friendly wave as she walked up the steps and through the front doors.

When she turned back, not surprisingly, her mother was gone.

...

When Ebony finally marched up to her desk, she was ready to crack the lid open on this thing. She wasn't ready, however, for the sight of Nate sitting in her chair, poring over her files and using her notebook and pen.

He looked up and smiled.

She found her nostrils flaring for some odd reason. She opened her mouth, not completely clear about what she should say.

"I've been here since five o'clock this morning." He cracked his neck from side to side. "Which is lucky, because there's a lot to go through here."

Ebony mumbled a yes.

He was the last thing she'd expected to see. She didn't know why. Surely a circus sprawled between the files would have been less likely.

He looked at her evenly. "You're annoyed that I'm in your chair, aren't you?"

She hiccupped with laughter. "Yes," she said squarely. "That's *my* chair."

"Well," he shrugged, not moving, "I got here first. And I think you'll find that it is the department's chair."

"I suppose I'll sit on the floor, then." She looked around, trying to make a show of things, but she managed to catch sight of Nate's gaze lingering on her new clothes.

"Or you could get a chair – it's up to you. But once you've stopped worrying about furniture restrictions, there's some stuff you should know." Nate, it seemed, had snapped back to his in-charge, in-control, and in-the-moment attitude. Playtime had just been canceled. "The Grimshores are an old family, right?"

Ebony nodded.

"Well, according to this, they're not as old as you think." He picked up one of the files. "There's pretty extensive information here, but it only seems to go back to the 1920s."

Ebony made a face. “Oh, they’re much older than that... I think.” She scratched her head. It wasn’t as if she’d learned it in school or anything, but she was fairly sure that the Grimshores were one of Vale’s oldest established families. Now she was pressed, she wasn’t sure exactly where she’d learned that fact.

“Those books I borrowed from you on the history of Vale say you’re wrong. The Grimshores only arrived in the ‘20s. And by arrived, I mean popped up out of the blue.”

Ebony made another face. Though she couldn’t put her finger on the exact facts, she simply knew Nate must be wrong. “No, that can’t be right. Everyone knows that the Grimshores are a very established family. They own some of the nicest, oldest buildings in Vale, and they have their fingers in nearly every business-flavored pie you could imagine.”

Nate shrugged easily, his shoulders tugging at the fabric of his neat shirt. “Not according to these files and not according to those books you gave me. Now, unless you are telling me these files are wrong and those books you loaned me were pure fiction, then the Grimshores only appeared in the ‘20s.”

She shook her head, her expression a muddle of confusion. “No. The magical files couldn’t be wrong. You can’t doctor them or fake them like you can ordinary files. They’re heavily protected by the Truth—”

“The Truth?” His eyebrows descended as his face became masked with confusion.

“Oh, just one of the universal forces – kind of like Death but less active.”

“Right,” Nate said automatically.

“Anyhow, they can’t be doctored. And those books you got from my store – it’s kind of the same thing. Believe it or not, they’re actually written by Harry. They’re in-house editions, if you will. Harry was a prolific historian and an even greater wizard. If that’s what he said, then that’s the truth.... But—”

“But what?” Nate straightened the files in front of him but didn’t take his eyes off her.

“I don’t remember reading any of this.”

“Right,” he held out one of the files, motioning for her to take it. “Then re-read it and refresh your memory.” He stood, motioning for her to take his chair. “I’m going to go find a chair and maybe something to eat. Don’t you move now.”

Ebony rolled her eyes and just kept her smile at bay. He was being rude, she told herself, and yet she couldn’t help but smile. He was being arrogant and over-protective, she tried to convince herself again, but, once again, she simply smiled.

Was he really being arrogant, or was that simply what Ebony found easiest to believe? Just as she’d done with her mother last night, Ebony had slipped into the version of events that was easiest and most satisfying to hold; the one where the world was against her, where her mother had abandoned her, and where Ebony didn’t seem in control, or responsible, for anything that was happening.

And yet she’d had an almost incident-free walk to work with her mother. Could the same be happening with Nate? Could it be that what was easiest to believe about the detective simply wasn’t true?

She glanced down at the files, plunging into them like someone jumping into a lake from a cliff above.

Nate was right, she realized as she flicked from file to file. There simply wasn’t anything on the Grimshores prior to the ‘20s. And he was also right about them apparently popping into existence. There wasn’t any background information on them. Whoever had written the file speculated on that exact fact – the Grimshores didn’t appear to have any traceable history.

Ebony frowned as she read, her head leaning on her hand as her gaze flicked across the text with the darting energy of a hummingbird.

The Grimshores weren't quite the upstanding family everyone supposed. Once again, if anyone had asked Ebony whether the Grimshore family were upstanding citizens, she would have nodded an emphatic yes. They gave to charities, attended all the right functions, even sat on all the right boards of administration. They were good people with the best interests of Vale at heart.

Now she was learning that the once beautiful flower was plastic.

According to these files, the Grimshores were involved in more magical crime than you could shake a stick at (or a wand, or a broom, or a sacrificial knife). For an intense period, they'd had their fingers in everything – from importing banned magical items to trying to gain an unfair advantage through hexing.

As far as she could tell, they were never charged for any of it. Even though there was a whole box pertaining to their extra-legal activities, the Grimshores weren't once punished for a single crime. It was a fact that was noted in their files with some emphasis. Not only was it very hard to pin a crime on the family, it was impossible to make it stick.

By the time Nate returned, Ebony was so engrossed in the files, she didn't notice him until he stood right in front of the desk.

"Doesn't make much sense, does it?" he intoned with a keen voice, taking a sip of his coffee and handing her one. "And makes you wonder what on Earth is really going on."

Ebony took a deep breath and nodded. "I just don't get it." She held the warm cup close. "Why didn't I know these things? Why didn't anyone tell me? I've never been told about any of this stuff. Not once have I ever heard a whisper of any of this. The Grimshores are upstanding people," she said automatically, then stopped, shaking her head in surprise. "Sorry, they're supposed to be upstanding people."

Nate's face had an unreadable expression. "You just said they were. Say it again."

"Sorry?" She took a sip of her coffee, not following him.

"Say that the Grimshores aren't upstanding people. Try to say it."

She looked at him askance, hoping he realized how mad he sounded. "Okay. The Grimshores are upstanding people." It took her several seconds to realize what she'd said. "No, sorry – they aren't upstanding people," she managed with considerable effort.

Nate put his coffee down on the desk. "I'd say that's pretty weird, wouldn't you? Not being able to say a word against the Grimshores?"

Ebony, lips parted, just nodded.

"Almost sounds magical." He crossed his arms, still staring down at her.

She chewed her lips. "This isn't good, Nate. In fact, this is very, very bad."

"Strong magic?"

"Very strong magic." She sat back from the files, staring up at him, not knowing what to do or say next.

"Then that's good, right?" He shrugged, smiling down at her.

"Sorry, how is that good?"

"Because we now have a lead. Do you think it's a coincidence that a Grimshore just happens to be involved in the crime that gets you slapped with a wild punishment you don't deserve?" He put both hands down on the desk.

"Oh," Ebony managed, her voice flat. "Right," she found herself using the same word Nate always did.

Her gaze followed his arms down to the desk, and she took a moment to stare at what was there.

"Oh, my goodness," she said slowly, her voice tiny.

"What is it?" Nate's voice was quick.

Ebony picked up one of the files, gently plucking a photo from between the pages. She'd seen this picture earlier this morning, but she obviously hadn't properly looked at it. "Nate," she looked up at him, her eyes wide with shock, "I've seen this before."

He probably resisted the urge to crack a joke and nodded at her quickly. "Where?" She swallowed. "In the crypt."

Very suddenly, her arm began to ache. Her wound from the crypt erupted in dull, persistent pain. She rubbed it but didn't put down the photo. "Nate, this was on the cover of the book the man from the crypt was using for his spell."

"That's the Grimshore family crest," he said automatically. "But Ebony, what book are you talking about?"

Ebony blinked rapidly. "The book from the crypt. The one that contained his spell for the future – the whole reason for summoning Death. You must know what I'm talking about," she laughed uneasily. "Nate?"

He shook his head. "We never recovered a book, Ebony, just the guy and Cecilia Grimshore."

Ebony kept blinking. "But the book—"

"This is important, isn't it?"

"The book was the whole point of his spell. I mean..." she trailed off. She was starting to feel very cold and very alone.

Maybe Nate noticed, because he reached out a hand and placed it lightly on her arm. Instantly her flesh began to warm with a pleasant tingle.

And maybe he'd also started to notice Ebony was feeling alone, because at that exact moment, he leaned further over the desk, face angling her way.

## Chapter 16

Ebony stopped thinking about all her problems – the Grimshores, the world, magic. Every single iota of attention she possessed concentrated to a point, and that point was Nathan Wall.

The sun that had shone brightly all morning had managed to heat up the wood veneer on her desk. A fact she noticed as her fingers lightly touched the wood, her body leaning forward. Her once wild hair slipped over each shoulder, dangling before her as her hands pressed into the desk.

Finally, they kissed – lips touching, faces brushing cheek-to-cheek. She could feel her breath striking his warm skin only to fall back against her own.

For just a second, he was all she was aware of. For just a second, Ebony Bell only had enough attention for Nate Wall. But in just another second, none of that mattered.

His phone rang.

Ring, ring, ring.

Nate receded like a wave tracking back to the ocean and delved a hand into his pocket.

Ebony stood there, body pressed up over the desk, face dangling there like a Christmas decoration still up in the middle of July.

She swallowed a breath and jerked back.

“Detective Wall here,” Nate said, his tone completely normal.

Not a trace of the awkward, the sudden, or anything else tainted Nate’s words. He spoke as automatically and coolly as he always did.

“I see.” Nate nodded, gaze darting out the window. “And where is this, exactly?”

Ebony, lips parted, looked on. You wouldn’t know, she told herself as she blinked even more, that the man who seconds ago had seemed more tender, romantic, and gentle than a rose petal against the cheek was now the same man on the phone.

“Okay, yeah, I’ll be there as soon as I can.” He nodded again. “I’ll be ready, sir.”

With one more nod, Nathan Wall ended the call.

If Ebony had ever believed she’d heard silence, she was dead wrong. The sticky, thick, suffocating silence that now descended between them caught every possible word in its net before it was even said.

“I gotta go,” he said, shrugging.

She opened her mouth for quite some time before the right word popped up. “Right.”

He put the phone back into his pocket, not really taking his eyes off her but not really looking at Ebony either. For just a split second, she half-fancied that he looked conflicted.

“So...” She sighed, crossing her arms and glancing out the window, not because she wanted to know what was out there, but because she needed something else to look at. “What’s going on?”

“There’s been a break-in at the Praytor Jewelers.” Nate flexed his shoulders as if trying to shake out some pain in his back – or maybe one in his jaw.

Ebony tried to concentrate on the words rather than the man saying them. Get a grip, girl, she told herself, trying to suck in a steadying breath. It was just a little kiss. And it was interrupted. What did it really matter?

Praytor Jewelers, a break-in....

“Hold on,” she felt her face crumpling with confusion. “Aren’t they both magical jewelers and ordinary jewelers?”

“Yeah,” he flattened down his tie. “That’s the problem. This isn’t an ordinary break-in. Apparently, they stole some important stuff.”

“What? Are you serious? Praytors have two wizards on guard around the clock. How on Earth—”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged again. “But I’ve got to go. Half the station is going, apparently.”

Ebony nodded evenly. “I imagine they are. This is big.”

“I gathered that from Ben’s... less than cheery tone.”

She bit her lips, trying to smile. “He’d have the Commissioner on his butt about this. I wouldn’t want to be in his shoes right now. Depending on who stole what, this could make both the witches and wizards pretty angry.”

“I’ve got to go, Ebony.” Nate turned and walked several steps, then paused as if wondering whether he should add something. “I’ll see you later.”

He walked off, leaving Ebony completely alone.

When she was sure he was gone, she sucked in a massive breath and shook her head. “What was that?” she whispered to herself, face freezing into an awkward but energetic grin.

She put her hands on the desk, fingers tapping the wood quickly. “Right.” She patted back her hair. “Right,” she tried again.

So... what was she meant to do now? What had that ah... little kiss actually meant? Nothing? Just Nate playing games?

Ebony turned to the window, catching a glimpse of her reflection. Her face was plastered with odd, half-shocked consternation. Far from gaining any clarity today, so far she’d only managed to fall into a whirlpool of greater confusion.

Even though their kiss had left her thoroughly confused, it had served one purpose. Moments before, she’d been on the edge of a nervous cliff, filled with apprehension at the sea of uncertainty beneath her – her mood now lifted. She was zipping, her hands and face still tingling with warmth and excitement.

The fact the book from the crypt had never been recovered was still a worry, of course, but it wasn’t about to send her to her knees, yet.

Neither were the Grimshores.

She had to find out what it was all about. She had to....

Ebony ran a finger over her lips and tried to think. She had to do something productive, something directed. But what? Should she wait here, all starry-eyed, until Nate came back? Should she stay here and go through the files, trying to find out more about the Grimshores?

It took her several minutes to come up with a plan. She’d go down to Frank and see if there was any mention of the Grimshores in the non-magical files. Perhaps they had a couple of speeding fines or something. Or maybe every single Grimshore had always led a fault-free life. It was worth a check, just to see if their blessed lives extended beyond magical crime.

She wouldn’t bother asking Frank what happened to the book from the crypt. Nate wouldn’t be lying to her about that. If he said it hadn’t been retrieved, he’d be right.

As for who had it.... Ebony sighed. This was just another item to add to her list of problems to solve.

She had to concentrate on the Grimshores. What was the true extent of the magic protecting them? Couldn’t a single person in the whole of Vale speak against them?

Even if Ebony’s search through the regular records didn’t bring up anything on the Grimshores, she could still try to talk to other people – to see if they too had such automatic and glowing views of one of Vale’s *purportedly* oldest families.

Plus, she could also find out more about this mysterious break-in at Praytors. Praytors was one of Vale’s biggest jewelers. While they made pretty good wedding rings for the mundane citizens of Vale, they were also known as trustworthy suppliers of magical items. If you needed a good quality, certified, reliable amulet, sacred knife, blessed ring – or any other

magical item – Praytors was your first port of call. And while they traded in both ordinary and extraordinary items, they were very careful to keep both sides of their business separate and safe. Praytors had at least two wizards on guard in their shop at all times, doubling as magical bouncers and dashing shop assistants. So technically, should the brave, ambitious, or plain stupid try to steal their stock – Praytors should be able to look after itself.

Should be, she reminded herself. But if Nate’s words were anything to go by, then the unimaginable had happened, and Praytors had been robbed.

How? And by whom? And what exactly had they wanted?

She wasn’t going to get anything answered sitting at her desk with a mild blush on her cheeks. So Ebony pushed to her feet and headed downstairs.

Her first port of call would be Frank. Not only would Frank know everything there was to know about looking through the police files, but he was more than old enough to remember this stuff off the top of his head. He would be a real test, Ebony assured herself as she marched up to his desk, of whether the citizens of Vale were truly free to speak their minds about the Grimshores.

“Ebony Bell,” Frank mumbled from his desk as he looked up from a pile of Manilla folders, printouts, and newspaper clippings, “how’s your father?”

She shrugged. “Fine.”

“I take it from your short answer that you aren’t here to talk about your dad.”

Ebony shook her head. “Look, this is going to sound odd, but just go with me here.”

“Go with you where?” Frank looked at her, his aged face pressed with confusion.

She smiled through a laugh. “I’ve just been looking through some cases... and I was wondering if I could get your opinion on something.”

He answered with an expectant silence, just sitting there still as a statue, waiting for her to ask her question.

“I was wondering if you knew who the Grimshores are.”

“I would have thought you’d know that, Ebony. It is common knowledge.” He sat so neatly in his chair, it looked as if he’d been arranged by an artist.

“Yeah, pretend I don’t...”

Frank sighed, obviously irritated by her silly game. “The Grimshores are one of Vale’s most respected and oldest families. The members of the family sit on many prestigious boards, give to many worthy charities, and generally look out for the citizens of Vale like wondrous guardians.”

Ebony nodded, keeping her expression as blank as she could. It was incredible how much Frank appeared to believe what he was saying. His face was alight with the wonder and truth of it all. Had that been how she’d looked to Nate? Had her eyes been just as wide with eager pep?

“Go on,” she encouraged after Frank came to the end of his spiel.

Frank made a face. “There’s not much more to say, really. Though the family is large, Tony Grimshore is currently the patriarch, if you will. He sits on the board of the hospital, on the council, is a good confidante of the Mayor, and is very good friends with the Commissioner too. Not to mention, he owns four hotels, three restaurants, two car parks, eight office buildings, and quite a large lot of land outside the city perimeters. And those are just his personal properties. His sons, uncles, and general extended family, probably own nearly three-quarters of the business around Vale.”

“Three-quarters?” Ebony repeated, surprised. She’d never thought about it this closely, but now she had, the thought chilled her. The family, between the lot of them, almost owned all of Vale. Hadn’t anyone else thought this was a little frightening? One family with a monopoly and quite possibly magical protection against anyone ever speaking out against them....

“Um.... Well, considering the family has been around so long, can I have a look at their file? Surely, after all, they must have committed some crimes at some point. Even if it’s just a speeding ticket—” she couldn’t finish her sentence.

A look of outraged shock flew over Frank’s face. It was as if Ebony had just punched his mother. “Ebony Bell,” he said, voice harsh, “the Grimshores are absolute pillars of the community. Not a single one, ever, has committed a crime. Dear girl, we should all hope to be more like them. The very idea that they could have broken any law shows me just how much you don’t know about them.”

The strength of his reaction shocked her. Not just because it made her feel like a child being told off by the principal for calling God dirty names, but because of the sheer peculiarity of it. This didn’t feel like something Frank would ever do. The man had more passion for files than upholding the moral good. Even if Ebony had sullied her own father’s name, Frank would have just given her a pressed-lipped tsk-tsk. Now he was admonishing her from his pulpit with more vehemence and passion than a prophet bringing down a lightning strike to slay the unbelievers.

“Ah, okay,” Ebony said quickly, not wanting to create a scene. She had all the evidence she needed and didn’t like the idea of being thrown out of the window by Frank for saying another word against the Grimshores. “I was just interested, that’s all. I mean,” she took a hasty look at his still angry expression, and tried to smile, “I know that the Grimshores are the absolute best people in all of Vale.” She tried to underline her words by waving her hands around. “They really are just so upstanding.” She smiled and smiled. “Really, it was a stupid question to ask.”

Finally, Frank’s face softened. “Yes, it was... but that doesn’t matter.... Now, where was I?” His head dipped as he returned to work.

Ebony studied his face for as long as she could without appearing too conspicuous. After a while, he looked like ordinary, old, file-loving Frank again. She couldn’t put her finger on the transformation, but one moment she could hardly recognize him and the next it was just old Frank.

