Chapter 1

He awoke abruptly after having a bout of vivid dreams. A beautiful yet disturbing face haunted him. In his dreams, a fair maiden looked up at him with her big, poignant green eyes. Behind those eyes hid a dark past. He couldn’t help but look at her. Those eyes hypnotized him and set off a whirlwind of feelings that he had never had before. He could not turn away. He had to find out more about this mysterious woman he had been dreaming about for several weeks.

*Is it someone I met before?* he wondered. No, he would have remembered a beautiful face like that. She had never spoken to him in his dreams, but he imagined her voice to be sultry or songlike. He could not help but study the curves of her body. He wanted to run his hand through her long, soft, delicate hazelnut-colored hair, blowing in the wind.

He stepped toward her but startled her once she realized he was confronting her. Her eyes widened with fright. She stood motionless. As he was about to speak, she disappeared in hindsight. He was left torn and confused. Who was this irresistible beauty who bewitched him, and what could she possibly want from him? Jesse Taylor frantically searched for her in the deep woods. He could see the silhouettes of the tall, evergreen trees. The moon was beaming down on him, and he could hear the wind whistle. He could suddenly hear some twigs crack in the distance. It sounded as if someone had stepped on them. Taylor now knew he was not the only one there.

Jesse Taylor became annoyed when he realized his lips were parched. Taylor wanted to continue his dream, but the dryness of his throat was becoming unbearable. He sluggishly got out of bed to go get a glass of water. He was wondering why he was repeatedly having dreams about the same woman. He couldn’t figure out what made him so fixated on her. Taylor thought there had to be a plausible explanation. He slowly walked down the hallway and into the kitchen. Taylor could see the fridge through the moonlight. He flicked on the light switch, walked over to the cabinet, pulled out a glass, and laid it on the counter. He then filled his glass with iced water and took a couple of large gulps of it while standing sluggishly in front of the kitchen sink. He quickly drank the rest of it. It was just enough to satisfy his thirst.

He floundered back to his bedroom. Taylor rubbed his eyes as he tried to find his way through the darkness. Moonlight passed through the large window in the living room. It helped guide him along his way. It was an unusually cold spring night. He could hear the howling of the wind. Suddenly, he felt a draft coming through the window. He shivered and wished that he had put on his robe.

He entered his bedroom, made his way to the bed, and quickly slid under a pile of blankets on his bed. Taylor now felt warm and snuggled. He then positioned his body in a way that made him feel comfortable before slowly drifting back to sleep. As he was back into a deep sleep, the vision of the mysterious woman reappeared. This time she stared at him with a menacing look on her face. Her eyes had a red glare in them as she slowly approached him. There was something devilish about her. His heart began to race as she held out her arms toward him. She began to chant words that he had never heard before. She then waved a wooden magic wand around in the air and pointed it directly at him. Taylor knew she was casting a spell on him. He turned around and began to flee into the deep, dark woods of Salem, Massachusetts.

His body suddenly couldn’t move, his vision began to blur, and his knees felt weak in the dream. Taylor then saw himself lying on the cold, wet ground. The woman approached him with her magic wand and pointed it directly at him again. He looked up at her dark, piercing eyes as she began to conjure up another spell on him. Taylor, motionless, started to scream in agony. Blood trickled down his forehead. He looked at his hands, which had a few cuts and were now smeared with blood. He then pled for her to stop and noticed she was extracting his blood and filling a small glass vile with it. *What is she doing to me, and why does she need my blood?* he wondered.

“Please stop!” he continued to scream out in his dream as he held out his arms to protect himself. She beamed down at him with evil in her eyes. Her beautiful flowing hair now whipped around wildly in the wind. The woman’s creamy, youthful skin turned wrinkly and had a pale white color.

“Oh, God, please don’t,” he pled. “I beg of you. I don’t want to die this way!”

He fearfully looked up into her red glaring eyes once more. Then suddenly, all he could see was complete blackness as he went unconscious. It was then that he took his last breath in the dream. Taylor once again rose quickly from his bed, but this time petrified. He broke out a sweat and breathed in heavily as he tried to recollect himself. Taylor tried his best to reassure himself that it was all nothing but a dream.