She left the office far more confused than when she’d entered. If she’d thought not being able to speak against the Grimshores had been scary but not all that important, she now had her evidence that it was a lot more pervasive and darker than she’d imagined.

Frank had seemed like a different man when he’d been talking about the Grimshores – filled with the kind of fervor and righteous belief that reminded her more of a disciple and less of an elderly detective.

She shook her head as she left the room, still trying to take it all in. What kind of magic had the Grimshores employed in order to have this much effect on people? Whatever it was, it was powerful. Frank was in the police station, after all. And Ebony had also been right here in the police station when she’d tried to convince Nate the Grimshores were as upstanding as flag poles. If it was some kind of cursed object making Ebony and Frank talk like this – then, by rights, it shouldn’t work in the police station. The station was one of the most protected buildings in all of Vale.

So what was it?

It had to be more general than a simple cursed object. It had to be something that, presumably, all the inhabitants of Vale came across. If everyone in Vale was affected, then it had to be something that could affect all of Vale at once. Something all of her citizens couldn’t help but share.

The water, the electricity, the ground, the buildings?

As she walked along the corridor, fully intending to return upstairs, she somehow missed the stairwell altogether – too caught up in her thoughts. With her head bowed, lips pressed, and a look of full concentration on her face, she walked the length of the corridor.



What would Avery think? Would she be able to speak out against the Grimshores? Ebony was one thing, just a little witch in the scheme of things. But surely whatever this magic was, it couldn't extend its influence over someone as powerful as Avery Bell?

Ebony bit further into her lip, her legs walking along on full autopilot.

Unless of course her mother did know. Perhaps the witches of the Coven knew what the Grimshores were up to but simply kept the secret.

Ebony found herself at the end of the corridor and was surprised to look up and see the office door of the Police Chief himself.

She laughed softly. What was she doing down here? Silly goose, she admonished herself as she turned on her heel.

She glanced to her left as she set off to walk back to her office, for real this time.

She stopped, dead still. The door was open to the Chief's second office, and she was afforded a clear view of his richly patterned Persian rug and leather chairs. It wasn't the decor that surprised her. It was what was sitting on it – or rather, who.

The man from the crypt. The pasty, creepy, irritating man from the crypt. The one who'd set all Ebony's troubles rolling in the first place. If he hadn't decided to up and kidnap Cecilia Grimshore, Ebony would still have her magic – her *life*.

He was in a suit of some sort, though the tie that sat against his gaunt and pulled neck was emblazoned with embroidered golden runes. He was obviously trying to look inconspicuous. It didn't matter. Ebony would be able to pick out that face from a mile away.

It did take her several moments, however, to recognize the woman who sat next to him.

The hair, that nose, that long, swan-like neck....

Cecilia Grimshore.

Ebony stood and stared, face angling to the side, her eyes open with worry, confusion, and something else.

The gaunt man was the first to notice Ebony, and he made eye contact. Those large wet eyes snapped onto her.

Cecilia looked up, her hands clasped primly in her lap, her smile stiff on her face.

"There's someone at the door for you, Mr. Bates," Cecilia said steadily, her expression so calm and even, it was clear she either did not recognize Ebony, or was the best actress this side of Broadway.

The Police Chief walked to the door, his brow furrowed. He was a tall, bull of a man with a broad chest and a mustache so bristly, he could have passed for a strongman from a '50s fair. "Can I help you, Miss Bell? I am currently in a meeting."

It took a second for Ebony to find her tongue. The confusion at seeing the madman from the crypt sitting alongside his apparent victim was too much. "Ah, sorry... Chief... but what's going on here?"

The Chief's mustache didn't manage to hide the thin frown that cut his jaw in half. "Excuse me? You're out of line—"

"Out of line?" Ebony's voice jolted up a pitch. She may technically be a witch, but she was still under Chief Bates' command. That was the last thing on her mind right now. "I'm sorry, but shouldn't that man be in prison?" her voice trilled high, her throat tight from the confrontation.

Now the Chief's face practically boiled. It was as if his skin had been dipped into cooking fat. "What on Earth are you talking about?" he pressed out each word like the puff of a bellows. "This man and Miss Grimshore are guests of mine—"

"Guests?" Ebony repeated, her voice trilling even higher. "Are you out of your mind? I put that man behind bars several weeks ago." She gestured toward the gaunt man. "For

attacking that woman.” She jabbed a finger toward Cecilia Grimshore, who still hadn’t moved a muscle. “And you ask me what on Earth is going on?”

“Put him behind bars?!” the Chief’s voice boomed out, ringing with anger and disbelief. “You are out of line, Bell. Now, get out of here before I give you an official reprimand.”

“What?” Ebony’s stomach kicked, her palms sweating profusely. What was going on here? What was the Chief playing at? Why was the gaunt man out of prison...?

“Don’t you mind us,” Cecilia Grimshore said, her hands still clasped primly, her smile still as bright as a daisy under full sun. “I’m sure your employee there is just a little confused.”

“It can happen,” the gaunt man agreed, nodding affably and leaning forward in his chair. “Sometimes people become very confused,” he repeated, eyes latching onto Ebony.

“Confused,” the Chief repeated, blustering. “She’ll be more than confused if she doesn’t apologize this instant and get out of here.”

Ebony’s mouth just lay open, her skin tight with cold. “This can’t be happening,” she said out loud, more to the situation than to any of the three people around her.

“Perhaps she is under stress.” Cecilia cocked her head to one side, her eyes as bright as glittering diamonds. She looked like someone examining a curious painting in a museum. “I do believe police work is stressful,” she added with a cute shake of her head.

The gaunt man agreed. “Very stressful. What, with all those criminals and such – is it any wonder she might become confused?”

“Very forgivable,” Cecilia added with a smile.

“Indeed,” the gaunt man agreed, leaning back in his chair.

“You simply mustn’t punish her for this, dear Chief Bates.” Cecilia tilted her head toward Ebony.

“Certainly,” the gaunt man had the hint of a sneer on his lips, but his face still beamed out with general good cheer, “not on our behalf. We are both very much not insulted by this. So we implore you to simply leave her alone.”

“Oh,” Cecilia put up a hand delicately, “and maybe give her a cup of tea,” she added brightly.

“Excellent idea,” the gaunt man agreed. “Tea.”

The Chief grumbled before taking a gruff breath. “You are lucky, Bell. Now get out of here. I don’t want to see you again.”

Chief Bates closed his door with a bang, leaving Ebony standing there, staring at nothing but the grain of the wood.

What had just happened?

Cecilia, that man... what?

Ebony blinked wildly, reaching a hand up to rub her eyes. She couldn’t believe this. There was the Chief of Police carrying on a conversation with the same man who she’d done for magical kidnapping and Death Summoning only several weeks before.

And there was Cecilia Grimshore, sitting alongside her supposed attacker as if they were the politest of friends.

Ebony rocked backward and forward on her feet, hearing nothing but the muffled voices from within the office.

What should she do? Run down to the front-desk and raise the alarm? Scream for help? Had the gaunt man somehow escaped and cast spells over Cecilia and the Chief?

Ebony rubbed her face again. No, that didn’t make sense. With the amount of magical protection on the station, the man – even if he was an accomplished wizard – wouldn’t be able to hex the Chief.

The Chief would know, *should* have known that Ebony had arrested that very man for attacking Cecilia Grimshore almost... how many weeks ago was it now?

Ebony tried to remember, but somehow the thought kept evading her grasp.

The crypt, the kidnapping in the crypt... it had been....

She pinched the bridge of her nose and turned from the door, shaking her head as if to clear out the cobwebs.

She took several steps down the hallway. The crypt, she kept repeating, the crime at the crypt.

As she walked unsteadily down the corridor, her heels clicking against the clean marble, she kept repeating those words to herself: the crypt, the crime at the crypt. Even though she was having greater and greater difficulty trying to remember what it was all about, some part of her knew if she kept holding onto those words, she'd remember.

Ebony managed to make it to the stairwell, her hand still pinching the bridge of her nose, before she remembered anything more.

Yes, her mind almost screamed at her, *the crypt*. That man... that gaunt man... he'd been at the crypt. And Cecilia Grimshore, she'd been there too.

As if with a pop and a fountain of sparks, all Ebony's memories returned to her. She found herself shaking her head. Had she really just forgotten all about that crime, the same crime that had left her magic-less for a month?

Ebony stood there in wonder. A sick sensation sank through her stomach. This memory – this crime she'd apparently stopped – it was real, wasn't it?

She was suddenly seized with such an odd sensation. No, you silly goose, she told herself, you know the crime is real. You remember it, remember?

She shook her head. But if that was the case, then what was the Chief of Police doing?

She was torn, teetering at the edge of a dark and lonely cliff. Who was right, Ebony or the Chief? Was it more rational to believe Ebony had somehow made up all this junk, or that the Chief had been hexed in the station?

This strange fog of a feeling that hung around Ebony with a limp, cold grip didn't help matters. It was encouraging her to doubt everything she'd ever believed....

No, she had to check. She headed for Frank's office.

If everything was turning to smoke before her eyes, then it was time to stoke up the fire and see what else could burn. She had to find out what was real, whatever it took.

When she walked up to Frank's desk, she could still feel the fog around her, sapping her identity like a leech at her wrist. "Frank," she said in a whisper.

He looked up, squinting at her. "You again, Ebony Bell? And what do you want this time?"

"I just um... want you to check something up on the... ah, files."

"Not something frivolous, I hope." He typed something slowly into his keyboard and looked up at her with a serious expression.

"Oh," Ebony laughed uncomfortably, "I hope it's not that frivolous."

"What do you want to know? I do have other work to do, you know."

She wiped her palms on her skirt – they were getting so slick with sweat that she was worried Frank would start to notice. "Um. You know that incident that happened several weeks ago. You know the one in the cemetery? The one with the illegal Death Summoning and, ah, Cecilia Grimshore?"

Frank's face crumpled with annoyance. "More of your games, Ebony? Now listen here. Your father was a great detective, and he would be more than a little ashamed to watch your games, young lady. That little incident in the cemetery, if that's what you want to call it, was your own fault – and I thought you would have realized that by now. You made a terrible

mistake. And I'm more than glad to see that your Coven has punished you for it. Really," he nodded quickly, "you shouldn't make such a mistake again."

Ebony receded back from him. "What? I hardly did anything—"

"Ha," Frank blurted. "If it hadn't been for Chalcedony, why, we would never have gotten Miss Grimshore out at all."

"What? Chalcedony wasn't there. She only started here after I, well, after they took my magic away."

Frank shook his head, his skin pasty with shock. "Now I don't know what's gotten into you today, and maybe I don't want to know. There is little wonder, considering your current behavior, that you've been replaced as our witch consultant. Really, what would your father think?"

"Replaced?" Ebony shook her head. "What are you talking about?"

"Ebony Bell, stop playing this game. I have work to do, and you'd best go and do yours, lest you find yourself without a job and without a leg to stand on." Frank turned deliberately back to his work, obviously deciding to ignore her from now on.

She turned from him, her face hot, and walked away.

What, in all that was holy, was going on here? Had the station's defenses been overcome? One moment Frank was fine, but the next he was treating her like the scum you scrape off the streets.

Ebony's hands started to shake as she climbed the stairs. It was all she could think of doing: receding and heading back to her office, her home amongst all those files. Magical files, after all, could not lie.

As she walked up the steps, she tried tremendously hard not to cry. Her skin was hot and itchy, her body limp and weak. None of this was right, nothing at all. Frank, the Police Chief, Cecilia, and the gaunt man. *What was going on?*

She had to check the files. Ebony closed her eyes and drove the words into her mind. She had to go check what she'd written about Cecilia and the crypt.

Ebony started to take the steps quicker. Magical files could not lie, she repeated to herself. And whatever paperwork she'd done regarding the crypt case would be upstairs amongst the files. All she had to do was retrieve it, read it, and then... well... try to convince everyone else they were mad.

Ebony still shook as she reached the top-level. Her lips were dry, her eyes wide, and the beginning of a serious stress headache was forming in her shoulders and temples.

She dove toward the most recent files.

She reached out a hand, spotted where they should be on the rack, and snatched the right Manila file.

She opened it.

It was empty.

## Chapter 17

Ebony stared at the file in her hands, not believing what she was seeing.

It was empty – completely empty.

She dropped it, reaching instead for the file behind it. She leafed through the contents, hoping somehow the crypt file had been misplaced. Far from it. Not only was the crypt file itself missing, but every single file relating to magical crime that Ebony had written in the past several weeks was also gone. *All of them.*

She blinked hard as if she'd just stuck her head in a wind-tunnel full of sand. She put down the files and stepped away from the shelf with a jerk.

This was all some kind of mistake, her rational brain tried to tell her, just someone playing a terrible joke.

Ebony waited for laughter to erupt from behind her. It didn't. So she let her mouth pull up into a bare, awful grin. It was the kind of smile a monkey showed in the face of danger – with curled lips but not a single ounce of mirth or laughter.

"Oh, lord," she said softly, wiping her eyes with a sweat-moistened palm. What was she meant to do now?

This was a desperate situation, utterly desperate. So what should she do? Run through the police station and try to raise the alarm? Hope against hope there were still people out there who... who what? Who still liked her? Who remembered Ebony hadn't stuffed up all that badly on the crypt case? Who remembered Cecilia Grimshore shouldn't be hanging around with a man who'd once kidnapped her?

She rubbed her face again, biting hard into her lips. Hold on, girl, she told herself quickly. You're doubting yourself again.

And sure enough, she could feel the thick pall of self-doubt swirling around her. Though the effect of it was lessened up here amongst the files, Ebony could still feel this powerful desire to question everything she knew.

She took a breath. She was missing something here. This situation was surely desperate, but making herself desperate was hardly going to fix it.

She stared out the window at her own reflection and the cityscape and mountain-ranges beyond. You can do it, she told her reflection. Just find the only certainty in this uncertain scenario and latch onto it.

The question was, what did she really know?

She knew... that she was Ebony Bell. That she was a witch, though currently without magic. That she owned a magical second-hand bookstore called Harry—

Ebony suddenly snapped a smile. "Harry!" she said out loud. "Of course."

Harry was her store, her charge. He also had the largest collection of history books this side of the Library of Alexandria. Yes, the magical files that could exonerate her might be missing, but Harry would still have his own source. Somewhere within that dusty shop, she should be able to find a tome or two on the Grimshores.

It was a start. But what to do about Frank, the Chief, and – quite possibly – the rest of the police station?

How far did this go? How many people no longer believed Ebony's account of what happened at the crypt?

She sucked in a breath, quickly swallowing as she did.

She had to find out, didn't she? She couldn't just stay up here, waiting to go home, while some unknown force changed her friends and rewrote her life.

She had to at least go downstairs to face it.

With a deep rattling sigh that sounded more like it belonged in a movie of the undead, Ebony turned to head downstairs.

She hit the stairs with her heart rattling in her chest.

As she descended, feeling like a rabbit trotting into a den of wolves, she realized people were returning from the Praytors case. Uniformed officers were walking to-and-fro, lips pressed thin and gaits even. The detectives were back, too – Ebony caught a glance of Ben’s back as he dashed off down the corridor.

She tried to swallow a quick and painful sigh at the sight of Ben. What would he think? Would he have forgotten about the crypt case, too? Would he spy Ebony and wonder why on earth she was here? Would he march over to her and give her a jolly good Ben-style talk-down for her lack of diligence and ability in dealing with the crypt case?

With a shake of her head, she realized there was only one way to find out. She set off after him, her heart now louder than a military band in full patriotic swing.

There was something to be said for no longer having magic. Every emotion and every sensation felt more intense. It came with a great deal more attached to it. No longer could she dismiss an unpleasant sensation with a quick spell. With her abilities and magic in check, all Ebony could do was watch and listen. She had to pay attention to what she was feeling and thinking.

“Ben,” she called out, almost catching up to him. “Ben?”

Her heart was in her mouth, trying to shake through her neck like a wild dog on a chain.

Ben turned slowly. His expression was strange, confused. He appeared to look at Ebony like a man staring at an apparition in smoke. Was it really there or just his mind playing tricks on him? “Ebony,” he said slowly. “What are you doing here?”

She swallowed again, and this time it hurt. “I came in today. You know, like I said I would last night?”

“Last night?” Ben made a face that said the words *last night* sounded like alien mumbo-jumbo.

Before Ben could fully process the thought, the last person Ebony wanted to see walked up behind Ben: Chalcedony.

Chalcedony appraised Ebony like a farmer might look at a fox that had broken into its chicken coop. “What are you doing here?” she asked abruptly, folding her sleek arms over her even sleeker shirt.

Ebony’s skin started to prickle, but she had to press on, she told herself. Nothing about this situation was going to be easy from here on in. And if it wasn’t going to be easy, then Ebony had to make herself as hard and unyielding as stone. “I work here.”

Chalcedony’s lips curled, but no one in their right mind would call it a smile. “You work here,” she repeated loudly and clearly.

Other officers and detectives began to turn around, staring at Ebony with as much puzzlement as Ben was. It was as if Ebony was now the only square in a sea of circles or the only bright red piece in a puzzle of grays and blacks.

“Ebony Bell, you no longer work here,” Chalcedony’s voice grated like a rasp over metal. “In fact, you’re lucky you still can work, considering what you did.”

“What I did,” Ebony repeated, using every single ounce of effort and will not to turn around and run home wailing about how unfair the world was.

A couple of detectives gave small laughs. Unfriendly laughs that clearly told Ebony they were on the side of Chalcedony, the Grimshores, and all that was wrong with Vale.

Ebony dug her fingernails deep into her palm and chewed on her lip. “I didn’t do much, Chalcedony,” she said. “In fact, taking the time to think about it, I really haven’t done much my whole life.”

Chalcedony laughed harshly. “Now, if you are finished making an idiot of yourself, you had better leave this station before you’re thrown out.”

The last and only person Ebony wanted to see appeared.

Nathan Wall walked toward her, his face as blank and expressionless as a slab of new marble.

She watched his expression, her own melting into some kind of drooped-lip pout.

“What’s going on here?” he asked as he drew up alongside Chalcedony. His expression was still as readable as a lost, ancient language.

What he was thinking, Ebony had no idea. And what he thought of Ebony, well....

“Oh, nothing, darling.” Chalcedony turned and flashed him a smile.

Ebony’s brow clunked down a full notch. Darling? Had Chalcedony just drawled out a little pet name for the detective? Or was that tone of familiarity—

Chalcedony turned and patted Nate affectionately on the chest. “I’ve got this – you can go back to work.”

Nate didn’t say anything, he didn’t move, and his expression stayed the same. In fact, Nate looked exactly like Nate. He didn’t have that same tinge of confusion that crumpled the faces of Ebony’s co-workers, or former co-workers if the stories were to be believed.

Nate looked like the first time she’d met him. His feet were planted as if he were trying to grow roots. His jaw jutted forward with an angle that could cut the wind in two, and his eyes shone with a determination that could burn forever.

Was this the same man she’d kissed only this morning?

Ebony felt sick, giddy, wild, mad, stressed, pathetic, done for, and totally overwhelmed. But she somehow still stood there. If she just kept her feet in the same place and her balance intact, she could weather this storm by simply being.

“Well, are you just going to stand there, Ebony?” Chalcedony turned on her. “Because I really will throw you out.”

“I... am sure you will,” Ebony managed. She could feel the desperation rising in her like a king-tide. But she couldn’t let it win. No, no, no. She couldn’t become desperate. Desperate people in desperate situations were, well, Desperate with a capital D. She needed to find some other way, something to latch onto for support.

But what did she have left? No magic, no friends, and only a vague belief that her memories were worth fighting for.

What was she without her magic, her friends, and her memories? She was just the name itself – Ebony Bell – empty and without use.

So she’d fight for Ebony Bell, then, whatever that meant. Those two little words were currently devoid of magic, love, and their usual charm, but they were the only things Ebony could still say with confidence were hers.

“But you won’t. Because I haven’t done anything wrong,” Ebony said the words with force, pushing herself to believe in them as she pushed them out of her mouth.

“Haven’t done anything wrong?” Chalcedony said with a guffaw of laughter. “Are you out of your mind?”

Ebony nodded. “The jury is still out on that. But here’s a question for you.” She swallowed. She was fighting for her name, she told herself. And it was now up to her to prove that Ebony Bell was something worth living for. “Tell me, Chalcedony, what actually happened at the crypt? What time did you arrive? Who was down there? When did we get the call? What was the weather like? Who was the culprit? What was he summoning? How long had you been working at the police station beforehand? What exactly did I do?” the words gushed out of Ebony like lava boiling from a break in the Earth. As soon as she opened up the floodgates, every question she’d been longing to ask the universe flooded out of her, all laced with aching, fierce emotion.

Chalcedony's expression began with a fat-cheeked laugh, which slowly shifted down until she wore a look of confusion akin to the detectives around her. "I started working for the police department..." she trailed off.

"After I was unfairly punished for a crime I did not commit," Ebony said, voice stronger.

"You did," Chalcedony suddenly spat back, her voice like a whip. "You fool, you endangered all your friends and co-workers, Cecilia, even the citizens of Vale—"

"Oh, really?!" The passion was now arcing through Ebony like electricity through a live wire. "It's now gone up to include the citizens of Vale, has it? What's it going to be next? The world? The universe? Everything that has ever been and ever will be? Just what, for crying out loud, am I supposed to have done? Can you actually tell me that, Chalcedony?" Ebony's hands were now curled into such tight fists, it felt like they'd stay that way for the rest of her life.

Once again Chalcedony wavered. When it came to the facts, to the actual details, she couldn't supply them. She was like a student who'd crammed for an exam only to find that the questions she'd studied weren't on the test. She looked up and to her left, trying to blink out an answer.

The more Ebony watched, the more she felt sorry for Chalcedony.

It was a disarming feeling, one that started to slide down Ebony like a sheet of ice trailing over her skin. Chalcedony had no idea what she was doing, no idea why she was here. Deep underneath the anger and vanity, was... fragility.

"You failed as a witch," Chalcedony snapped back, her voice ringing with righteousness.

"Failed as a witch," Ebony repeated dully. "That's not an actual answer, is it? You can't tell me a single fact. All you can do is paint an emotive picture. Well, let me tell you, I would be very worried about that, witch. When you can't remember what you've done, then you can't be sure of what you are doing," she cracked out her last words with a surety that didn't seem to belong to her. It was different, very different from the usual confidence she had, or at least the confidence she had once had as a witch. This had an edge, a sharp, glittering edge of experience that cut forward like the strongest blade. Ebony wasn't just throwing around a catchy comeback here. She was saying something for the benefit of them both. If you can't remember what you've done, you can't be sure of what you are doing.

The words cut deeper into Ebony the more she thought about them. If Ebony doubted her memories, how was she to know what she was doing? How was she to have any direction at all in her present, if her past was a hazy, insubstantial fog?

It took a moment longer for Chalcedony to bounce back, but bounce she did. "You've never been a real witch," she said with the kind of spite someone should only reserve for the criminally wicked. "You've always been a failure, a danger to yourself and others with no idea what you're doing and no control or dignity." Chalcedony's blond hair fluttered over her shoulder in a breeze that just wasn't there. "What you did at the crypt was unforgivable. And now they've taken your magic away, permanently. It serves you right."

"Permanently?" Ebony echoed, her jaw dropping. Now *there* was a development. The more she pushed at this situation, the more she tried to find out, the less she submitted – the more it found ways to punish her. First, it was with Frank and the Grimshores. By the second time she'd mentioned them, he was ready to burn her at the stake. The same was happening here, wasn't it? The more she pushed, the more the situation pushed back. All in one morning, she'd lost her apparent sanity, her friends, her job, her magic, and Nate... though she wasn't quite sure she'd ever had him.

Stunned, Ebony stood there. What would happen if she kept pushing? What was left to take? Her family? Harry? Her life?



She swallowed, throat dry and parched. This was it, she had to decide. Walk away or keep pushing at the impenetrable wall until she lost everything she ever had, or the darn thing fell before her.

What was the point of backing down if she'd have to watch all her friends walk around in this terrible fugue? What was the point of giving up if her treasured magic had already been snatched from her? Her job? Nate? Why stop now?

What did she have to lose?

Ebony opened her mouth, but a hand descended onto her shoulder with the gravity of, well, gravity.

She looked up into Nate's steely expression. Being this close to him brought a strange mix of emotions to the fore. The swirl of this morning's kiss, the confusion at having lost him before she'd even known him, and that little doubt at the edge of her mind. That little doubt that had always told her Detective Nathan Wall was much, much more than he seemed.

"Leave now," he said, voice as sharp and harsh as a gunshot.

She jerked her head backward, not expecting his mood, his words, or his tone.

"Excuse me," she began, trying to catch hold of her strength before it all dwindled away. "But there's a serious problem here, and—"

"Yes, there is," he agreed firmly. "And it's you. Now leave." Nate's expression was as stony as a quarry, and just as hard.

Ebony's eyebrows practically crossed. "No—"

Nate pushed her back now. "Would you rather be escorted out?" There wasn't a gram of warmth left anywhere in him, in his voice, or in those blazing eyes. But there wasn't confusion either, there was—

She backed off, not sure what to do.

Chalcedony shook her head. "Ebony, you never knew when to quit. Even when we were kids, you'd always blaze ahead like an uncontrollable idiot. I was done with you long before you stole my lucky charm."

Ebony blinked back, still trying to duck out of the looming shadow of Nate but confused by Chalcedony's claim. "Sorry, what? Who stole whose lucky charm?"

"My little plastic knight." Chalcedony uncrossed her arms with a smile and stared blatantly at Nate. "Didn't count for much though, did it, Ebony? Your uncontrollable, foolish ways have just led you recklessly into your current plight. You have no one else to blame, Ebony, no one else to blame," she repeated the saying as if it were a prayer.

"You stole my lucky charm!" Ebony blustered.

It had been a little plastic knight in white and gray armor with a little plastic silver sword. She'd found it in the attic one day when she was a child and had carried it around with her like a teddy bear. She'd talked to it, confided in it, trusted it, and cherished it. And, being a witch, her adoration had imbued it with the kind of magic that solidified it as the luckiest of charms. Then, one day, it was gone.

As the memory welled within her, Ebony, just for a second, realized how dumb it all sounded. Ending a friendship over something as silly as a little plastic toy?

But now the course of history had changed, or memory at least, and Ebony was the one who'd stolen that lucky charm – another turn in her rapidly disintegrating wheel-of-fortune.

She opened her mouth to reply, not knowing what to say.

Nate descended on her like a strike from the heavens above. He latched a hand over her elbow and twisted her to the side. For the briefest of seconds, his expression appeared to change – to soften, to crinkle, to shiver. Then that rock of an expression was back. "You were asked to leave. Now I'm past asking." He twisted her arm until she couldn't help but follow the direction of the force, and he tugged her down the corridor.

Though the various detectives and uniformed officers around her looked on with interest, there was still the hint of that mild confusion over their faces. It sat above them like a low-level cloud blocking out the vast sky above – befuddling and with the hint of rain.

No one moved or said anything, not even Ben. Though his expression was far more pained than the rest. His eyes flickered, like a fire fighting to stay alight.

Ebony was being manhandled down the corridor, past her co-workers, and not one of them had a thing to say about it.

“Let me go!” she protested vainly, putting up a fair fight, but stopping herself from actually reversing the detective’s grip and trying to flip him onto the floor. She still had the training of her father. And though she was now a jobless, hated, magic-less witch, she fancied she could still throw a man twice her size.

By the time they reached the stairwell and were alone, Ebony was pretty ready to fight back. “Get your hands off me,” she warned. “Or so help me, I’m going to flip you. You’re all under some stupid spell from the Grimsh—”

“Ebony,” he hissed in her ear, not releasing his grip for a second. “You say their name again, and I’ll gag you.”

She started to push against him, twisting her arm in his hand until her wrist jammed against the gap in his thumbs and she could finally tug herself free.

She jerked away, descending three or four of the stairs, pressing her back into the railing as she went, not wanting to take her eyes off him for a second.

He didn’t dive after her and latch onto her arm like a hook onto a fish, but he did walk after her. He sucked in his lips, his chin jutting out way more than usual, and his eyes blazing like a fire in a gas plant.

Detective Nathan Wall was livid and marched after Ebony with the determination of a whole army.

## Chapter 18

Ebony drew back, breath quick and harsh in her chest. She didn't like that look in his eye. She *really* didn't like that look.

Was it possible the magic the Grimshores were using – whatever it was – was it possible it had turned Nate against her? Made him angry? Violent even?

"Just get out of here," He didn't grab her again, but was close enough that his breath beat against her like a wave against a levy. "Get out. Leave. While you still can."

Ebony fought the urge to protest, to plant her feet and ask just who he thought he was to throw around threats like that. But who did Ebony think she was right now, let alone Nate? The whole world was threatening to pull the rug from under her high-heels, and she was getting hung up on a little threat. Not that the threat was little, or the man who was making it. But still, maybe Ebony should just leave.

"Ebony, go," Nate's voice twitched, if a voice could actually twitch. It peaked and dipped like an economic graph after a crash. And his expression went with it.

For the first time, she realized Nate was barely holding onto something, containing something behind that wall of anger like a genie in a lamp.

"Nate?" she questioned, lips dropping open.

"Get out of here," he rounded on her again.

This time she got the message.

She danced lithely to the side, perhaps even faster than he'd expected she could move, and ran off down the stairs. She didn't stop running until she was out of the front doors of the police station. Though she slowed to a passable jog whenever she passed a uniformed officer – knowing that perennial rule about cops chasing anything that ran.

She jogged to the other side of the road. She wanted to get as far away from the police station as possible. Now she was out of the place, the potential danger of the situation began to dawn on her. Her whole life... *her whole life* had just changed. She'd thought things had moved quickly last night – with the mugging and the conversation with her mother – but this was insane.

Reality was melting around her like icing left out in the full sun. Her memories, everything she'd once held sacred – now, apparently, all of them were gone.

And yet... not gone. It wasn't the fact that Vale itself had changed. Here it still was, stretching out around her in its palette of browns, grays, and blacks. The pavement was still solid beneath her feet. The buildings were still standing around her, and the sun was still shining in the sky.

Everything was the same, yet different. But Ebony couldn't easily point to the *out-there* to discern the problem, because the source was within her. It was the fact that the reality she was now being forced to play a part in was not the one she remembered from this morning.

The world hadn't changed, only her world had.

Ebony kept up an even and steady pace, her heels hitting the pavement with regular clicks. She had to get away from here as quickly as she could. It was the look in Nate's eyes, the timbre of his voice. Nothing fit. And yet she couldn't help but feel the real anger behind his actions. Was he her friend, or very much her foe? Was he under the same cloud of forgetting everyone else was under? Or was Nate Wall, as usual, just different?

Ebony found herself scratching at her arms, neck, and face. Basically, any sensation that arose, she quickly grabbed at, as if checking it wasn't a spider creeping over her flesh.

Nate. Her mind kept going back to Nate.

Who was he? What did he want from her? Could she trust him? How did he fit into all this?

There was only one place to go: Harry's.

Whoever had stolen the files from the police station had likely done a very thorough job. But breaking into a magical bookstore to pilfer a couple of history books was a whole other level of crime. Harry wouldn't like that, and Harry could make the walls fall in on you. He could pull the floorboards out from underneath your feet. He could make the light fittings shatter all over you. He could wrap you up in the blind cords and clock you over the head with a comprehensive encyclopedia the size of a boulder.

They could mess with Ebony, but could they effectively mess with Harry?

It depended on what their magic was and how they were using it. Casting spells over people and changing their memories was one thing – a terrible thing, for sure – but still only a certain kind of magic. You couldn't cast spells like that on a store like Harry. Harry didn't keep his memories in his head or have them attached to objects like so many people did – with treasured rings, photos, or journals bringing up memories like keys in locks. No, Harry's memories weren't so much anywhere, as everywhere.

Harry's memories were in the light bulbs throughout the store. They were in the way the wind whistled past the windows on a stormy day. They were in the way the keys grated in the lock. They were in the way silence wended itself around the bookcases and boxes, like a snake around its eggs.

Harry was intangible, and his memories were intangible. Still, if you found some way of burning down the store, Harry, and his memories would be gone. But short of actually taking an ax to his foundations, you couldn't cast a forgetting spell on a store. You couldn't make Harry forget himself for even a second.

As she drew closer and closer to Harry's – ever careful to keep an eye out for potential attackers, or fireballs from the sky – she realized how smart and how very dumb this was. If someone actually was after Ebony, if they really did want to get her on her own, now was the perfect time. And if they were strong enough to make it through the police's magical defenses, then Harry's wouldn't pose too much of a problem.

Then again, it was where she'd decided to go. Magic or not, the right thing to do, or not – Harry's would be where Ebony Bell would make her stand.

She could call her mother or try to get in contact with the Coven, but something told her that was a far worse plan than it sounded. Her mother would likely already know what was happening to Ebony. If Avery Bell wanted to help – if she could help – she'd already be here.

No, considering how much Ebony had been punished for her past and continuing advances against the Grimshores – she was going to do this alone. Well, with no one but Harry, at least. She had no qualms about bringing him in on this. The cantankerous old fool would likely pull up his foundations like a skirt and trundle after Ebony if she tried to leave this city or fight against unknown powers on her own.

Harry loved a fight, almost as much as he loved a book. He'd been a powerful wizard in his time, who'd loved to seek out evil and danger to wallop it on the head.

As she neared her shop, her feet started to move faster and faster until she broke into a run. Her hair slapped against her back, her hands gripped into fists at her sides, and her skirt flared around her like a cape.

If there was someone in her way – if there was a witch, a wizard, a demon, or even a Grimshore – in her current state she'd run right past them or through them.

Just as she crossed the pavement, heading for Harry's with the most direct route possible, she spied the police cars. And the wizards.

Yes, wizards.

There were wizards standing around outside her store, all dressed up in their leather with their numerous tattoos glinting in the sun. That was the thing about wizards – they definitely weren't a bunch of old men with prodigious beards and blue robes. No, the closest analogy to any human group would be bikies. Wizards were mostly large, hairy men with tattoos and an attitude to match. It had to do with the type of magic they practiced – it wasn't the light-handed feints of the magicians – real wizard magic required a lot of strength, of both mind and body. The tattoos were as much to impress girls as they were to adorn themselves with empowering symbols of magic. And the hair, well... there was something about men, power, and beards Ebony had never really figured out.

She drew to a stop so sharply, she practically fell out of her shoes.

She ducked into the shop next to her. Thankfully she didn't draw the attention of the horde down the street. They were all looking the other way, or congregating in front of the shop, trying to get in.

Harry was obviously not being helpful. The door was closed, and every single blind was drawn. In fact, there were now blinds on the front windows – even though there hadn't been any this morning. Harry was obviously hunkering down.

Were they after her, or were they after Harry?

The mugging last night.... The man had been after her bag, hadn't he? Had he been after the keys to the store? Or had he really only been after her?

Ebony, her throat so dry and narrow it felt like she was breathing through a sand-encrusted straw, walked further into the Turkish takeout she'd automatically ducked into, staring out the windows, but at the same time trying her hardest not to be seen through the glass.

"Ebony!" the owner announced happily from behind her, his hands outstretched.

She turned and blinked quickly at him. She was blinking way too much today. It appeared to be her go-to reaction for finding out her life was being destroyed and rewritten by someone who didn't have her best interests at heart.

"Ebony. I haven't seen you in days. And may I say," he nodded appreciatively, "you are looking so nice."

"Ah, I am, Mohammad?" she asked carefully, giving him plenty of time to change his mind and throw his shoe at her.

He didn't, but he did pick up on her alarmed/fatigued/befuddled state, and he nodded with obvious tenderness. "Bad day?"

She nodded.

"Hey, why are the police outside your store, anyway? Are they waiting for you? You work for them," he shrugged. "And they look impatient – maybe they are here to pick you up for some case or something?"

"Yes," she answered dryly. "Here to pick me up."

"And what's with the bikers, eh? Why are the bikers and police together? Is this Co-operation Saturday, or something?" Mohammad laughed heartily at his own joke.

Ebony clenched her teeth together and tried to think.

Why was Mohammad being so nice? Well, he was always nice to Ebony. That was no real shock. But today, when the rest of the world wanted to hunt her down? Why was he immune?

Maybe she just hadn't mentioned the Grimshores in his presence, or maybe it was something more. Casting a spell over everyone Ebony had ever met, making them all believe she was a terrible, naughty little witch, would take an astounding amount of magic. Not only would you have to blanket the city in a forgetting spell, but it would also have to be directed specifically at their memories of Ebony.

Now, whatever was going on was big and big with a capital THIS IS BIG. But just how big was it? If she was the center of this mess, wouldn't it make sense to only cast magic on those directly around her – people who could actually affect her, and whose affected memory would have a big effect on Ebony herself?

The Grimshores were evil, for sure, and they seemed incredibly powerful. But why waste magic? Why seek out and cast a spell on the whole city, when just the police department would do?

Magic, like money, was about maximizing returns. You only ever spent as much magic as you would be sure of reward.

Ebony took a sharp breath. She was going to try something here. Ebony was going to be honest. "Look, Mohammad, I have to be honest with you. I'm having a really, really bad day."

"Free Turkish delight," he said automatically, grabbing the glass jar on his counter and selecting the largest piece before tossing it to Ebony.

She smiled. And it was genuine. "I'm afraid I might need something more than that..."

He nodded sagely. "A pastry? Coffee? Both?"

"I was thinking something more along the lines of access to your fire escape." Ebony bit into the sweet, allowing the sugar to seep in and temporarily raise her mood.