Sadly, the woman continued to hunt him for several more nights in his dreams. No matter how hard he tried to block her from his dreams, somehow, she would still pop up in them. Each night, his dreams about her weren’t the same. Some nights he was entranced by her beauty, and other nights she haunted him. The dreams kept getting more and more realistic by revealing more details, and the facial features of the woman’s face became clearer. Then, one day, the unexpected happened.

As he was mowing his lawn on a bright and crisp spring day in Salem, Massachusetts, a young woman captured his attention. She very much resembled the woman in his dreams. Her appearance had taken his breath away. Taylor wasn’t sure if it was just pure coincidence or if his dreams were an omen. One thing was certain, and that was to stay clear of the mysterious beauty walking down his street. He stared with curious eyes. As she caught his gaze, Taylor quickly looked away. He couldn’t help taking one more glance at her. She smiled and waved at him. He cautiously waved back and gave her a smile in return.

There was a light breeze. She ran her fingers through her long brown hair and moved a few strands of it away from her face to get a clearer look at him. Taylor tried his best not to look awkward and not reveal his distrust of her. She then continued walking on. He watched her as she walked away. Taylor could not help noticing the curves of her body or the delicate features on her face. She was very pleasant to look at because of her beauty, but his dreams made him realize he had to steer clear of her. He hoped that was the last time he would ever confront her. The whole situation was creeping him out.

It was Saturday, so Taylor didn’t have to be in the office today. He was a 40-year-old news reporter at the *Salem News*. It wasn’t the type of newspaper he had dreamed of working at, but it was a start. He hoped to someday work for a bigger and more reputable publication, such as the *Boston Globe* or the *New York Times*. As an aspiring journalist in college, he dreamed of covering politics and international news. He had hoped his career in journalism would allow him to travel abroad and learn about other cultures. Instead, Taylor found himself spending much of his time stuck behind a desk and working within the City of Salem. He would occasionally look out the window while pondering ideas for his stories and wondering what it would be like to cover a war-torn country or interview powerful world leaders.

He was covering an investigation into the disappearances of five people—four men and a woman. The last reported missing person was two weeks ago. Taylor was hoping to hear from Police Chief Lewis Huber soon. He needed more details to complete his story. His news editor was breathing down his neck about turning it in. A search team was set to be sent out tomorrow morning. Taylor was hoping there would be a breaking discovery. It would bring peace to the families and loved ones if they could find the location of the missing individuals. There had been several searches in the woods during the past few weeks and yet there still wasn’t a single trace of them.

Taylor tried hard not to think about his story, for it was his day off and he needed to put his mind at ease. He was feeling a great deal of accomplishment after mowing the lawn and finishing painting the trimming on his home. Taylor wasn’t sure where this sudden burst of energy had come from that would allow him to take on this much work over the weekend, especially after having very little sleep during the past few weeks. He then realized that he had been feeling jittery over seeing the woman in his dreams walk past his house. Taylor knew that it was probably what was pushing him to do so much work in order to keep it out of his mind.

Now that he got all his work done, he could take it easy for the rest of the day by reading the James Patterson thriller he had recently bought and watching sports on the television. But for now, he would run over to his favorite restaurant, the Lobster Shanty, to order some take-out food. He had worked himself up an appetite.

When he arrived, the restaurant was hopping. A fresh, briny, and sweet scent was in the air. He could hardly wait for his lobster macaroni. His mouth began to water. When he heard his order number being shouted out from behind the counter, he dashed over to get his food. As soon as he grabbed his bag of food, he saw a familiar vision ahead of him. It took him by surprise. His heart leaped as he walked toward the beautiful enchantress that had been haunting him nearly every night as he walked over to the door. Taylor tried his best not to meet her gaze, but her eyes were hypnotic. It had to be all coincidental, but was it?