Mohammad didn't look at her askance and run outside to call the police, though he'd obviously made the connection. "I see. So, the police aren't here to pick you up – they're here to *pick* you up."

Ebony patted the icing sugar off her fingers and nodded.

Mohammad appeared to think for a moment and then nodded heavily. "The fire escape is just around the back, and the key is on this keychain behind me."

She sucked down a deep breath.

"You know," he said as he motioned her around the counter and handed her the key, "you are a good person, Ebony. When good people have bad days, it's criminal." He handed her another helping of Turkish delight. "And you know the police, they chase criminals."

She laughed again, blowing the icing off the top of the sweet she'd just been handed with the puffs of her giggles.

"This, I think, is what has happened in your case." He nodded sagely at her.

"You mean that if I start having a good day, they'll stop chasing me?"

He shrugged. "You know the police, they're like cats – they chase anything that runs. All you need is for them to chase something else."

She smiled through a sniff. "Yes, I really do."

"But anyhow, no more chatting. Time for you to start evading the law. And me, I'll go out and give you a distraction."

"No, I couldn't ask you to do that. I really don't want you to get involved. Please, don't do anything risky for my sake." Ebony fixed him with the most genuine, steady gaze she could muster. It was true. She really, really didn't want to drag anyone else into this mess.

Mohammad shrugged again. "I'm not going to go at them wielding a knife – not that kind of distraction. I'm just going to ask those friendly officers why they haven't been able to find those kids that keep painting graffiti on my store. They can't even spell – it's annoying."

Ebony bit her lips but smiled, nonetheless. "I really don't want you to get in trouble."

"I won't. Now go – go!"

"Thank you, Mohammad." She nodded, then turned and ran out of the back of the store.

All the shops along this side of the street had fire-escapes that went up to their roofs. They were all old buildings, and the fire-escapes would hardly meet safety regulations – hence the ability to lock them. No, the shop owners either used them as a means to clean their back windows or to access the roof. All these shops were built in a certain era, and they all had sloping, interconnected roofs. Sometimes, though rarely, Ebony would drag a chair up onto the nook between the roofing tin of Harry's and catch the sun. She had a door, you see – an internal door that led up to the roof. It was such an odd feature of the building. From the mezzanine level, you could take a second winding staircase up to a nook that was barely two meters squared but afforded a brilliant view of more roofs.

It was just the kind of feature the living Harry would have specifically built into his shop – simply because it made no sense. It was kooky, eccentric, and highly unlikely to ever be used unless you needed archers – or, well, another route in.

Her plan was to get to the top of Mohammad's roof, somehow lie low, and make it across the practically joined roofs until she reached her own. Then she'd plead with Harry to open the door, run downstairs and... blow raspberries at the officers outside. Or, at least, come up with a better plan once she was there.

Ebony quickly, but quietly took to the fire-escape. There were wizards outside her store, and wizards were clever blighters. They had to deal with their fair share of magical insanity, so they knew you always kept an eye out for the strange. And Ebony Bell crouching along the rooftop would be just the kind of strange they were after.

She took each step carefully, ensuring her heels practically kissed the metal grating with their gentleness. The last thing she wanted to do was make a grand old clanging and banging and draw every cop, wizard, and neighborhood dog her way. She gripped the metal railing and then re-gripped it as she moved along slowly. By the time she reached the ledge that led up to the roof, she was so tense from the carefulness of it all, she was ready to run berserker-style across the roofs, screaming like a wild banshee.

She contained herself and quietly vaulted onto the roof. Though the metal did groan and grate at her sudden weight – it wasn't the equivalent of a cymbal crash in an orchestra. It would be nothing above the general hum of city life.

For the next part, Ebony finally twigged and took off her damn heels. It was a pity to let them go, considering how pretty they were, but trotting over sloping metal in heels afforded about as much traction as detergent on ice.

She left them there, her beautiful lavender heels, just sitting on the roof of the Turkish Takeaway. Maybe one day she'd be able to go back and get them. Or, more likely, Mohammad would go outside to find it raining shoes.

Ebony continued along barefoot, her toes and heels digging into the metal like hands into dirt. She tried to grip the old metal as best she could while trying to keep low and crouched. So far, it seemed to be working, but it was also giving her a terrible backache.

By the time she made it to the far side of Mohammad's roof, she started to get the hang of her awkward roof-gait. She even managed to leap the small distance between his roof and the next with relative ease, though she did let out a grunt worthy of a gymnast – a very quiet gymnast who was doing her best to hide from the judges with guns and wands.

With tremendous care, patience, and the kind of agility no amount of magical punishment could take away, Ebony made it – though the last leg of her journey was dire, indeed. With the risk that any sound she made would carry down to the police below – she finally, painfully, and carefully made it onto the roof of her own shop.

She could feel it moving ever so subtly underneath her feet.

"I'm glad to be back, too," she mouthed, not wanting to let even a whisper escape her lips.

Now she was on his roof, Harry was going to protect her. She walked with relative comfort and ease until she made it onto the nook of flat concrete and finally to the door.

The door swung open without her having to say a word. And finally, finally, Ebony Bell walked back into Harry's Second-Hand Bookstore.

She wasn't going to be able to mooch around with her music on full-bore, eating candy and dancing like a loon. No. There was a gaggle of cops and wizards trying to break-in, and she doubted they were after something cheap to read.

Ebony steeled herself with a breath and tried to think of what to do next.



## Chapter 19

She needed a plan, and she needed one right now. About twenty cops and wizards were about to burst through her door. If they could get past Harry, then... they'd likely do something.

That was the thing – she had no idea what they wanted. She could guess, considering the general lamentable theme of her day, they didn't want to invite her out to tea. Likely, the Grimshores had ramped up their curse and were getting ready to punish Ebony further.

All she hoped, all she could possibly wish for right now, was that Harry's magic would hold. She wasn't kidding when she said he'd been a powerful wizard and that he still retained the majority of that power. In his day, Harry Horseshoe had been a force to reckon with. And he still was. He just had more heavy books and sharp bits of wood to do the reckoning with.

It was a very good sign they hadn't broken in yet. It meant Harry could handle them. But, get a gaggle of wizards on her doorstep, all casting fire-spells at the shop, and even Harry might start to sweat.

"Harry," Ebony said in a full voice, knowing Harry wouldn't let the sound carry outside to alert the police, "what are we meant to do now?"

"Blast the blighters off the blasted pavement," Harry boomed in his crackly voice.

Ebony gasped, shocked by his sudden use of his voice. He hardly ever talked to her. In the several years she'd owned this store, Harry had only mumbled at her a handful of times and only when there was some pressing maintenance issue.

Now his voice was as loud, present, and dusty as the rest of the store. "Ebony, there's powerful magic in the air – clinging to you like a cloud."

"I know, Harry, I know." She brushed her arms compulsively.

"Then let's blast it away," he said, his voice as gruff and grating as wood splintering from a shotgun round.

Though Ebony had seldom heard him speak, she knew from experience Harry liked the term *blast* almost as much as comic books liked the word *blam*. During his adventures as a wizard in the '20s, Harry Horseshoe had come up against some seriously powerful and hideous creatures. And all in the name of writing a good book or retrieving an important tome.

"How?" Ebony sighed, always keeping an ear out for the front door below. She hoped they at least had some time to plan. She didn't fancy everyone bursting in during her think-tank session. She'd be able to throw a couple of books and cushions at them from over the staircase railing, but that would be the limit of her strategy and defenses. "Do we even have any time?"

"Ha!" he roared, every light-fitting shaking as if a bolt of thunder had rung out nearby. "They're going to have to try a lot harder to get in here. These new young wizards aren't like us oldies, Ebony. They're soft and silly."

Ebony, beside herself, giggled. If the bikies outside were soft, then Ebony couldn't imagine what was hard. "So, you can hold-out?"

"Hold-out?" he rumbled back. "I can stand against a whole fleet of them, a whole army. Don't you worry, Ebony. I've made friends with most of the buildings along this street \_\_\_"

Ebony's frown deepened. "You have? But they don't have spirits inside? And how did you even make it out of the building?"

“Don’t interrupt, girl. I’m sharing important information about our plan. If I want to, I can pull this whole street out from under their little plastic boots. I’d like to see them cast fireballs at me while they’re tumbling around in the sewers.”

Still brimming with nervous energy, she walked over to the kettle by the wall and flicked it on.

She could do with a cup of tea.

“Are you making yourself a cup of tea, girl? At a time like this?”

She shrugged.

“Excellent idea. Put some gin in it. And tip one through the floorboards for me – always good to have a bit of Dutch courage onboard your boards before a bit of a barney.”

Ebony smiled, still nervous but unbelievably happy to just stand here and listen to Harry’s blustering. He was on her side. He was really on her side. And while she couldn’t say their relationship was always smooth, she knew he was there for her. They’d get in fights, he’d hurl books her way – but none of that mattered, because deep down he cared for her. It wasn’t the kind of relationship Ebony was used to – with adoration and pleasantries – but considering all her other friends now thought she was the most terrible criminal in the whole world, it was the only relationship that mattered anymore.

“You go ahead and put mostly gin in mine,” Harry added, “with only a dash of tea. I’m going to need it to think.”

As Ebony pottered around, grabbing mugs and tea bags from under the bench, she kept taking stuttering breaths. She couldn’t help it. Her breath spluttered along like a car about to die, or rather an old wagon protesting at the sight of a hill. Could she make it, or end up getting half-way there only to roll back down to crash fantastically and die in burning flames?

“Alright, you can stop sounding like that, girl,” Harry gave her a bump from the floorboards. “It’s courage time.”

“Courage?” She grabbed Harry’s tea and poured it down one of the prodigious cracks in the floor. A strange gulping sound met her ears, and not a drop of liquid remained on the floorboards once she was done. “What does it matter? I mean, I don’t have any magic, Harry, nothing. What am I meant to do? I was planning on coming back here to find a book about the Grimshores,” she shuddered as she said that word, looking over her shoulder automatically in case they rappelled through the windows and shot her point-blank. “And maybe using it to vindicate me. But we’re past that. So very past that,” she said dejectedly as she took a draft of hot tea. “It was horrible, Harry,” she added after a dreary moment, finally realizing Harry probably had no idea what she was talking about. He could sense the magic in the air and appreciate that the police were rudely trying to break-in, but he wouldn’t know the extent of this horrible situation.

“Ah, yes. No need to explain, girl; I know what’s going on. I’m connected to you, Ebony Bell – you are my charge. I am also a powerful wizard.” The blinds shook, and a wizard outside yelped, no doubt as a shard of wood exploded from Harry’s door like a woody exclamation point. “I have been in Vale for so many years. I have been with you for many years, too. I know a powerful spell when I smell one, and there’s one lingering above you like a cloud of flies. There’s a curse drawing you into it, and it’s getting my goat.”

“But what is it, Harry, and why are they doing this?” She took a deep breath and groaned right through it. “Who are the Grimshores, and what do they want with me?”

“Start from the beginning, girl. What do we know about them? Where did you first meet? When did this whole business begin? If we start this story at the beginning, Ebony, we’re far more likely to make sense of our present. And,” he let out a rollicking laugh, “we’ll have a sporting chance of blasting their ending out of the water and replacing it with our own.”

She smiled, though it was hardly exuberant. She was thankful Harry was here to protect her and raise her spirits. But even he couldn't stop her from dwelling on the world-of-horrible crushing her life. "The beginning.... Okay, I guess it started in the crypt. A man had kidnapped a woman and was calling Death—"

"Kidnapped, Ebony, are you sure?" Harry cleared his throat, wherever that might be. "Or is this your interpretation of events? I'm not asking you to paraphrase here; I'm asking you to tell me exactly what happened and when."

She scratched the back of her neck. "Okay. Exactly what happened? I walked into that crypt and managed to break through the little protection it had far too easily. I became worried that other creatures were pressing in on the place, waiting to gobble up the magic and the man inside. So I convinced myself that I couldn't do any magic – not with what was lurking all around us. To do so would only increase the risk."

"Entirely possible, Ebony," Harry agreed. "Entirely possible," he repeated ominously. "People these days do not appreciate the true risk of magic. They appreciate only power, the fools. You did the right thing, child. You wouldn't have caught me performing magic in that environment. It would be like covering yourself in chicken's blood and jumping into a tank full of hungry sharks."

Her smile grew a fraction wider. Finally, someone who not only believed in Ebony's version of events, but agreed with what she'd done. If only she'd bothered to confide in Harry earlier, maybe she wouldn't have had such a rough time these past several weeks. "The man had a book in his hands," she continued. "And, Harry, the darn thing had a picture of a family crest on the front." She took a sharp breath. "I realize now that it was the Grimshore family crest."

"Ah," Harry said, his voice trilling. "Interesting."

"I saw a picture of the crest in the magical files at the station. But I didn't recognize it at first. I couldn't recognize it." She scratched her arms.

"This is important, very important. But go on, Ebony, get to the end, so we can hurry up and rewrite it."

"The man was close to consummating the spell. He only needed the flesh from the corpse." She shuddered.

"Indeed, the flesh would have given the spell power. It would have sapped the Truth and Meaning from the corpse's life and transferred them to the spell. Powerful, dark stuff."

"Well, he couldn't get to the corpse with me in the room, so he went for blood instead. He moved toward the woman," Ebony trailed off as she tried to remember the precise series of events. Had the man actually ever threatened the woman? Or was Ebony only adding those details in now?

"Are you sure? Do you remember that exactly?"

"I don't know...." She took a rattling sniff. "I fought the man because I thought he was aiming for the woman. I managed to get the book out of his hands," her skin began to prickle, "and just as I did, the woman screamed right in my ear, Harry, and it distracted me. That's when the guy managed to slash me." She cupped her injured arm.

"Where did the blood go, Ebony?" Harry's voice was subdued. "Did you see it afterward? Did you clean it up with your own hands?"

She shook her head. "I didn't have time. The Coven got me just as everything settled down. And then," she raised her wrists and tapped her bracelets, "these."

Harry was silent. "Who retrieved the book?" he asked with a snap.

Ebony gulped, suddenly feeling very cold indeed. "No one. When I asked Nate, he claimed he didn't know what I was talking about."

"What?" Harry spat, the floor shaking beneath her feet. "You left it there?!"

“Not me, Harry,” she protested. “I woke up in a hospital bed the next day, and people told me it had been sorted. Ben assured me the Coven had solved everything, that the case was done and dusted. And I just....”

“Forgot about it?”

“I had other things to deal with.” She croaked through a laugh. “I didn’t imagine the book hadn’t been retrieved, that the spell hadn’t been repealed.”

Harry grumbled, several bookcases wobbling. “I think we have our answer, Ebony.”

She resisted the urge to sink through the floor and bury her head in her arms. “You don’t think...”

“That your blood got on the book and consummated the spell? That’s precisely what I think. It would account for what is happening to you now. Your life, your story, is being rewritten – deleted, destroyed. And in its place, the Grimshores grow stronger.”

Ebony didn’t breathe for a long while and suddenly sucked in a gasp. “But, but, Harry, those files in the police station suggested that the Grimshores have been untouchable for years – for almost a century. No matter what’s happening to me now, I can’t account for that.”

“It just means they’ve done it before, Ebony, and they’ve probably had help. You wouldn’t be the first unfortunate soul who has given over their life so the Grimshores can write themselves a wonderful future. And unless we can stop this, you won’t be the last. I’ve seen it before, you know, spells like this – families that maintain their grip on power through various illegal, inhumane, and thoroughly dark magical rites. And this is Vale, Ebony. If it was going to happen anywhere, it would happen here.”

“But, Harry, isn’t this huge? I mean, the Grimshores own most of Vale, and if those files are anything to go by, they’ve had this strangle-hold for years. With magic like this backing them up, wouldn’t the witches and wizards have gotten wind of it?”

Harry was silent for just a second. “You put too much faith in them, you know. Just because the Coven and the Council of Wizards purport to regulate magic, it doesn’t mean much. Power and position do not eliminate corruption, Ebony, only truth does. Now, can you tell me with total confidence that you know the truth of your Coven? Do you know their ways, their plans, their desires?”

She shook her head. Her mother’s face came to mind. The crackling power, the wild hair, the dazzling skin.

“All you know is they have the power, and they’ll do anything to keep it. And this, Ebony, can be said about all ruling-bodies – the wizards and magicians, too. You mark my words. It is absolutely not impossible that a powerful witch or wizard knows of the Grimshore spell and even aids them as we speak.”

Her heart sank. “Oh, no... Harry, what do we do, then? What happens now? I mean, if it’s true, and my story is being taken over by the Grimshores, then how do I get away? Won’t it simply continue taking away my life?”

“There are ways and means, dear. There always are. Nothing is over until the book closes.”

“But, Harry, I don’t get it... why is everyone turning against me? I understand that the spell is taking over my life.” Ebony paused, a sharp memory of Nate grabbing her wrist and snapping at her to get out coming to mind. “But why is it working like this?” She gestured toward the front of the store. “What’s the use of having everyone attack me? Why does everyone hate me?”

“The spell is directed toward the Grimshores and away from you, dear. It is a funnel connecting your life, your history, and your soul to them. It also protects itself from any attempt to be destroyed. Tell me, when did you know for sure that this spell was taking effect?”

“When... when I realized I couldn’t speak against the Grimshores.”

“Are you sure? What about the mugging last night?” One of the upstairs blinds rattled.

Ebony sucked air through her teeth. “Just before I left work last night, I found a box about the Grimshores. It made me remember about the case.” She shook her head. “It was after that I was mugged.”

“My guess is, child, that the Grimshores were trying to get a hold of you,” Harry grumbled. “The blighters,” he added for good measure.

“But they’ve had ample time to try. So why now? And if they have the book, then why not consummate the spell completely?” She raised her hands to the sky. “It doesn’t make sense. Why draw this out? Why attack me so slowly?”

“Perhaps they don’t have it.”

“Don’t have what?” she huffed.

“The book. Perhaps they don’t have it. Perhaps that’s why they chose to rewrite you so slowly and painfully. Because perhaps they have no other choice.”

She shook her head, thoroughly confused. “Why wouldn’t they have the book? It was their spell, after all.”

“Perhaps someone else does, child. We can’t say for sure. It’s simply a hunch, but it’s a strong one. I’d wager that if the book were in their possession, you would be gone from history now, Ebony Bell.”

She closed her eyes tightly.

“So the spell is gathering slowly – faster, now that you have brought attention to it – but still, the spell is incomplete.”

“So I’m in limbo, then.” She swallowed. “The more I act against the spell and the Grimshores, the more my life will be rewritten. And the more people will turn against me.” She sighed, thinking of the welcome kindness Mohammed had shown her. The more she spoke-out, though, the fewer friends she’d have. Soon all of Vale would be after her....

“Limbo? You are in my store. Get a grip, girl. And no, there is always something you can do. It is the rule of life. Movement and action are ever-present.”

“What then, what do I do?”

“Think,” he trilled. “Think wide, think deep – think better than they do, and we’ll win this.”

Ebony pressed her lips into the thinnest, tiniest smile she could manage. “I doubt thinking is going to stop the police from bashing down my door or my life from being rewritten....”

“Ha!” He chortled, the stairs rattling. “Thinking is all you have. Thinking comes before magic, girl, you know that. Without it, magic is nothing. It is the random, the chaotic, and the unmanageable. But with the right thought, magic becomes power. If we think better than them, we become more powerful than them. And if we have more power, we can reverse this spell. We can stop them from rewriting you and start rewriting them instead. Trust me, it always works on dragons.”

The sound of more sirens blared from outside, and Ebony looked over her shoulder to stare in their direction, even though she couldn’t see through the blinds. “What do they want, Harry?”

“Ah. That would be what came in the post. It’s downstairs.”

She shook her head. “What do you mean? What came in the post? And why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

“Because we’re planning, Ebony, and planning can’t be interrupted for the post.”

She took the stairs heavily, her mug bouncing around in her hand, shedding little droplets of tea this way and that.

Though she knew Harry would last against the horde trying to break down his door, Ebony still walked carefully toward the front of the shop.

The post arrived twice a day: in the morning and in the afternoon. But never on the weekend. And today was Saturday.

When Ebony wasn't there, Harry usually just let the postman in and made some general noises from upstairs to pretend someone was home. Who knows, he probably even imitated her voice and called to the postman to, "Put the blasting post on the bench, you trotter."

But today was Saturday....

She warily walked up to the counter and the box that was sitting there. "Harry, what were you doing letting the postman in on the weekend?"

"Oh, it wasn't the postman. It was a courier," he said more importantly.

"Do they work on the weekends?" she commented offhand as she kept making her way carefully toward the box.

"I imagine so. They are important, you know. They hand people far more important post than the postman," he said, derision obvious.

"Okay. What do you think it is?" She snatched up the scissors by the counter, cutting at the packing tape with quick, expert movements.

"Oh, something magical. I can feel it."

"But if you know it's something magical and you know the police and wizards are after it, why did you let it in?!"

"Ebony," he said, the blinds ruffling with a puff, "I didn't know the police wanted it at the time. They came later with those wretched little wizards. I thought it was just some book from one of your suppliers."

Ebony opened the package. Inside wasn't a book, that was for sure. It was a pouch of Wizard Gold.

Wizard Gold wasn't like the ordinary stuff. It wasn't shiny and pretty, and you certainly wouldn't be making rings out of it. It was black, sooty, and looked like coal. It was a powerful alchemical substance that could be used to turn any metal into gold. With the right incantations and a pinch of this black stuff, a trained wizard could turn a handful of iron ore into a gold ingot.

It was, obviously, incredibly valuable. It was the equivalent of having your own fully functional money-machine.

"Ah, Harry," she said, her voice shaking, "this isn't a book."

Harry had grown momentarily silent. Suddenly, all the books sitting on the counter gave a tremendous flutter. "Gadzooks," Harry said, very seriously.

"Something like that." Ebony bit into her hand, pushing the package away from her. "I didn't order this," she said weakly.

"Yha! They would never have given it to you. That stuff is regulated by the International Wizard Bank. They have inflation to think about, you know."

"No wonder they're trying to break down my door." She leaned on the bench and took heavy breaths, the desperation of the situation spiraling around her again.

"Calm down, child."

"Calm down? Where are these even from?" she spluttered back.

"Oh, the only place in Vale registered to print gold is Praytors."

"Praytors?" Ebony replied, her voice catching. "But there was a break-in there only this morning."

"Well then, I fancy we've just found out what was stolen." The books by Ebony all fluttered closed with a snap.

“This is terrible.” She groaned, head collapsing onto the bench. “What are we meant to do now? That’s why those wizards and the police are outside. But how did they know? I mean,” she straightened up for a second, “maybe they know it was posted here, but they don’t actually think that I’m responsible.” She patted her chest, her hands a little floppy. “So I can just open the door and give it to them, and everything will—”

“Blow up in your face like TNT in your pocket. Are you mad? Have you learned nothing about today? Do you really think those wizards are just knocking politely to have their stuff returned? Get wise, girl, this is all part of the Grimshore curse. Mark my words, they not only think you are responsible and will gloss over the fact that the Wizard Gold was patently posted to you – they will drag you off to prison and likely bring back witch-death by burning.”

Ebony shuddered. “Harry, that’s awful!”

“Ha, you need to be shocked into paying attention, my dear. So that was the shock. Don’t you go opening the door, all conciliatory and pathetic. They aren’t going to listen to you. All their reason has been sucked up by the Grimshore spell. They all think you are as guilty as a scheming dragon. You’ve been rewritten to them, remember? Nope, as long as the Grimshore spell is taking effect, you won’t be able to trust a soul. And the only way to deal with those Grimshores is a good blasting.” The floor trembled as if with laughter.

“I guess.” She turned away from the door and settled her gaze on the recently stolen Wizard Gold in front of her. “That’s a good point. But what now?”

“Hmm, thinking, always thinking. We’ve got to think ahead before we can act ahead. So, get in your head and start thinking!”

About what? About this situation? About Nate – about the impossible, awful, intolerable, nastiness of it all?

“Constructive thoughts,” Harry bellowed. “Not that poor-me crap.”

“Harry,” Ebony said with a shake, “can you read my mind?”

“No, but you are predictable. So, here’s a tip: stop being so blasted predictable and start being creative. Stop running from everything that’s going on or blundering around like a drunken miner in the dark, and start digging for diamonds, girl.”

“I’m not blundering around,” she said, her voice barely defensive, because she patently knew she’d been blundering for most of her life. Considering how things were working out for her, she might as well change her name to Blundering Bell.

“Yes, you are. And it stops here. Ebony Bell, you are being rewritten. But you, witch, know that such a thing cannot happen to a person of strong will. If you have a direction, you cannot be diverted off course. You have let your own story dwindle and left the door open for another to acquire your rights to life. So we must reverse this. We must give you back what you should never have left to dwindle. Seize back your purpose, girl. Seize back your story!”

“How, Harry?” she asked dejectedly.

“Simple. What do you want? Answer that, believe in it with all your heart, and you will have your story back.”

There was that question again. It seemed everyone these past several days had been asking Ebony what she wanted. Now the question was different – sharper, more in focus – quite possibly because the situation was dire. Ebony stood on the edge of a cliff, a sword pointing into her neck and a tremendous plunge waiting before her. That tended to focus things. She couldn’t ignore the question anymore. She couldn’t ignore anything anymore. Because if she did, and she ignored the right things and latched onto the wrong things, these would be Ebony Bell’s last actions.

“Are you done thinking yet?” Harry interrupted impatiently. “Because there’s no point in thinking unless it has quality.”

“Quality?” She kept staring down at the gold. “Surely all thought has the same quality – insubstantial cloudy stuff between your right and left ears.”

“Same quality? Are you mad? You can have deep thoughts, long thoughts, inclusive thoughts, exclusive thoughts, peripheral thoughts, happy thoughts, and grave thoughts. Why, you have a world of thoughts. But what you really want are the right thoughts.”

“So now I have to figure out what I really want, and I have to have only the right thoughts.” She sighed so deeply it felt as if she was trying to rid herself of a lifetime of tension – trying but failing. “This is a lot to do before the Law bounces down the door and drags me off to the stake.”

“Oh, stop being despondent; it’s frankly irritating. Really, girl, hasn’t anyone ever taught you how to want, let alone think? You’re a witch! Surely these are at the very basis of your skill and discipline.”

Ebony let out a tiny laugh. “No one ever teaches you how to think, Harry. This isn’t the ‘20s. We don’t try to formalize things like that, and it’s just nonsense to believe you can.”

“Nonsense? How ripe! Why, little Ebony, I was taught from birth to death how to think and want.”

“Oh, yes.” She kept staring down at the gold. “And who taught you? Did you apply for a course at the local college? Or did you see an advert in the paper and send away for a book of lessons?” She rolled her eyes.

“No, you little trotter, the world taught me. Really, getting to your age and having no idea how to learn things? What exactly have you been doing with your life?”

She huffed. She was starting to get annoyed. It was rising in her like hot steam off a boiling pool. It was making her skin hot and itchy and her cheeks red and raw. She was starting to get sick of this stupid question. Why did people keep asking it as if they knew the answers themselves? She felt like they were all lording it over her, as if the world, all her friends, and all her family had the answers to the test Ebony had forgotten to study for.

“I don’t know, Harry,” she snapped. “Maybe you should just hurry up and tell me.”

“Tell you?” his voice trembled with anger. “What impertinence.”

“*Harry*,” her voice arced up. “I can’t take much more of this. There’s a horde of police and wizards trying to break down my door. I’ve lost my job, my magic, and my life. The Grimshores are rewriting my life so they can maintain their hold on Vale. I can’t just stand around and think like this, I have to—”

“Ah, there you go, you still can’t think. You still don’t know what you want—”

“I want you to shut up,” she shot back, her voice exploding in a sudden rush. “I want this situation to end – no,” she said suddenly, “I want to end this situation. I want my magic back. I want my friends back. I want to lift this curse, arrest the Grimshores, and reverse any damage they’ve done. I want... I want... I want Nate. I don’t want him to be evil. I want it all to be a mistake. I want—”

“You want him?” Harry’s voice was incredulous. “Yuck! I knew he was trouble the first time I laid eyes on him. He’s so annoying. So righteous and bland. He also has a secret, Ebony. I can smell it on him. Something big. I just knew I had to keep you two apart—”

“So that’s why you kept trying to kill him?” Ebony crossed her arms.

“Ha, that and I just liked to see his alarmed little eyes. Reminds me of a gorilla, that one – a slow, dumb gorilla.”

“He’s not dumb. He’s... different. But it doesn’t matter,” Ebony took a sudden breath. “Because I want him.” She reached down and picked up the pen, twisting it around in her hand. “I want to be me, Harry. I want to be Ebony Bell. I want to live the life I want every single day. I want to potter in my shop and return home to a hot dinner, a hot detective, and hot—”

“Don’t you finish that sentence,” he cut in.



“Showers,” she supplied with a shake of her head. “I wouldn’t really change much.” She brushed her hand along the countertop. “Just the little details.”

“Oh, no, you’d be changing everything – because you’d want it now. Very different, that. Knowing you want what you have stops you from looking for what you don’t want and ignoring your blessings for the pursuit of curses. Any wizard knows that. Except for those hairy little louts outside. I bet all they know is how to cuddle cushions and plait their beards.”

Ebony chuckled softly. “Right.” She stopped herself with a stage blink. Gosh, she was turning into Nate – throwing *rights* out left, right, and center.

But it was odd, very odd. Ebony felt different. She couldn’t put her finger on it, couldn’t point to a specific sensation in her stomach or a tickle along the back of her shoulders. It was just different somehow. It was like her center of gravity had shifted ever so slightly, her feet planted just a fraction more solidly on the ground.

All she’d said was she wanted roughly what she already had, but with certain embellishments in the Romance Department. That, and the right to continue living the life she wanted even when those wants changed. If she woke up tomorrow and wanted to explore the Amazon rainforest, she wanted to be able to follow that want just as much as any other.

“Ha,” Ebony suddenly let out an explosive laugh. It was just as that little old dear had said the other night when she’d come in proselytizing and handing out pamphlets. The secret wasn’t in the thing you wanted – it was in the wanting itself.

The right to want, the freedom to will – whatever you wanted to call it – that was what it was all about. It didn’t matter what you wanted – whether it was a truck full of chocolate or a hot-air balloon made out of pants – the magic was in the will directed, never the object intended.

Things started to click into place like a puzzle spontaneously solving itself.

“Ohh,” Harry gave the blinds a bit of a flutter, “now we’re talking magic. I can feel it in you, Ebony, feel it crackling away in your bones like a fire in dry brush.”

Ebony looked down at her hands, then at her bracelets. “What are you talking about, Harry? I don’t have any magic anymore; they took it away, remember?”

“Ha.” A book exploded open with a rush. “Take magic away? I’d like to see them try. They can’t take away your magic, Ebony. They can only contain it. No one can reach into your soul and take what’s rightfully yours. Magic isn’t some fancy ring, a catchphrase, or a special element zapping around in your blood. It can’t be removed and taken somewhere else. It’s a part of you, Ebony, as much a part of you as your name, your identity, and your whole.”

Now that she’d taken the time to think, Ebony realized with a pained sigh that Harry was right. Magic wasn’t something you could steal from someone else, stash in your sack, and run away with. If it’s there, it just means the person can understand and interact with the world differently. It doesn’t mean they have some kind of extra juice circulating in their veins.

“They’re just like walls, Ebony.” Harry let a soft breeze shoot through the room. “Those bracelets hold back the tide of your magic, like barricades holding back a crowd.”

She kept staring at her hands. So all she needed was to break the wall. But how? These had been given to her by the Coven, for crying out loud, and they had more power combined than Ebony could ever dream of.

“Oh, it’s not going to be easy, but you’ll figure it out.” The closed-sign over the door moved as if it was nodding. “I know you will.”

Ebony bit her lip. Things were starting to come together in the oddest and most curious of ways. Still, things were swelling. It was like watching the clouds gather before a storm. Everything she needed or seemed to be lacking was slowly drawing together in the same place. She now knew what she wanted, and the vague beginnings of a plan were poking their way through the darkness.

She was going to end this situation, rather than the situation finding a way to end her. She was going to lift this Grimshore spell, drag the rotters to prison, get back her friends, and find a way to grow her magic until she could break through her bracelets – and then, well, she was going to win Nate, even though that sounded like something the hero from a ‘50s B-grade horror film would be trying to do. But it was true. She wanted to fight off the bad guys and win the guy.

Clichés aside, she *would* do this.

## Chapter 20

So here was what she had to do. Ebony Bell had to find a way to break the Grimshore spell.

She patted her hands on her skirt. Let's see, she thought to herself, what else? She had to somehow get rid of the police and wizards trying to smash down her door to grab back the gold. She had to arrest the Grimshores. She had to get these darn bracelets off. And last, but not least, she had to find out what Nate's secret was, and then take things from there.

Ebony swelled her chest, taking in the deepest of breaths. "Okay, Harry, we need a plan."

"Are you telling me we need to think? You trotter, that's my line!" Some candy rolled out of the bowl by her elbow and trundled along the counter to the tune of Harry's voice.

Ebony spied the bowl, grabbed a lurid purple lollipop, and pulled off the wrapper with a tug. "I know. I get that now." She popped the lollipop in her mouth and rolled it around for a bit. "So what's our plan?"

"Blast them," Harry said triumphantly.

"Yes, but that's an outcome, not a plan. How do we get from being surrounded by police and wizards—"

"Pathetic wizards," Harry clarified.

"Whatever. How do we get from being surrounded, to finding the Grimshores, taking their spell, and smooshing it all in their faces? There's got to be some steps here, Harry, and we'd better start taking them before the police go and lease themselves a magical bazooka."

"Like I said, Ebony, I'm friends with most of this street. If need be, we can make our stand here."

"Yes, but the Grimshores aren't here, and their book isn't here, and neither are they very likely to come to us, are they?"

"Hmm," some thick dust-clouds erupted off the top of a bookcase, "a good point."

"We need to be creative, Harry. We need to be original. We need to do something the spell can't contain – something fresh, something forthright, something important."

"Atta girl."

"But what do we do? Where do we concentrate our efforts? The Grimshores or the book? If I attack the Grimshores head-on, won't the spell just accelerate? But how do I go about finding the book instead?"

"Well, doing a location-spell is out," Harry mumbled. "If it's a magical creature that has the book, we don't want them sniffing out our spell and knowing we're after them."

"Hold on, maybe no one has the book." Ebony's voice pitched with excitement. "Maybe it's still in the crypt?"

"Ha, you think if those bozo police officers had simply failed to retrieve it, the Grimshores wouldn't have crept back in and grabbed it after all the heat had dissipated? No, Ebony, my guess is someone has it. Not the Grimshores, but someone."

"Great," Ebony sighed. "But who?"

"Maybe that's the wrong question to ask right now, kid. Let's start with something easy, something manageable. The Grimshores and the book aren't the only things bothering you, are they? They aren't the only mysteries you want to be solved."

She bit her lip, confused by Harry's words. Right now the Grimshores and their horrendous spell were the only things Ebony could think of....

She stopped. No, that wasn't true. She could think of Nate, for one. The way he'd seemed unaffected by the Grimshore spell, but the way he'd still viciously chased her out of the station. It had been him who'd brought her attention to the Grimshore spell in the first

place. If he hadn't pointed out to her that she couldn't say a word against the Grimshores, then maybe she wouldn't have gone against the spell and half of Vale wouldn't be after her right now.

Ebony chewed on the edge of a fingernail, not liking this train of thought. It had been Nate who'd saved her from the mugger the other night, just in the nick of time. It had been Nate who'd assured her the book had never been recovered....

"What are you thinking, girl? Fess up."

"Nathan," she used his full name, and it sounded so odd to her, possibly because she felt so odd about him at the moment. A swirling distrust was growing in her stomach – a distrust that reacted with her feelings like potassium reacting with water. She felt like her heart would blow up if she didn't do something soon.

"Ha! I thought so. Such a rotter that one."

"No," she protested passionately. "He's not. He's just...."

"An enigma. A mystery. A curiosity that must be investigated!" Harry's voice boomed. "I agree, Ebony, I wholeheartedly agree. That boy of yours must be investigated; there's something very odd about him, indeed."

"He's...." She tried to form a thought but couldn't. What was Nate, really? He'd always seemed to have a secret – something he kept from Ebony and the world, something ensconced behind that mask of his.

"A target for investigation," Harry declared. "And a good one."

She shrugged, feeling incredibly conflicted. "Okay," she sniffed. "But how do we do that? I can't very well go back to the police station to face him – they'll likely shoot me, run me over, and then shoot me some more."

"Ha, oh, I don't think you should go find him, Ebony."

"What?" She shook her head, confusion furrowing her eyebrows. "But you said—"

"Oh, no, I say we go to his house and look through his stuff. You know, do some detective work on the detective."

"*We* should go? Harry, you're a building. How are you going to come along? I think the fuzz outside are going to notice if you suddenly pull yourself from your foundations and start walking down the street."

"Oh, silly girl, there's so much you don't know about me. Really, you need to get more learning in you – you haven't nearly enough." A magazine by her feet puffed open to reveal a man trundling along with a large travel-case by his side. "I can travel. In fact, I'm very good at it."

"I think you mean you could once travel. You're attached to this building now, Harry. I may no longer have magic – my magic may currently be contained," she corrected, "but even I know that."

"You doubt the great Harry Horseshoe? I can travel, Ebony Bell, because I have a traveling case."

She didn't reply, because that statement didn't deserve one.

"It's upstairs." There was a tremendous thud from the mezzanine level. "And I'm already packed."