He knew he had to confront her sometime and find out who she was, so he mustered the courage to go speak to her. He shook off his nerves and calmly walked up to her. She flashed him a smile. Her red velvet lips and pearly white teeth were very tempting. Oh, how he yearned to taste those pouty, soft lips. Taylor quickly shook the idea out of his mind and tried to focus on what he was going to say instead.

“Hi!” he said in a friendly manner. “I don’t know if you recognize me from earlier today. I was mowing my front lawn as you walked past my home, and we waved at each other.”

“I do recall seeing you earlier,” she said. “Wow! This is quite a surprise to find you here. We must have been craving lobster at the same time. From what I heard, this place is amazing.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty great,” he remarked. “I highly recommend the lobster macaroni. It’s to die for.”

“I’ll keep that in mind the next time I come here,” she said. “The food smells great. I am most definitely looking forward to eating my lobster roll now.”

“I have never seen you before,” Taylor said. “Did you just move here?”

“Yeah,” she replied. “I moved here about two weeks ago. In fact, I live just two blocks from your house. I like to go on a daily stroll through the neighborhood to get some fresh air, so you might see me frequent the area you live in. I do like to change my route ever so often.”

“My name is Jesse Taylor, and I also like to take long strolls through the neighborhood,” he said. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” she said with a smile on her face. “My name is Brianna Rush. My friends call me Brea, but I much prefer Brianna.”

“So, what brings you here to Salem?” Taylor asked.

“My sister and I just opened an herb and holistic shop called Utopia Galore,” Rush said. “Salem would be a perfect place for it. My sister, Tara, lives here. She, too, is fascinated with witchcraft, sorcery, and holistic treatment. She is really in tune with her spiritual side.”

Taylor then had a vision of the woman who looked like Brianna casting a spell on him in his dreams. Could his dream come true? He was having a hard time believing it now because of her sweet smile and her innocent demeanor. She seemed harmless on the outside, but what was she harboring deep inside of her? Taylor proceeded to talk to her cautiously and watched her every movement.

“So, what do you do for a living, Jesse?” she asked. “I don’t take you to be the mystical or holistic type.”

“I am a news journalist at the *Salem News*,” he said. “I could tell our business reporter about your new shop. She has been trying to come up with story ideas these past few weeks. We don’t have many shops like yours around here, so I am sure it will make for an interesting business story. I’m sure she would love to talk to you about it. Her name is Rosa Briggs.”

“I would very much appreciate it,” she replied. “Thank you. I just so happen to have my business card right here.”

She took her business card out of her purse with all her contact information and the business address and handed it to him. Taylor took the card and placed it in his wallet.

“I think you are going to love living here,” Taylor said. “You will find that the people are friendly, there’s plenty to do here, and the sights are great as well.”

“I’m sure I will,” Brianna replied. “I already love it!”

“Well, it was nice talking to you,” he told her. “I might stop by the shop to say hello. I must go now. The New England Patriots are about to play the San Francisco 49ers and I would hate to miss the game.”

“Okay, I hope to see you soon,” she said.

“Me, too!” Taylor responded with a smile.

Taylor still wasn’t sure if Brianna was to be trusted. He had a strong premonition. There was just something about her presence that he didn’t like. Taylor also realized that it could be all a part of his imagination.

Later that night, he found himself once again dreaming of Brianna. This time it was not only Brianna in the dream. She was with a whole group of women. The women danced naked wildly around a bonfire. They threw their arms up in the air fiercely, and their hips gyrated as they leaped about.

Taylor was tied up to a wooden pole in the center of the bonfire. The flames rose higher and higher. There was nowhere that he could escape to. It appeared he was part of some ritual. He screamed in agony. He looked up into Brianna’s emerald-colored eyes. She flashed him a wicked smile. She laughed hysterically as his legs caught fire. Taylor could not believe what was happening to him in his dream.

He woke up quickly and tried to reassure himself that it was all just a dream. Brianna couldn’t possibly be capable of doing something like that to him. She seemed to be so sweet and innocent with that angelic smile and girlish voice. She was very pleasant to look at. Taylor saw that it was 3:30 a.m. on his alarm clock. He became frustrated when he realized he had to get up to use the restroom. Taylor begrudgingly got out of the bed. He was getting tired of this routine consisting of having nightmares, being woken up, and getting a glass of water or going to the bathroom in the middle of the night. He was in desperate need of sleep.

As he was leaving the restroom, Taylor’s heart dropped when he heard a tapping sound coming from the kitchen window, followed by a loud clatter. He no longer felt like he was alone. He nervously pulled out a gun from his hallway closet. Taylor then headed to the kitchen to see what was making the sounds. He slowly made his way to the window. He jumped when he saw a pair of glowing eyes looking at him from outside, standing in front of his garbage can.

As he got closer, he saw it was the eyes of a black cat. He sighed with relief as the cat meowed. It was clear the cat was looking for food. Taylor banged on the window to scare the cat away after it had jumped up and landed inside his trash can. The cat screeched, then leaped up and scampered away. Taylor laughed at first but then got a fright himself when suddenly he saw a dark figure with red glowing eyes running off into the woods behind his house. Taylor had a feeling he was no longer safe. He had the suspicion that someone had been there and they were watching him. Taylor also had to keep in mind that people were mysteriously disappearing in the area.

He had to secure his home. Taylor wasn’t going to allow himself to go missing. He then made sure every door and window to his house was securely locked. He kept his gun on the nightstand next to his bed for the remainder of the night as a safety precaution. Taylor kept both the porch light and the back door light on.

Under all the mysterious circumstances, it was a struggle for him to get any sleep. The night got spookier as a storm passed through Salem. Lightning flashes could be seen through his bedroom window. The wind picked up, and the sky darkened. He could hear the rain pouring down on his roof.

Taylor turned on some soothing music to help relax him. His eyes drew heavy. A few moments later, he was fast asleep.

Chapter 2

Taylor woke up to the sound of a car rumbling by with its music blaring outside his bedroom window. He was deeply annoyed when he looked up at the alarm clock and saw that it was only 8 a.m. Taylor had hoped he could sleep undisturbed all morning. He really needed to get caught up on his sleep. He tried his best to go back to sleep but was unsuccessful. He was pleasantly surprised to see the sun out that morning after having a stormy night. He figured since he was already up and the weather was nice outside, he’d just as well get the day started.

He stretched out his arms, yawned, and hopped right out of bed. He quickly headed to his kitchen to brew himself a fresh cup of coffee to help rejuvenate him. He knew a search party would be going out soon in hopes of finding the missing individuals who had recently disappeared. He had to always keep his phone by his side in case there were some latest developments. He had to keep his eyes and ears open. It was important that no other news outlet gets the scoop first. Taylor would give his anonymous source a call later in the day to get updates.

His anonymous source, Saul Benjamin, is a 67-year-old retired police officer who liked to devote his time to charity and join search parties whenever he could to help solve missing person cases. He was a very caring man who had a sense of duty in making sure justice was being served. He did whatever he could to help put criminals behind bars. Benjamin had always been a reliable source for Taylor during both his time as a police officer and after his retirement. Taylor knew he would likely be hearing from him soon about the investigation.

Sunday mornings were a day that he could relax, read other newspapers, and watch the local news to make sure he was up to date on what was being covered by other news outlets in his coverage area. Taylor tried hard not to get too wrapped up in his work over the weekends, but it wouldn’t hurt to check up on things. After all, news can break out at any moment on any day.

It wasn’t work that was bothering him, though. It was his recent encounters with Brianna and seeing the red glowing eyes last night that was troubling him. Because it was so dark, he couldn’t make out what the mysterious figure could be. There were so many questions whirling around in his mind.

It was all too strange to meet someone in the real world who was torturing him in his nightmares. There was something very unsettling about it. If only there was some way he could erase the memories of the dreams that were haunting him every night. Taylor knew he had to confront his fears by spending more time with Brianna. Maybe, after realizing he had nothing to fear about her, the dreams would go away.