"You are a spirit attached to a bookstore, Harry," she said, her voice blank. "It doesn't matter if you have a traveling case – you can't travel."

Harry didn't reply, and just for a moment, Ebony felt vindicated. Then whatever had fallen over upstairs started to thump and bump with great enthusiasm.

She shook her head, heading for the stairs. Then she took a sudden sniff and ran up the stairs with all the speed she could muster. "Harry, are they in?" she shouted. "Is that the wizards?"

She mounted the top of the stairs carefully, staring around her with the quick, edgy movements of a meerkat. There wasn't anything up here, save for a large brown traveling case that was currently dancing around on the floor as if it were filled with hungry cats.

"Harry?" She approached it warily, still not sure it wasn't some curious trap from the wizards outside. Maybe she'd get close enough, and then a burly, hairy wizard would spring out and wrestle her into a headlock.

"Ha!" the traveling-case said, its buckle moving like a mouth. "I told you I owned a traveling case." He gave another little dance. "I have packed myself inside and am now ready to travel."

"But," she walked up to him, staring down at the curious case bumping around like a pinball in an arcade machine, "you can't travel—"

"Ebony Bell," the buckle formed a frown of sorts, "there are many things on this Earth and in this universe that you do not understand. But if you stop to ask questions of every curiosity you meet, you'll never get very far. Now pick me up, girl, and let's go and do some blasting together." The case gave a good wiggle on the word *blasting*, showing just how enjoyable that concept was to Harry.

Ebony bent down and, after giving the case a thorough looking-over, picked it up. It didn't weigh a thing. "O... kay... but—"

"No buts. We go up the stairs, onto the roof, and on with our plan."

"But the store – and the Wizard's Gold? I mean, shouldn't we take them with us?"

The case opened to show the gold inside. "Tastes like gold, funnily enough, and powerful magic – spicy stuff. Will probably give me indigestion."

"And it's a good idea to take it with us, do you think?" Ebony found herself filled with indecision.

"Oh, yes. Valuable stuff. Can't be leaving it simply sitting around on the counter, can we? Plus, never know when you need the Midas touch. Turning lead into gold is quite a useful ability."

Ebony took a very deep breath. "Okay. But what about the store?"

"Don't you worry about the store, girl; there's still some of me left here. Plus, I've put more hexes and blessings on this place than you've got clothes in your wardrobe. I used to try out any new spell I'd learn on my travels, or in my books, and pool them all around this store in one epic security-system of booby-traps. I tell you, I really wouldn't want to break in." The case bustled with laughter. "But it ought to be fun watching someone else try."

"Okay," Ebony steadied herself, "then we can go." She walked over to the second stairwell that led up to the roof and then stopped. "Hold on, we don't even know where he lives," she realized with a pang of anguish.

"Oh, don't we? Did you forget you so blithely loaned him my books? My precious books on the criminal history of Vale? I've been to his house, Ebony. Blast it – I've seen him eat! He'd sit at his ruddy table, with a plate of toast and sardines, and pick up my books with his oily hands. Monster. Smelly monster," Harry added with a sniff.

Ebony shook with laughter. "I never realized you could transfer your consciousness to your books." She bit her lip, not liking the idea that every single book she'd ever sold had a packet of Harry's consciousness attached – so he could leer at people as they snacked and read, or, heaven forbid, read on the toilet.

"And yet, there is more you do not know about me. I don't spread into those silly novels you get in for your customers, Ebony. I'd rather burn myself down than extend my Awareness to those. No, but the books of this store – my books – well, they're part of me, aren't they?"

"So, you've been to his house, and you know how to get there?"

“Oh, yes,” the bag bucked, “and I’m going to enjoy going through that place like a cyclone.”

“If we’re meant to be detectives, Harry, then you ought to know they aren’t known for their cyclonic action. We have to be discreet.”

“Discreet? Bah Humbug. Ebony, I didn’t see much of his house; he only kept me in the kitchen, the rotter. But I tell you, he has a room.”

Ebony trotted up the stairs quickly, the case extraordinarily light in her hand. “You know, having a house, it doesn’t surprise me that he has rooms in it. In fact, if you said he had a house and it didn’t have a single room at all – then I might get suspicious and wonder if he doesn’t really have a shed instead.”

“No, Ebony, a *secret* room,” the bag hissed like a jet of air escaping a high-pressure pipe.

“Right. What kind of secret room, and how do you know if you didn’t see it?” She reached the top of the stairs and gently pulled the door open, staring out at the suspiciously sunny sky above. Considering her current situation, she expected to see some seriously foreboding storm-clouds gathering on the horizon like vultures waiting for the wounded to fall.

“I felt it – I saw the door too. Mark my words. It was a secret room.”

Ebony sighed. Considering all the surprises Harry had given her today, she didn’t have the strength to fight this. If Harry could fold himself into an old leather traveling case, then he was probably right about this secret room of Nate’s.

The question was: what was in it?

She walked out onto the roof, hefting the case along with her. “Harry,” she mumbled quickly, “how do we get off the roof? Got any magic up your sleeve?”

“Yes. But I wouldn’t waste it on rubbish like this. Magic is like silver cutlery, Ebony – you only bring it out to either impress or stab important guests. So I suggest you get us off this roof the same way you got up here.”

Ebony took a moment to roll her eyes, putting a lot of effort into the movement even though no one could see her. Then she began the tremendous toil of quietly, carefully, and ever so delicately, wending her way back to the Turkish Takeout – only this time with the added bonus of having to lug a case with a magical bookstore cooped up inside. Oh, and she still didn’t have shoes on. Though she realized with a smile, she could just pick up her shoes from before, meaning she didn’t have to go barefoot into the belly of the beast.

Sometimes life worked in mysterious ways. Either it had a sense of humor, or it just liked to mess people around.

By the time she made it back onto Mohammad’s roof, wrestled her shoes on, and trundled down the fire-escape, her face was hot, her hands sweaty, and she really needed a drink.

Rather than go back through Mohammad’s – as she didn’t want to risk any cops going in there for a coffee in between trying to break into her store – she left the key to his fire-escape on his mat and headed around the side of the building. There was a fence that was intended to stop people from gaining access to the back of the building without permission, but there was also a surprisingly tall dumpster next to it. With a couple of hefts and grunts, Ebony clambered on top of it with Harry and proceeded to pull herself over the fence. She soon gave up trying to keep her skirt straight and decent and took to the fence like a commando to an obstacle course – with a face like a twisted picture and a grunt worthy of a caveman.

She dropped down on the other side of the wall, teetering forward in her heels but managing not to fall into the drain or smack face-first into the pavement.

“Very nice,” she heard Harry whisper quietly from her side. “Now, follow what I say, and follow it exactly. There are people after you, Ebony; I can feel them. So let me find you a path forward.”

Ebony nodded. That sounded perfect. Putting the responsibility onto someone else sounded like absolute heaven right now.

After walking down an assortment of alleys, side-streets, and even over a few more fences – she found herself on the outskirts of town. She felt like she’d been walking for a whole week, maybe a year, considering how much her feet hurt.

If she’d once hobbled along with the case, she now dragged it and herself. Long ago, she’d taken off her heels, ditching them for the discomfort of bare feet. She simply couldn’t take the blisters and chafing anymore.

Nate lived right at the foot of the mountains, on the side of Vale that swept up to the forests beyond. His house was in a very leafy suburb, which backed up onto what looked like a forest reserve. There were giant oaks, elms, and spruces all around the place.

Yes, that was how far Ebony had walked – all the way from the middle of the city to the mountains.

She couldn’t guess what the time was, but Harry assured her it was only late afternoon, and Nate would still be out for hours.

Ebony had no idea how Harry could know this, but she went with it. She didn’t have any other option.

Still cursing the fact Harry hadn’t allowed her to take a taxi or even a bus – because he didn’t like the smell of other people, he’d insisted – Ebony carefully walked up to Nate’s house.

It was quite nice really. It had two levels and a wide timber veranda that skirted the whole place like a halo. In fact, the whole place was very woody, like a stylish Canadian lodge. It looked homey, warm, and oh-so-inviting. It also swept up into the forest behind it, with big old birches and elms standing sentinel by its sides.

Very pleasing to the eye really, somewhat like the owner itself.

It also looked like it was locked to the teeth and had an alarm system for extra roar.

“Hmm, Harry, how do we get in?”

“A rock through the window should do the trick.” The case guffawed with laughter. “That should show the upstart. Or you could try keying the code into the alarm system. The dunce of a Detective had my book in his arms when he was opening the door.”

“Yes, but surely we need a key to get in the front door—”

“Ha, don’t worry about that. I have a way with locks. I’ll just blast it off.”

Ebony shook her head, ensuring she was well under the cover of a low willow – not wanting Nate’s neighbors to spy the sketchy, shoeless woman with the large brown traveling-case hanging around the Good Detective’s house. “We can’t blow the door up.”

“Oh, it will be a small blast, just a little one directed at the lock, like a Claymore, really.”

“Harry,” she said through gritted teeth, “this better work, or—”

“Oh, it will,” Harry replied with satisfaction. “Just get me to the door, and I’ll do the rest. Then we’ll disarm the alarm and go cyclonic in the Good Detective’s House.” The bag let out a throaty chuckle that rambled on entirely too long.

Ebony stood under the protection of the tree for several more seconds before finally sneaking out and heading for the front door. She looked so cautiously this way and that, if anyone had seen her, they would have had no doubt she was a shoeless thief.

She held her breath as she walked up the steps, ignoring the mat before the door that said *welcome* in the same fantastic yellow the police used on their flak-jackets. She couldn’t help but think it was very ironic in her case.

As she held up the bag to the lock, hoping no peppy mother was out walking her equally peppy dog – Ebony wondered how Nate would react to this. Coming home to find a bedraggled, barefoot Ebony holding up an old, big traveling case to his door. It would be comical and terrible. His face would run the gamut of emotions until it set in anger and then.... Oh, he'd probably just shoot her.

"Hurry up, Harry," she whispered, dancing from foot-to-foot. "Someone's going to see us."

"Nonsense. And if they do, they'll just think you're a dancing telegram considering this silly jig you're doing. Now hold still, almost got it." There was a very sharp but not so loud pop, and a fizzle of smoke erupted from the lock. "Got it. Now let's disarm that alarm before it calls more police. Because," he laughed, "we're still carrying around stolen items from Praytors."

Ebony shook. She'd almost forgotten that one. But she didn't have time to feel sorry for herself.

She whipped open the door, went inside, and spied the alarm panel on the wall. "What's the code, Harry?"

With seconds to spare, she keyed it in, her heartbeat dropping noticeably as she realized they were safe in the house. For now. "Gosh darn, that was thrilling." She deliberately used Harry's turn-of-phrase, hoping he'd realize just how *thrilling* things really were.

"Hmm," the case rumbled appreciatively, "reminds me of the time I fought a horde of dragons in the mountains of Afghanistan."

Ebony shook her head again. "Harry," she took a breath, "I'm not saying breaking into Nate's house isn't wild, dangerous, and exciting, but is it really akin to fighting dragons?"

"Oh, everything is like fighting dragons, girl. It's one of life's great comparative experiences."

"Right," Ebony's voice drawled, and she gave a sudden hiccup of laughter. She'd just talked like Nate in Nate's own house.

"Oh, stop saying that – it's annoying. Now let's go break into that trotter's secret room."

"Yeah." She looked around, her stomach giving a strange tremble as she realized she was getting her first real look at how Nate actually lived. There was a sideboard by the door with a bowl on it, probably for his keys. And there was a coat rack on the other side of the door with a heavy winter jacket, a raincoat, and a thick beanie hung up on the hooks. There was also a pair of clean gumboots sitting next to the rack.

"Hey, come on, girl. Let's not dawdle. We are running out of time. And I'd like to get some blasting done before the day is out."

Ebony turned from the boots and started to walk down the hall. Several rooms branched off at her sides, and a wooden staircase twisted off at one point, leading up to what looked like a very spacious loft.

She found herself wondering very acutely which room was his bedroom.

She walked over to a door and grabbed the handle, curiosity getting the better of her.

"No," Harry snapped immediately, "that's not the secret room. Now hurry up. I'll lead the way!"

Ebony sighed and continued down the corridor. It opened out into a lovely, large kitchen. All along one wall were big windows and a French sliding-door that led out to the deck beyond. The windows and door all offered a spectacular view of the garden leading up to the forest and mountains above. Really, it was the kind of view you could wake up to every morning and never grow tired of. She fancied it would be different with every passing



day and every passing season. Some days the clouds would sweep down from above, like frosting dripping off a cake. On other days the sun would stream through the trees, lighting up the soft greens of the young foliage like light through cellophane.

Ebony sighed. This was longing in a way she wasn't quite familiar with.

"And just what is with that sigh, girl? You sound like you are swooning! At a time like this? Now get a grip. The room is just ahead."

She blinked, twisting her head from the view and surveying the rest of the kitchen. It was big, beautiful, and warm from the sun streaming through the windows. Just being here was making her forget she'd actually just broken in and the world was mostly out to get her with pitchforks, guns, and wizards.

Then she saw the door. It was off to the side, past a little area with a couch and rug that probably served as Nate's lounge room. Knowing the detective, he wouldn't believe in TV. He would think the only way to spend your time when you weren't working was to find other ways to work – whether it be studying or going outside to dig a manly ditch.

The room stood out, not because it had a big sign that read *KEEP OUT* in large, neon letters. No, it was because it had a faint glow emanating from all around the doorframe.

Ebony couldn't directly use her magic at the moment – it was still locked away behind those blasted bracelets. She didn't need to.

She knew whatever was behind that door was three things: secret, magical, and likely incredible.

As she walked up to it, her heart began to tremble with a nervous thud. It dawned on her, as she reached for the handle, that she was just about to find out what Nate had been hiding all along.

## Chapter 21

Ebony finally, carefully, and ever so delicately, opened the door. The glow from around the doorframe extinguished at once, and she found herself facing a dark room.

“Ah, Harry?” she whispered, putting a hand up to the side of the door in an effort to find the light switch.

The traveling bag gave an almost nervous twitch. “My word,” Harry mumbled, “quite remarkable.”

“What’s remarkable? I can’t see anything.” Ebony took a step into the room, putting Harry down so she could free her hands. “It’s just so dark in here.”

It really was dark, a very unusual dark. The kind of dark that flows in after a light has been extinguished. Any witch knows that such darkness has a different quality to the denser, heavier stuff you find in perpetually black caves or out in the lightless reaches of deep space.

This was quick dark. It had speed and agility, like a panther leaping from tree to tree in order to stay ahead of its prey. It could wrap around you or wend its way from behind in such a flash it was impossible to see. Scientists may say there is nothing in the universe faster than the speed of light, but anyone with an ounce of magic knows that isn’t true. Certain breeds of darkness move significantly faster. In the time it takes you to turn on the light, the dark has to get well and truly out of sight.

Even the light filtering in from behind Ebony through the open door didn’t seem all that strong. It felt like it was very far away – like it was far off on the horizon while she was stuck in some cavernous pit down below.

Ebony stretched out her hands, not wanting to trip over something and fall heavily to the ground. She didn’t like the idea of breaking her ankle and crawling out only to bump into Nate’s legs, enabling him to give her a swift and deserving kick.

She could hear Harry bouncing around on the floor, still muttering to himself. “Oh, yes, old energy,” he said for the second time. “Ancient stuff. Hmmm!” he trilled. “Very invigorating. Reminds me of when I was a boy.”

Ebony softly bit her lip and moved her hands in front of her, as if fighting off a slow, invisible enemy. She didn’t want to bump into something, she reminded herself, just as her thigh dug into something hard and pointy.

“Ow,” she yelped, falling forward onto what felt like a stone bench. Something hard, metal, and cold came up against her skin as she tried to steady herself.

“Ebony!” Harry gave a yelp. “What have you done?”

“I haven’t done anything.” She steadied herself. She wondered just how exactly she was meant to navigate through this room and find Nate’s secret if it was so darn dark. And it wasn’t as if she could simply go find a torch, either. Ebony knew enough about magic to know that when you faced darkness like this, you needed more than a torch to see through it.

She huffed.

Then she felt it and heard it. She even fancied she could smell it. But in the darkness, she had no chance of actually seeing it.

“Ebony!” Harry roared. “Duck back.”

She floored herself, launching to the side with a thud as something whistled past her ear.

There was a crash as something heavy and metal sliced into the floorboards by her side.

“Get back, Ebony. Time to do some blasting!” Harry was making such a tremendous crashing that it sounded like he was rocketing around like a bouncy ball in a glass shop.

Ebony backed off, scuttling along the floor like a crab. She still couldn't see, and the light from the doorway was only getting dimmer, making it feel more and more like she was fighting something terrible in the confines of her own, darkened mind.

"You're in the way, Ebony. Duck back, girl." Harry made even more noise now. He sounded like one of those old war klaxons winding up as it got ready to blare defiantly into the dark night.

If Ebony was in the way, she couldn't tell; it was just so dark. She heard something metal clink against the floor as if something heavy was walking in pointed, solid shoes. Then there was another whistle as something sliced right past her face.

Ebony screamed, lying down on the ground with a snap and rolling to the side until she hit what was either the wall, or that strange stone table.

Once again something metal slammed down right next to her, barely a centimeter from her head.

She kicked out wildly, not knowing in which direction, but not caring. She had no idea what was fighting her – no idea of the size, the dimensions, or the power. So she simply struck out at everything.

Her foot connected with what felt like a leg, but the thing was so covered in thick, tough metal, she instantly regretted it. A terrible pain shot up her unprotected toes, and she sucked in a wheeze.

"Got ya now," Harry blurted, a hot, white streak of energy erupting from the bag and flying over Ebony's face. It appeared to impact with something – the sound of clinks and thuds erupting by her ear.

Something crumpled beside her as if she'd been standing too close to a suit of armor as it toppled over.

Just as she allowed herself a strangled but thankful breath, the lights turned on.

The room suddenly filled with a bright, quite normal glow, and Ebony turned to see an actual suit of armor right next to her. It was crumpled, empty, and burnt all over from Harry's blast. It also had a massive, terrible looking broadsword in one of its giant metal gloves.

"Oh, my—" she whispered, pushing away from the thing as if she expected it to either spring to life again or burst into flames. As she pushed back, she brushed up against what felt like another set of legs.

"Word," the owner of the legs finished her sentence.

Ebony shrieked, sure it was another knight out to get her.

"Ebony," Harry rattled from the corner. "We've been sprung! Run."

A hand latched onto her shoulder – an actual warm, fleshy, human hand. And while Ebony wasn't going to rule out there being a sword in the thing's other hand – she realized with a gulp that it was way more likely to be a gun.

Nate.

"Get up," he growled.

She pushed up, just as he yanked at her shoulder, and she turned, just as he tried to twist her. Though the pain in her toes from karate-kicking a suit of armor was still intense, she forced herself to stand on her own two feet.

Nate. Detective Nathan Wall. Here he was. In his own house, in his own secret little room, facing off against his shoeless home-invader.