Taylor was beginning to wonder if the red glowing eyes, Brianna, and the missing persons were all linked. He still was afraid that his nightmare might come true. He wanted to stay away from Brianna, but there was something alluring about her. Taylor felt bewitched by her. He had to find out for himself if Brianna wasn’t the type of woman in his dreams. Taylor decided the best way to find out was to get to know her a bit better and maybe even ask her out on a date. It would be then when he would get all his questions answered.

Because Taylor had been so flustered about the situation, he decided a nice, brisk walk in the neighborhood would be exactly what he needed to clear his mind. It was the weekend, and he shouldn’t let anything or anyone spook him out. It was warm and sunny. Taylor slipped into a light blue pair of shorts and a yellow Lacoste polo shirt. He put on a black pair of Ray-Ban sunglasses before stepping out of the house. There was a gentle breeze in the air that crossed over him and cooled him off. The trees swayed in the wind. He could hear birds chirping, bees buzzing, and the swishing sound of the wind. Taylor felt calm and relaxed.

He wasn’t far from his favorite bagel place called Bagel World II Bakery and Deli. He could stop there and get a bagel and some coffee. The brisk walk got his heart pumping as he took in the fresh air. He smiled and waved at an elderly couple as they passed him by. Taylor thought the couple looked cute together as they were casually strolling by, holding hands, and gazing at each other with smiles. They looked genuinely happy together. It suddenly made Taylor feel lonely.

At the counter of the bagel shop, he ordered a plain bagel with a smear of honey walnut cream cheese and a large cup of hot peppermint mocha. He frequented the bagel shop so often that employees knew him well. Taylor waited patiently to hear his name being called out. He took a seat at a small table in front of the shop so that he could watch pedestrians passing by. He loved his neighborhood. It had such a quiet and homey atmosphere, which made it ideal for raising a family. He loved both the people and places in it. His attention turned when the barista behind the counter shouted out, “Jesse!”

As he rose from his chair to walk over and get his order, Taylor noticed a familiar face sitting at a table at the back of the bagel shop. Once again, it was the same beautiful face that had been haunting him for weeks. He tried to avoid her, but it was too late. Brianna had already seen him. He didn’t want to be rude, so he waved and smiled at her. Taylor then quickly turned around and headed back over to his seat in hopes that she would not come over and talk to him. He could hear her saying, “Excuse me,” as she passed a woman nearby. Taylor knew she was headed his way. Despite not wanting her to come over, he knew it would be the perfect opportunity for him to ask her out on a date and perhaps end his nightmares once and for all.

He turned his back to her to pretend that he hadn’t seen her. Taylor suddenly felt tense. He ate his bagel and drank his coffee in an awkward manner. His hands shook, and his heart began to race. His face flushed. Taylor knew he had to get out of there immediately. Something told him to turn around. He looked over his shoulder and noticed Brianna was only a few feet away. His heart dropped, and his palms began to sweat. Taylor didn’t know what he was going to do or what he was going to say. She slowly eased her way to his table.

He wondered why she was consistently showing up at all the places he was going to. Was she spying on him, or was it all just coincidental? There was an eerie sensation taking over from him. He felt alarmed by her presence. It was no use. There was no way to avoid her. Brianna softly tapped him on the back. He quickly turned toward her to show he acknowledged her presence. Taylor quickly smiled at her.

“Well, we just keep running into each other,” she said coyly with a slight smile on her face.

“Yeah,” Taylor responded. “How about that?”

Brianna brushed a strand of hair from her face. Her long brunette hair was wavy and ran halfway down her back. Her deep-set eyes gazed at him. She then subtly touched her face. Taylor was taken back by her beauty. He took a deep breath, and his pupils grew larger while he stared into her eyes. He just couldn’t resist her. He was attracted to her like a moth to a flame. He suddenly felt like something was drawing them together.

“It’s really good seeing you again,” she said. “I know it’s kind of odd that we keep bumping into each other. I can assure you it is truly coincidental. It appears we like to go to the same places.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” he said. “I don’t think you are following me around. You seem alright to me. I could use the company. I was beginning to feel a little lonely.”

“It is nice to see a familiar face.” She smiled innocently. “I don’t know anyone here. I hope we can be friends. Maybe we can go to some of these places we keep bumping into each at together sometime.”

“That would be nice,” he said hesitantly. “I don’t have any close friends. My job doesn’t enable me to have much of a social life outside of work. Sometimes having to interview people frequently throughout the day makes me want to have some private time to myself, though.”

“Yeah, I can see why you would feel that way,” Brianna replied. “I, too, get tired of talking to customers and to the same employees daily that I need a little break from being with people. It is good, however, that you are willing to put some time aside to come with me to places. I really appreciate that. I would really enjoy having someone to talk to. I’ve been feeling like a hermit lately.”

Taylor couldn’t believe what he was about to do next. He felt sorry that she was new to the area and had no friends there yet. Just looking into those puppy dog eyes was enough to pull at his heart strings. Taylor knew it was the right thing to do. Also, he was in desperate need of answers.

“Would you like to have dinner with me tomorrow night?” he asked. “I know this seems so upfront, but we got to break the ice at some point, you know.”

“Yes,” she said with a gleam in her eye. “I would love that. Thank you so much for asking me. I really appreciate it.”

“Great!” Taylor replied. “I guess this is the part where I get your phone number and address so I know where to pick you up.”

“Oh, yes,” she said.

They then exchanged phone numbers and Brianna wrote down her address on a napkin for Taylor. Taylor decided he was no longer going to let a dream come between them, but he was going to be very cautious when spending time with her. He did not know her very well and wasn’t going to take any risks. Taylor then smiled at her as they waved goodbye to each other. It made him happy seeing her happy.

He spent the afternoon watching football and drinking beer, lounging in the backyard on his hanging outdoor lounge chair, and barbecuing some chicken and steak. Taylor thought about where he was going to take Brianna on their first date. He thought Rockafellas would be a good choice. They were known for their creative cuisine. It would be a nice enough night out that day to sit out on the restaurant patio under the stars. It would help set off the mood.

He walked into his kitchen to check his phone. There were no new messages. A few minutes later, his cell phone rang. He rushed to the phone to answer it immediately. He heard a familiar voice on the line. It was Saul Benjamin, his source or the missing people story. He jumped in his seat so high that he nearly fell out of it before answering his phone.

“Hey, Jesse!” he said excitedly. “I have some major news to report.”

By the tone of Benjamin’s voice, Taylor knew he had a major scoop for him.

“During the search today, we found two bodies in the woods near Pioneer Village,” Benjamin said. “The bodies appeared to be charred. There was evidence that led us to believe there was a huge bonfire in proximity. There were traces of several footprints around the bodies. The laboratory is testing some DNA from the bodies so we can identify the individuals. The police believe there is some foul play at work here, but we won’t know for sure as of right now. They are still investigating the situation.”

“Was any weaponry found in the area, Saul?” Taylor asked.

“We couldn’t find any,” Benjamin answered. “There didn’t appear to be any stabbing wounds on the bodies. We did find some deep scars as if some animal with sharp claws had attacked, but there also was a chalice nearby with blood stains on it. This tells us humans were there after the body was scarred.”

“How long will it take the lab to get the results on the DNA?” Taylor questioned him.

“I don’t know,” Benjamin said. “It could take a week or even a month to get them back. The truth is I really don’t know.”

“How far apart were the bodies, and do you think they died at the same time?” Taylor asked.

“They were several feet apart,” Benjamin replied. “The police don’t believe they died at the same time. In fact, they believe they died days apart.”

“What led police to believe they were murdered?” Taylor asked.

“I can’t answer that question right now,” Benjamin said. “The investigation is ongoing. But by the looks of it, there was some foul play involved. Both may have been part of some human sacrifice, with the evidence of the bonfires and the chalice in the area. We may be dealing with a cult or a witch coven. This is all speculation, so I wouldn’t recommend putting any of it in print.”

“As always, thank you for your assistance,” Taylor said. “I don’t what I would ever do without you.”

“You are welcome,” Benjamin said. “If you need to ask any more questions, you know where to find me.”