Ebony sucked in her lips, shrugging backward in order to release herself from his iron grip. Not that he'd let her.

"What are you doing here?" His expression was... she'd never seen him look like this. No, she'd never seen anyone look like this. It was as if she wasn't staring into his face at all – as if his eyes, mouth, jaw, and crumpled brow weren't anything but details belying what

was truly inside. Because past the stare, the frown, and the clenched teeth was something else. Something....

"Ebony, what are you doing here?" He squeezed her shoulder, his grip like a stone on flesh.

She shrugged back, this time putting more effort into it – twisting at the right time until she could use her momentum against him. She pulled herself free. She hobbled backward several steps and kept staring.

"What are you?" she asked, voice soft and barely audible.

He snorted as if that was the last question he'd expected her to ask. His expression changed briefly – his eyes flickering, his frown inching inward.

He was like a puzzle. The way he looked, the way he flattened his tie, the way he said "right," at every moment, regardless of how wrong things were – it was as if all of it was some kind of code. A puzzle that, if you knew how to assemble it, would unlock what was within.

Nate wasn't the tie, the voice, or the face. He wasn't the need to drive painfully slowly; he wasn't the need to quote the rule book at people; he wasn't the need to work twenty-four hours a day. Nate was whoever was behind all that.

"What am I?" he repeated, crossing his arms, his expression still so angry, so cold, and so... something else.

"Ebony, you stand back," Harry whistled from the corner. "Because if he tries anything, I'll blast him rotten."

Nate flicked his gaze over to Harry. "Tell me you didn't bring him along?"

"That's right, boy – I'm here. And let me tell you, try anything macho on my girl, and I'll blow up your house, your stuff, and your face. Your little magical armor there attacked us – almost killed my Ebony. So don't you get cocky with me."

Nate shook his head, clearly not worried and not amused. "You broke into my house with a magical bookstore in a bag – nice. And the armor? I doubt it would have actually killed you," he added.

It took Ebony a moment to realize he was talking to her – Nate wasn't facing her, after all. He was, instead, staring behind her at the suit of armor Harry had blasted.

"I knew you were going to be hard to handle," he said to himself with a shake of his head. "But this is incredible."

"Sorry." She kept backing off, wanting to get away from Nate and the magical armor, and over to Harry, where things were more likely to go "boom," but less likely to involve her. "I don't get it." She took a breath. "And you need to explain it to me right now."

"Atta girl," Harry rumbled appreciatively. "You tell that rotter. You understand, Mr. Detective? We're here to question you, and not the other way around. You've got a secret, my lad, and we're here to extract it from you."

Nate's eyebrows pressed together. He was either confused, or slightly amused. "Right. Or you'll blast me, right?"

Ebony swallowed. "Look. You have to tell us right now where you stand. I don't know what's going on." She crossed her arms and sniffed. "The Grimshores, their book, the spell I'm being rewritten into – I have a feeling you know what's going on."

He stared at her but didn't speak, move, or change his expression. They may have been standing in his secret room, with a mysterious set of armor that had moments before been moving of its own accord – but Detective Nate still had no intention of giving anything away.

She decided to press on. This was how it was going to be, she realized with defiance swelling in her chest. If the Grimshores were going to take her down, she was going to go down kicking, screaming, and cursing. "So what is it, Nate? How come you don't seem

affected? You've always been different." She pointedly looked down at the armor with its enormous glittering sword. "Though I hadn't realized quite how different until now. But here's your option – no, you don't actually have an option." She stared at him, her eyes level, her mouth set, and her cheeks stiff. "Who are you, what are you, what do you want, and who do you work for?"

Nate, contrary to all expectations, laughed. It drew on for entirely too long. "You want to know all about me, Ebony?" He raised an eyebrow. "You haven't figured it out by now? What have you been doing all this time—"

"You better hurry up and answer the question, Mister, or I'm going to blow up your house," Harry warned with a drawn-out grumble.

Nate didn't look unfazed. "Fine. I'm a knight," he said simply.

Ebony's features pressed together, but she hardly had an ah-ha moment. "Sorry? Is that meant to be revealing?"

"You're not exactly the world's best witch, are you? Don't tell me you've never heard of knights—"

"Hmm," Harry said thoughtfully. "You, a knight? I doubt it, Mr. Right. Knights are sworn to uphold the rights of all humanity. They are the most powerful of all the non-magical races, even though they have a special magic all of their own. They fight dragons," Harry said appreciatively, "and protect the weak from the strong. No, you can't be a knight. You're too boring."

Nate chuckled. "Sorry to burst your bubble, but I'm a knight."

Ebony watched their interaction, still not following. "Hold on, I've never even heard of knights. If they're one of the magical races, then why don't I know about them?"

"Non-magical races," Nate corrected as he adjusted his tie.

"Oh, no, they have a special magic all of their own," Harry countered quickly. "It's will magic. Very powerful stuff, that."

"Whatever," Nate shook his head. "And it doesn't surprise me that you haven't heard of the Knights. We hardly advertise ourselves anymore."

"Oh, no, you love your secret societies and hush-hush round-tables. Cloak and dagger stuff, knights."

"Armor and sword stuff, actually," Nate interjected.

"Hold on, knights are real? I mean, more than just historical? Like, real-real? Like there are knights running around with their swords and gauntlets fighting dragons and saving damsels *today*?"

Nate shook his head. "No. Well, yes, but no too. Knights are real, and we do fight the occasional dragon and save the occasional damsel," he said with the subtlest smile directed right at Ebony. "But that's not the bulk of our work and never has been. We are sworn to protect humanity from whatever threats gather in the darkness. We're sworn to uphold the Good, the Right, and the Truth. We're sworn to—"

"We get it, Mr. Detective," Harry interrupted. "But I still don't believe you're really a knight."

"I have a suit of armor that moves at will. Isn't that evidence enough?" Nate gestured at the crumpled armor on the floor.

"I'll admit that is weird," Harry grumbled. "But a true Knight is bound by more than words. Show us your registration, chump."

Nate rolled his eyes. "Fine."

Then he began to do something entirely unexpected. The upstanding Mr. Detective began to unbutton his shirt.

Ebony sucked in a breath. "Ah, what are—"

Before she could squeeze out the words or a whistle, Nate whipped off his shirt to reveal, much to her disappointment, a singlet.

"Right..." she said carefully. "Do knights, as a rule, always wear singlets? Is that why you took off your shirt?"

Nate pointed to the small tattoo on the tip of his left shoulder. It was about the size of a coin. It was a small circle with another circle inside. That was it.

Ebony, already bored by the tattoo, let her eyes drift to the rest of the detective. To say he had impressive arms was the understatement of the century.

"Ah, I see," Harry said carefully. "You are a knight. My mistake."

Nate buttoned up his shirt, catching her gaze and cocking an eyebrow. "You done?"

She sniffed carefully. "Okay... so just because he has a really small tattoo, we believe his story?"

"That's not a tattoo," Harry said. "That's a Point of Registration. The man's a knight, most definitely."

She blinked hard then threw her hands in the air. "What *is* going on here?"

"I'm a knight. We just covered this."

"So, why are you here, Mr. Knight?" Harry's voice had lost the edge of antagonism. Perhaps the prospect Nate had fought dragons impressed Harry. "You knights don't act without orders from your Round Table. So what is it? Fess up – what's going on?"

"You're very direct, bookstore. You want to know why I'm here." He turned to take a long look at Ebony. "I'm here because of your Portal," he said simply.

"Why, is there something wrong with it?" Harry grumbled.

"You could say that. For a couple of years now, Portals around the world have been decreasing their output of energy. We don't know why." Nate pressed the bridge of his nose. "But the fields that support the Portals have been fluctuating."

"Fluctuating?" Ebony asked. "And? How is that important?"

"Sorry, you an expert on thermic-field dynamics? No, well I am. The flow of energy into and out of the Portal has to be balanced, otherwise...."

"Reality goes pop." Harry rattled around on the ground. "But you're wrong, Mr. Knight. If anything, Vale's Portal has been increasing its output. Ever since I've been here, its magical fields have only been growing stronger. Why, I remember when it was hard to raise a good fire-spell, now every silly wizard can do it."

"And that's why I'm here." Nate crossed his arms and sighed. "For some reason, the Vale Portal is bucking the trend. For some reason, every other Portal on the planet is taking in less energy than they're sending through, except for Vale."

Harry's buckle clicked. "Oh, my. Sounds like something is trying to come through from the Other Side."

"We hope not," Nate sighed heavily. "We really hope not."

"So, hold on," Ebony interjected, still not following, but not wanting to be left behind, either. "You knew about the Portal all along? Then why did you ask me all those questions in my shop? Why did you borrow all those books?"

"To see what you knew," he answered simply. "We suspect that someone is working with... whatever is trying to come through the Portal. Maybe they're trying to help it come through, or maybe they're being used themselves. We don't know. But I wanted to know how much you knew about the Portal to cross you off my list. I figured, as the witch consultant to the police force, that you should be investigated first. With the kind of connections you have with the Coven and the Force, you would be in an excellent position to manipulate the Portal without anyone knowing."

Ebony crossed her arms tightly. "And what exactly did you learn, Nate?"

“Ha,” he chuckled. “Oh, don’t worry. You’re about as capable of pulling that off as Harry is of winning a Manners Contest. I ruled you out ages ago.”

She huffed. Not sure whether she should feel annoyed or relieved.

Nate offered her a half-grin. “Something wrong? You’d rather you were still under investigation? You want to be pulled up before the Round Table while you’re fighting for your life against a rewriting spell? You really that masochistic?”

Ebony pressed her teeth together and stared at him. “How do you know about the spell?” she asked. “In fact, it was you who drew my attention to the fact I couldn’t act-out against the Grimshores. If you hadn’t shown me, I probably would never have found out, and I’d probably still have friends, a job, and a hope.”

“Ah, well. I haven’t been completely honest with you there.” He was unusually sheepish, considering his forthright nature.

She kept her arms crossed.

He patted a hand on his neck. He was having great difficulty saying whatever was on his mind.

“Oh, no,” Harry suddenly growled, “you didn’t, did you? You didn’t use Ebony as bait?”

Nate clenched his jaw and sucked his lips in. “Yeah, I did.”

“*What?*” Ebony snapped.

Nate put up a hand. “Okay, I used you as bait. I knew that spell was on you... because I was the one who found the book in the crypt.”

“But you... you said no one had found it.” Ebony’s voice was tight and high.

“I lied. I found it and took it home.” He shrugged. “And you’re lucky I did. Otherwise whoever is working for the Grimshores – whoever is manipulating the Portal – they would have grabbed that book instead. And if they’d gotten it, Ebony,” he looked directly at her, “you wouldn’t be here anymore.”

“Hardly an excuse,” Harry roared. “Taking the book for protection was one thing, but you haven’t broken the spell. You’ve just left it there, letting it run its course, letting it sap Ebony’s life while you stand around and straighten your tie.”

Her skin began to prickle. “Why?”

Nate, for perhaps the first time in his life, looked truly ashamed. “I had to,” he tried to explain. “Ebony, you don’t understand how important this is. What’s happening with the Portal—”

She put up a hand. “You think the Grimshores are somehow manipulating the Portal —”

“No, I think whoever is helping the Grimshores is manipulating the Portal. You don’t get to be where the Grimshores are without having connections, *magical* connections. And I’d say that whoever is helping them, is probably the person I’m looking for—”

“Probably? You’re not even sure, are you? This is all speculation.” Ebony’s voice was getting louder. “You think someone magical is helping the Grimshores. You think someone is manipulating the Portal. You think the two are connected. And based on all those thoughts, you put me in danger.” She nodded her head slowly, even though she wasn’t agreeing with anything.

“You rotter,” Harry concluded.

Nate pinched his nose again. “Look. You don’t understand. I wasn’t going to let anything happen to you. I saved you from the mugging, remember? I had my eye on you, Ebony. I wasn’t going to let any real harm happen to you. I just had to find out—”

She stared at him. “No harm? Everyone has turned against me. I’ve lost my job. I’ve had my magic taken away—”

Nate clicked his fingers. "Exactly. You were punished for the slightest of crimes before the Grimshore spell could really take effect. That's why I acted in the way I did, Ebony, I swear. It doesn't make sense that you were punished the way you were unless the Coven, or one of the Coven Witches, had something to gain."

"But why?" Ebony's voice peaked with desperation. "None of this fits together." She put her hands on her neck, trying to alleviate the growing tension. "In the crypt, in the cemetery – there was something gathering." She remembered the eyeless birds and shivered. "It was all too easy. Something had come before me and sapped the magic out of the protection spells.... And that man in the crypt, he didn't have a clue what he was wearing, what he was saying – he was setting himself up to be consumed by a greater magical force...." Ebony tipped her head back and took a deep breath. "If you're right, if a witch was working for the Grimshores, then why on Earth was it so easy for me to stop the spell? Why was the magic so weak to begin with? Any witch worth her money would have known that other creatures would be flocking to that cemetery—"

"That's the point." Nate kept trying to straighten his tie.

"Oh, I hope not," Harry muttered from the floor. "Because that is a terrible point."

"What? You all seem to know what's going on, and I don't have a clue."

"Whoever is working with the Grimshores isn't necessarily working for them." Nate nodded. "The Grimshores were being set up, just as you were."

"Set up?"

Nate closed his eyes. "Whatever is coming through the Portal, Ebony, it's big. And it needs power, a lot of power. Now, whoever is working with it – whatever witch or wizard is trying to pull it through the Portal – they'd know this. Their task would be to find it power, to find it magic, and to find it opportunities."

Things began to click into place, and she found herself staring into Nate's piercing gaze. "You mean they're feeding it? They're finding purposeless-magic and throwing it to whatever beast waits at the other side of the Portal, like a keeper throwing meat to a lion?"

Nate nodded. "The more they can disrupt things, the more they can encourage magic with no purpose, the more they feed it. The Grimshores were probably meant as an offering. Whoever has been planning this has likely fattened the Grimshores up for years, just waiting to pull the rug from under their feet and let the lion descend."

"Years? The Grimshores have had their power for almost a century—"

"Some magical creatures can live for an eon. You know that. And it takes time – lots of time and lots of power to try to bring through a creature from the Other Side."

"You're suggesting someone has been planning this all for, what, a hundred years? Isn't that a little farfetched?"

Nate crossed his arms and stared at her. "You are being rewritten by a spell you accidentally consummated when you carelessly let yourself get stabbed in a crypt while you were trying to prevent a man from summoning Death. I think you have reason to suspend your disbelief for a time, don't you?" He shook his head. "It's all speculation, Ebony, but that's all I have to go on now."

Ebony huffed. She was overwhelmed, she decided, simply snowed under by all this information. What was she meant to think, let alone do?

"Wait a second." She looked back up at him. "If you have the book.... If you have the book from the crypt, then we can end this spell." She curled her hands into tight fists.

"Technically," Nate conceded.

"Technically?" Harry roared. "Go get the book, you rotter, and I'll blow the ruddy thing into a thousand pieces."

"I'd really rather you didn't," Nate said evenly. "I need that book, and I need the spell on Ebony, for now."



Ebony, despite the situation, laughed. “*Excuse me?*”

“I’ve come this far... can’t hardly give up now.” He shrugged.

“You’re going to let the spell complete itself.” Her head ticked quickly to one side.

“Let me be rewritten, let me die, just so you can catch your criminal?”

“I’m not going to let you die.” He rolled his eyes. “But yeah, I need to find out who \_\_\_”

“You need to go get that book right now,” Ebony hissed. “Before I get Harry to redesign your house and half the block.”

“Be reasonable, Ebony. The safety of the whole planet is on the line. If a creature comes through that Portal, it will—”

Before Nate could finish his sentence, there came a noise from the front door.

A very specific noise: a bang.

## Chapter 22

Nate didn't say anything, just ducked down and grabbed the broadsword from the crumpled suit of armor.

Ebony's heart raced as the sounds from the front of the house grew louder and a lot more destructive.

Nate closed the door to the room they were in. He turned sharply, his teeth clenched.

"Ah," Harry said carefully. "We have company. Probably more silly wizards. And they're probably after the gold."

"What?" Nate hissed.

"Never mind, no time to explain." Harry shifted himself around on the ground. "Now, unless you want those bearded-louts destroying your house, I suggest we get out of here."

"Nice plan." Nate's teeth were still clenched. "But I don't exactly have an escape route in here."

"No? You should always pack at least one escape plan when heading into trouble. I find it always helps."

Nate swallowed but didn't answer. "Ebony, you stay in here. I'll go out and—"

"And what, get a fireball to the face? I'm sure it would improve your visage, knight, but I wouldn't suggest it. No, I say we high-tail it out of here and aim for the Grimshores." Harry was rocketing around on the floor with obvious anticipation.

"How?" Nate snapped, clutching the heavy sword easily.

More bangs and crashes filtered in through the closed door, and Ebony fancied they now had only seconds to spare.

"Time to open up a crack in the space-time continuum. Temporarily, of course," Harry assured them. Then he settled down onto the floorboards and proceeded to open up. The traveling case clicked open, the mouth of the bag revealing a swirling, twisting vortex.

Nate shot Ebony a quick look, just as the sound of shouts filtered in from the kitchen beyond.

"*Geth insthide now*," Harry said as if speaking around a mouthful.

The vortex crackled, sparked, and danced. It looked like a living puff of black smoke, studded with glinting stars and snaking twirls of energy.

Nate raised his sword and grabbed hold of the door handle, trying to stop it from being wrenched open from beyond.

Something thudded into the door.

Ebony looked at the door, looked at Nate, then looked at Harry.

She made a decision.

She pelted over to Nate, grabbed his arm, and pulled him toward the vortex.

"Come on!" she screamed, just as the door cracked under the weight of some terrible force.

As shards of wood splintered everywhere, Ebony tugged Nate toward the portal. With a final wrench, she jumped for it, pulling the detective in tow.

The vortex swirled out to meet them, like a hand reaching from beyond. As soon as they were inside, the view of the room vanished, replaced by a tornado of colors and sounds.

All around Ebony it appeared as if reality was decaying, twisting, unfurling. It was like being placed in a blender while every color of the rainbow and every sound of the scale were dumped in with her. Everything swirled before her, through her, and over her. She felt immersed, subsumed, and assimilated.

She felt like space itself, like time, like movement, like matter. For a brief moment, Ebony felt reality and felt *like* reality.

She felt at one.

But just as soon as the moment began, it ended.

Ebony found herself lying face-first on an expensive Persian rug. She also found Detective Nate was lying on top of her.

“Get off,” she said, just as he was standing up.

He leaned down and offered her a hand, pulling her to her feet with ease.

He looked around him, then back to her, then down at the rug. His eyes were wide, but that was the only sign that jumping through a bookstore-vortex had frazzled him.

“Wow,” he intoned quietly. “What just happened? Where are we, and where’s Harry?”