Taylor was saddened by the news, but he was now able to complete a story. He knew his editor, Joel Robertson, would be ecstatic about it. Robertson would expect him to get the story done first thing in the morning so they could be the first to get the story out. Taylor quickly finished writing down quotes and information in his reporter notebook. Afterward, he texted Robertson about the news.

He checked the time on his cell phone. It was now 5:30 p.m. Taylor suddenly remembered the red glowing eyes he had seen last night in the backyard. It would soon be dark, and he wanted to avoid seeing them again at all costs. He would go outside and look around for clues to find out what he saw last night while there was still daylight out. Taylor figured that would be the smart and safest thing to do. He had some time still to set up animal traps if the unwanted guest with red glowing eyes was an animal. Something was telling him it wasn’t an animal. He didn’t know any animals that could stand upright on two hind legs. The mysterious figure appeared to be very humanlike. Taylor wasn’t a believer in Big Foot, but he wasn’t going to rule it out. Not this time.

He explored his backyard first. He looked around for suspicious footprints or debris. He wandered around until he came across what appeared to be human footprints left in a muddy area under a red spruce tree. The footprints led further up into the woods. He explored the area and found claw marks on a tree. He found a wooden disk with a pentacle design on it hidden in some shrubbery. Tyler followed the direction of the footsteps further into the woods for about half a mile. He found a few tree branches down. He stopped at an area where the ground was partially burned. There was ash everywhere, and it smelled of burnt wood. It looked as if there had been a huge bonfire. Around the circle of burnt ground, there were several footprints. Could a ritual have taken place outside his home? He also wondered if the ritual was performed by a cult, a tribe, or a religious group. Taylor then combed the area to see if he could uncover any other evidence. He discovered some rope, a few bottles of dried herbs, and candles. It was beginning to appear obvious that some witchcraft or sorcery had taken place here.

“What the hell!” he said out loud to himself while feeling bewildered. He was trying hard to make sense of the whole situation. This sort of thing didn’t typically happen in his neighborhood. It was a family-friendly area where children played outside and rode their bikes on the sidewalk with no fear. It was the perfect place to raise a family. Taylor began to wonder if anyone else was having strange occurrences at their homes in the area.

His discovery left Taylor concerned. He then remembered Saul telling him that the two bodies found were charred. Taylor knew he had to tell the police about his discovery and let them know this was not normal activity in his neighborhood. He would also tell them all of it may be connected to all the missing person cases. The police would then come and search the premises immediately afterward. He made sure not to touch anything else and headed straight back home. Taylor knew the area was no longer deemed safe and that it would be dark soon. He wasn’t going to take any chances.

Taylor had a hard time sleeping that night. Throughout the night, he found himself on the lookout for strange occurrences outside his home. He wanted to make sure nothing attacked him while he was asleep in bed. Taylor was facing a great deal of fear. He would occasionally wake up in fright from nightmares and having heard strange noises outside his bedroom window.

He kept both porch lights on, made sure all doors and windows were locked, and kept his gun and cell phone on the night table. Taylor would be lucky if he got any sleep throughout the night. He didn’t know how he was going to write the story about the missing person case in the morning with a lack of sleep. It was going to take several cups of coffee to keep him awake during the workday. It wasn’t until 4:25 a.m. that he finally drifted off to sleep.

When he woke up in the morning, he noticed handprints on his window. It looked as if someone had placed their hands on the window to peek at him, then they let their hands slide down the window as they stepped away. The handprints were something you would see in a horror film. It sent chills down his spine.

Chapter 3

As expected, Taylor sluggishly worked on his story throughout the day. He had already drunk three cups of coffee. Yet, he still felt exhausted.

He worked diligently when piecing together the details of the story. Robertson was salivating over it. Taylor couldn’t wait for the *Salem News* to be the first media outlet to put out the story. It would be the top story on the front page with a huge headline in bold letters. It would be one of the most widely read stories of the year, and the *Associated Press* would pick it up, and it would appear in newspapers all over the nation, along with his byline. It was the type of attention that would help him land a job at a more widely known newspaper.