Ebony took a shaking breath, trying to clear her mind. She’d never traveled like this before – whatever this had actually been. The taste of the vortex still remained in her mouth, and it tasted like eternity. “Ah... where are we?” She looked around the room. It was incredibly luxurious, with a soft Persian-rug, beautiful antique furniture, and stylish pictures on the wall. There was also a fireplace and a coat-of-arms sitting just above the mantelpiece – a very familiar coat-of-arms.

Two lions and an upright sword.

“Grimshores,” she said quietly. “My guess is we are in the main mansion of the Grimshores or at least one of their houses, considering how rich they are.”

Nate looked around. “But how did we get here? I’ve experienced my fair share of magical transport – but that was—”

“Harry,” she finished off his sentence. “Harry Horseshoe was an incredible wizard in his day, Nate, and I fancy he still is. The old guy has read more books and seen more stuff than you or I could hope to imagine. I’m sure he probably learned that vortex trick off a dragon in Nepal or something.”

Nate shrugged, keeping a wary eye on the closed door behind them. “Where is he, then?”

“I imagine he’s still back at your house...” her voice trailed off.

“You think he’s okay?”

“If anyone can fight off those wizards, it’s Harry.”

“But why send us here?” Nate kept looking around, probably taking in every detail he could.

“To finish this story,” Ebony realized with a blink. “And quickly.”

“But if we’d stayed at the house, we could have fought, we could have—”

She put up a hand. “Listen to me, Nate. You say you need to find out who is behind the Grimshores, who is manipulating the Portal. Well, maybe Harry is giving you your chance.”

“But, Ebony, you can’t be here,” he said quickly, gaze flickering. “The closer you come to the Grimshores, the more you act out against them – the more you feed the spell.”

Her lips trembled. She hadn’t thought of that.

“You have to get away from here. I’ll see to the Grimshores.”

She paused then shook her head. “No. I’m not leaving.”

“Ebony, please—”

“No. This is my story, Nate, *mine*. I need to finish it. Or I need to die trying. That’s why Harry sent me here: to give me the opportunity to finish this how I want to.”

“This is madness. Let me—”

“I don’t think so. I’m done playing. I’m done running. I’m done thinking. It’s my turn to act,” as she spoke, her skin became hot. She felt as if she was amassing some great energy within her as if someone had kindled a fire deep inside her heart.

He gave a quiet laugh. “Now you get involved? Now you become brave? Now you get forthright? You’ve been around running confused for several weeks now—”

“And now I’m turning around to face the devil, as it were.” She put her hands on her hips. She was strangely aware of herself, she realized, strangely aware of how it felt to be Ebony Bell.

She could feel her skin, feel her hands, feel her feet, feel her heart. She was aware of her thoughts, of the determination rising in her like steam off boiling water.

Ebony felt like Ebony Bell: witch, woman, human.

She sniffed.

Nate looked at her, slightly awed. “You look... determined.”

“That’s because I am determined. No,” she corrected with a sharp smile. “I’m not determined. My destiny, *my life*, is no longer going to be determined by anyone else – not the Grimshores, not my mother, not the Coven, not even you.”

Nate’s gaze shifted, but he didn’t say anything.

“I’m not determined by anything,” she repeated. “I am determination instead.”

Nate laughed. “That sounds like Will Magic, Ebony. You sure you’ve never heard of the Knights?”

“No, this is my magic. And it’s time for me to use it.”

Just as Ebony finished her sentence, something happened.

There were two soft, barely audible thuds as two bracelets hit the carpet.

She slowly brought her wrists up and stared at them. The bracelets were gone.

There was a click, and her choker fell from her neck like a dead petal from a rose.

“Ebony,” Nate moved forward, clearly surprised, “your bracelets—”

A smile started to grow on her lips. She ran her hands over her wrists. She felt the flesh, felt the warmth, and she felt the *magic*. In fact, she realized she had never stopped feeling her magic. It had always been there; Harry had been right. Her only mistake had been in believing someone could take it away from her.

Nate leaned down and picked up one of the bracelets. Then he looked at Ebony. His gaze was different now. For the very first time, Nathan Wall looked impressed by Ebony Bell. It wasn’t her looks, her personality, her humor – it wasn’t anything about her. It wasn’t a feature, a facet, a face. It was the whole gem that caught his eye.

People can become impressed by an aspect of something, but very rarely do they allow themselves to be impressed by something as a whole.

She smiled. “Shocked? Because I am.” She kept the smile on her lips and then started to laugh easily. “I really didn’t think it would be this easy.”

Nate shared her smile, though he still kept an eye on the door. “What are you talking about? What about this entire situation is easy?”

“All you have to do,” she said mostly for her own benefit, “is decide what you want. And then all you have to do is go after it. Direct yourself toward it – heading set, course locked in.”

“Ebony,” Nate began.

It was just so simple, it really was. Ebony kept the smile on her face and felt the electric warmth of the realization flooding through her, like hot water through cracks in ice. All she’d ever needed was to decide what she wanted.

Her whole life. That’s all she’d needed.

She’d looked this way and that, for distraction, for entertainment, for meaning. She hadn’t realized the true reality had always resided within. Her wants, her desires – *she* was what gave her life meaning. Not the other way around.

Don’t look outside for what lies within. All these years she’d failed to realize that. You don’t wait for life to give you meaning; you give life meaning.

Nate walked up to her, placing a hand gently on her shoulder. "What's going on?"

"Oh, nothing really. I'm just ascending here, just realizing the true nature of reality. I'll be done in a bit, honest."

Nate shook his head, his expression mystified but a smile still on his lips.

Slowly Ebony settled. She took a breath. "Okay, let's go."

## Chapter 23

There was an old witch saying. In fact, it was a saying germane to all magical races. Find a way to give back to the universe, and the universe will find a way to give you double.

Spiraling reciprocal exchange. That's what Ebony's mother called it. You gave to the universe, it gave you more, then you gave it more in exchange, then it doubled the offer – and so on.

It was how reality evolved. It was how it created more out of itself. And it was the truth behind magic.

It had only taken Ebony her whole life to figure it out, but now it was a lesson well learned.

"Nate," she turned to him, the shine of her realization starting to wear off but not truly departing her. "We have to end this."

"You keep saying that, but how?"

Ebony glanced to the side, thinking. "Find the man from the crypt and find Cecilia. Question them until they squeal?" She shrugged. "We could give it a go. We could threaten them with damnation until they tell us who has been helping them."

Nate crossed his arms. "That's a terrible plan. You think if it was that easy, I wouldn't have dragged them both down to the station already? I'm immune to their charms, Ebony; I can see through their spell. But I'm not stupid enough to think I can just walk up to them and ask them to tell me who they have working for them."

"Then we find another way—" she began.

The door opened, and not with a gentle creak, but with a bang.

Nate piled into her, knocking her to the ground as the door handle came whizzing past her ear.

Several figures walked in, their footsteps heavy.

Nate grabbed her, pulling her to her feet.

He stood before her, his sword outstretched. His back was stiff, his posture strong, and he held his sword with such determination, a titan wouldn't be able to wrestle it from his grip.

In short, he looked like a knight.

Three figures stood in the doorway. The man from the crypt, Cecilia Grimshore, and....

"A dragon?" Nate hissed. "Are you serious? You have a dragon working for you?"

The man... no, the *thing* standing in front of Cecilia was incredible. It had the form of a large human male, but that was it. It was even crammed into clothes, but that wouldn't fool anyone into thinking it was a person. Its skin crackled and erupted with fire as if it were the surface of some planet being swallowed by the sun. Its eyes were two dents in its flesh – two holes that stared out with dead, black stillness.

And its mouth, its mouth was enormous – far beyond anything human, far beyond anything natural. It was grotesque, its jaw jutting out a good half-a-meter, its lips blackened skin. A bright white fire burnt from deep within its throat, the light appearing to burst through its skin like blood seeping from a wound.

Ebony swallowed. She'd never seen a dragon, but she'd thought they'd be more, well, lizard-like.

Nate readied his sword.

Cecilia laughed. "Oh, that won't do, Detective. That simply won't do." She cocked her head, her hair touching her long neck. "I would put that sword down and save yourself the trouble," she finished with a smile.

Ebony kept her eyes on the man from the crypt. “Who are you?” she asked, jaw clenched. “I mean, I still don’t even know your name.”

Cecilia laughed easily, and the man joined in. “At a time like this, you worry that you haven’t been properly introduced?” Cecilia pressed her lips together. “Aren’t you a strange one, Ebony Bell? How delicious that you’ll be the one to complete our spell. How is it working, by the way? Are you beginning to feel lighter yet? Is the weight of your life simply lifting from your shoulders?” She clasped her hands together, taking a sudden breath. “Are you giving over to Death? Are you letting your impotent little life be rewritten for the purposes of something grander, something far greater?”

“Wow,” Ebony tucked her wrists behind her back, “you are just as mad as your friend. I mean, I guess you would be, considering you were dumb enough to get played.”

“Get played?” the gaunt man said carefully. “You are foolish, witch. We are the ones in charge, we are the ones—”

“Who don’t have a clue about what’s after you,” Nate supplied, keeping his eyes on the dragon.

Cecilia shook her head. “No one is after us. We are the Grimshores. Our family has been at the center of Vale for almost a century. We own this silly town, and very soon we’ll own that silly witch.” She smiled at Ebony. “*Very* soon.”

“Shut up.” Nate re-gripped his sword. “You don’t have the book, so you can’t consummate the spell yet. You have nothing but a trumped-up dragon and a lifetime full of mistakes.”

“Tell me.” Ebony pressed her fingers together, driving the magic into the tips of her skin. “Who was helping you? Was it a wizard, or was it a witch? Did you pay them off? Did you promise to make them rich if only they helped you continue your hold on Vale?”

Cecilia narrowed her eyes. “You don’t have a clue—”

“A clue? You want a clue? Here’s a clue, dear Miss Grimshore. If I hadn’t interrupted your Death-Summoning, you would have been the one dying. You were set up and set up well. Neither of you must know much about magic because everything – from trying to summon Death, to what you were wearing – was bringing things toward you.”

“Things?” Cecilia asked, voice incredulous, though there was a hint of uncertainty in her gaze.

“Things of the horrible and terribly powerful variety. Whoever you thought was working for you, they weren’t. They were setting you up like a magical buffet, just waiting for a creature to come your way and gobble you down.”

Cecilia shot a quick glance at the gaunt man. Then she returned her gaze to Ebony. “I don’t believe you.” Her voice was high. “The Treasure wouldn’t have lied. The Treasure has kept my family safe and powerful for decades.”

“The Treasure?” Nate asked quickly. “What’s the Treasure—”

Cecilia laughed, and it wasn’t pleasant. It was the kind of laugh that could only be associated with the criminally insane or the astoundingly vicious. “I’m done here. Dragon,” her voice was commanding, “kill the man and seize the witch.”

The dragon didn’t need to be told twice and instantly leaped toward Nate. Although it had the form of a human, it moved like a beast. It crouched down until its hands were on the ground and then used its legs to spring forward.

Nate tracked back. He threw an arm out to Ebony, knocking her to the floor and out of the path of the dragon.

The thing let out a ball of flame. It shot toward Nate, and he barely had time to put his sword up to block the blow.

Despite the fact it was simply metal against flame, the broadsword managed to hold back the blast. The flame dispersed along the blade as if the metal was a vacuum, sucking the fire inside itself.

As Nate fought the dragon, the gaunt man shifted. He reached inside a sleeve, pulling out a knife. It wasn't just any knife. It was the same sacred knife he'd used to slash Ebony, the same knife that had drawn her blood and that had set their spell in motion.

It was still tinged red.

The man pointed her way. "Your blood," he mouthed.

A cold shiver passed over her skin.

For just a second it seemed Ebony and the man were alone in the room. Cecilia, Nate, the dragon – they all disappeared from her awareness as she focused in on the knife.

Blood is a powerful thing. You can't live without blood. Blood is what carries the oxygen, the life, around your body. It is movement, and without movement, you stop. Stop too long, and you'll die.

The man ran a finger across the blade, collecting some of the crusted blood underneath a yellowed fingernail.

What was he going to do with it?

"You think I don't know about magic, witch? You think I don't know about you, about your knight, about the creatures waiting on the Other Side?" He sighed. "Unfortunately for you, you are dead wrong."

Ebony became very cold.

*Very cold.*

He brought the blood-caked finger up to his mouth and blew.

The dried blood moved to the left. It moved to the right. It moved up. It moved down. It moved everywhere.

Ebony doubled over. Within her, she could feel her blood reversing, shifting, agitating.

She lost momentum. Where once there was order, there was now chaos.

She pulled in on herself. Fell to the floor. Fell to her knees. Fell to her hands. Fell to her face.

Her cheek was cold against the rug, though from within she melted from a ferocious, unyielding blaze.

"Power feeds power, child," he said, his voice by her ear, even though he wasn't standing near her. "And you are just the offering I need. Succumb or be overcome."

Ebony gaped, her mouth opening. She was unable to control her voice or her muscles. She couldn't control anything.

"That which is more powerful has more power, child; it is a tautology of universal importance. It maintains the order. That which is above is higher than that which is below. You cannot fight the order. You can only succumb."

Fight?

Order?

Power?

Snippets of thoughts, cuttings of memories, slices of feelings. Nothing to hold on to. Nothing to grab to stop from sinking under.

Nothing but the movement itself.

When left with nothing solid, you are left only with movement. And movement is all there is, anyway.

Ebony managed to close her eyes.

She turned inward. And all she found there was movement. So she latched onto it and followed.



“Don’t fight it. You can’t fight it,” he warned.

She wasn’t fighting it; she was following it. She tracked through her mind, through every memory she had. She clutched at the thread that bound them all – the silver thread of her soul.

She wrapped herself around it and pulled.

....

Ebony Bell took a breath and opened her eyes. Saw what was outside.

He hissed. “Don’t fight it!” his voice pitched high.

She pushed to her feet. She hung there, like a puppet loose on its strings.

Then she moved. She pulled her hands in front of her and grasped the magic in her mind.

“Submit,” the man demanded, his jaw locked.

“No. No, I won’t. You can’t have my magic, you can’t have my life, and you can’t have my story.”

The man’s eyes widened, his yellowed skin growing pale.

“You need me to give up, but I won’t,” she hissed. “You need me to stop writing my own story in order for you to rewrite it. You need me to give up my power in order for you to take it. *I refuse.*”

Then the man, his teeth grating, flared his nostrils. “You will not succeed—”

“I don’t have to. I just have to not give up.” Ebony brought her hands in front of her and felt the magic pooling in her body.

You don’t have to get what you want – you just have to want it. And she didn’t want to give up.

Ebony clutched her fingers together, calling fire, calling water, calling earth, and calling air.

She unfurled her hands in front of the man, pushing them outwards as if she were trying to push the space between them.

The floor moved beneath him; the air descended from above.

He stumbled forward, his face compressing with anger. He slashed at her with the dagger, bringing it around in a wide arc.

Ebony stood her ground and pushed again. She curled her fingers back into fists and then pushed them out. The dressing table behind the man fell toward him, the chandelier falling from above.

He dodged both, slashing at her again.

She didn’t move. She just pushed.

The blade came up close to her eyes. She could make out her own blood still crusted on the metal.

It didn’t move her.

She pushed one last time.

The man fell back.

Did the sky give way? Did the ground fall away from beneath him? Did fire consume him? Did he drown in an ocean appearing from nowhere?

No, he simply fell back.

Magic didn’t have to be showy. It just had to be effective.

Around Ebony, reality returned. There was Nate, with the dragon defeated by his feet. There was Cecilia, cowering by the door.

And there was the man, with the blade still in his hand.

Ebony walked forward, knelt down, and picked up the blade.

She wiped the old blood against her skirt.

What had remained of the spell was now spent.

Ebony's story, for now, was safe.

## Epilogue

"You just disappeared," Nate said, smiling at her from over the top of his coffee. The steam played against his face.

Ebony shifted in her chair, taking the chance to stare out of Nate's kitchen windows at the mountains beyond. Clouds were receding on the horizon, allowing the sun to flow back into the valley.

"One minute you were standing there, facing off against that man," Nate continued, taking a sip of his coffee, "the next you were just gone. It didn't take me long to deal with the dragon. But I had no idea where you'd gotten to. Then you just popped back. Where on Earth did you go?"

Ebony smiled back at him. "I'm not even sure it was on Earth." She chewed her lip, holding her cup of tea close to her chest. "It felt like I was in a pocket of... some other reality. Like it was a world occupied by just that man and me."

Nate shrugged and took a breath. He looked above Ebony at the sizable hole in his ceiling. "It's been a wild couple of days."

She laughed gently. "Yeah. Wild."

"Harry really managed to go-to-town on my house." Nate sighed, scratching his scalp. "Lucky it's still standing, mostly."

"Now, you listen to me," Harry said from somewhere on the floor, the traveling case giving an ominous rattle, "I had to fight off a horde of wizards. A horde, mind you."

Nate's eyes continued to survey the damage. "And I'm going to have to fight off a horde of bills before I get this place back to normal."

"Won't your Round Table pay for the repairs?" Ebony tapped her finger against the rim of her mug. "Or at least give you a noble loan?"

Nate raised an eyebrow and frowned. "They're too busy saving the planet. Plus, I kind of feel you should help out – considering you caused this whole mess."

Ebony faked a shocked expression. "I caused all of this? You were the one who used me as bait, Mr. Knight, which is hardly very chivalrous I'd like to point out."

Nate put his hands up, pretending to surrender. "You make a fair point, my lady." He offered her a devilish grin.

"Now don't you go getting any ideas. I," she said haughtily, "am not a damsel."

"Nothing would have given me that idea. I know you, Ebony."

"Not as well as you'd like to think. There's a lot you need to learn about me." She pointed at him and shook her finger.

"Well, I might just have the time to learn it. We have a lead, but I certainly haven't solved the Portal case yet."

Ebony clutched her mug tighter. "So it wasn't the man, then? He was powerful, Nate, really powerful. All this time he was playing us...."

"No, Eb. I checked with the Round Table. It wasn't him. I mean, I'd definitely say he was involved."

"It certainly seemed as if he wanted me to surrender to some force," Ebony shivered, "or some creature."

Nate nodded. "It's over now. The Knights have him. He's not going to bother you anymore. And we have our lead."

"The Treasure? But what does that even mean?" Ebony blinked at him.

"I don't know." Nate ran a hand over his face. "But I think we should find out."

"We?"

“What do you say? The spell over you has been completely reversed. Your life should return to normal, which means you are still the witch consultant to the Vale Police. I’m on the police force.” Nate patted his chest. “And you are obligated to help me solve magical crime. And this, Ebony,” he smiled as he said her name, “is a magical crime.”

Ebony pushed her hair behind her ears and thought for a moment. “Fine. I’ll help you find out who’s manipulating the Portal, Nathan Wall.”

“At what cost?” He laughed.

“Oh, I think we can negotiate that later.”

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