Once the story was done, Robertson posted it on the *Salem News* website right away. Taylor was extremely excited to see his byline underneath the headline of the story in bold letters. The story was also posted on social media. It didn’t take long for it to go viral. Hundreds of people were sharing it on the social media pages within an hour. A few hours later, his story was popping up on other news websites. He was now both exhausted and excited. Taylor thought he would soon be a well-known reporter and a respected one. He couldn’t wait to tell Brianna about all the hype that his story was getting. She was going to be really excited about it.

Taylor was now thinking about his date with Brianna. He was hoping the night would be special. It had been a long time since he last went out on a date. The last date was with his ex-girlfriend, Elsie O’Gallagher, who broke up with him nearly two years ago. She had told him that she had felt they were drifting apart and that they had very little in common. Taylor was upset about it, but he knew she was right.

Lately, Taylor has been feeling lonely. He thought Brianna co-owning an herb and holistic shop was rather odd, but he was willing to overlook it. Taylor would try to keep an open mind about it. He was interested in hearing her talk about why she owned one. Taylor also wanted to learn more about her background and what she was like as a person.

While he was thinking about Brianna, Taylor was waiting for some answers from law enforcement about the evidence he had found in the woods. He had called the police office earlier today about what he had discovered and about the unusual sightings in his backyard. Taylor was told that a few police officers were going to go to the area to investigate. Taylor was hoping they would find out what was happening and possibly provide him with some protection at night by keeping an eye out on the area. He wouldn’t be surprised if it was witch- or cult-related. It was Salem, Massachusetts, after all. Brianna might be knowledgeable about the subject. He decided he would not bring it up on their first date, though, because it might creep her out and he wanted to give her a good impression.

After all that he has gone through, a night out with a beautiful woman would be just the ticket. He desperately wanted to take his mind off things. He had been so tense lately. Taylor tried to relax a bit by taking a quick break to stretch, pace around the office a little, and look out the window. Once he was able to put his mind back at ease, he went back to working.

He only had one more hour of work time left. Taylor would spend the remainder of time writing a story about a press conference that was held during the afternoon about the bodies that were found during the search yesterday. He would have it ready for tomorrow’s newspaper. Taylor had already written a news brief about the conference for the *Salem News* website. He also posted a photo of the police chief talking to the press and answering reporters’ questions. It was important to keep the public updated with all the latest developments in the story.

He took out his recorder and listened to the police chief talking to add a few more quotes to his story. Taylor began typing at a rapid pace as he listened carefully. He had to make sure he quoted the chief accurately. He still had to call the police chief to ask him a few more questions.

“Hey, Jesse!” Robertson called out as he approached Taylor. “I just wanted to say nice job on getting the missing persons story out this morning. Many of our readers are commenting on our social media pages about it and sharing it with others. It’s nice to know that we are engaging our readers.”

“Thanks, boss,” Taylor replied. “It really means a lot to me knowing that my story is getting positive feedback from our readers.”

“How is the story on the press conference coming along?” Robertson asked.

“It’s just about done,” Taylor said. “I just need to finish adding a few quotes and ask the police chief a few follow-up questions to provide a more informative piece for tomorrow’s paper.”

“Excellent,” Robertson said. “Well, I’ll leave you to it.”

Taylor couldn’t wait to get the story done. He waited patiently for Police Chief Lewis Huber to call him back. Soon, his cell phone began to ring. He recognized the number right away. It was the police chief’s number. He hurried up and answered it. Huber provided more detailed information about some of the evidence that was found in the woods, what all the missing victims had in common, and where they were last seen. Now that he had all the information he needed to fill in the gaps in his story, he went straight back to work.

About two hours later, he had completed his story. He was relieved to meet another deadline. It was done in just enough time to be published in tomorrow’s newspaper. He quickly turned in his story.

The news staff wanted to get together after work to celebrate the recognition the newspaper was receiving for being the first to post the story in the nation at a local bar called the All-Souls Lounge, and Jesse Taylor would be the star of the group for writing it.

The Lounge was hopping when the news staff arrived. They raised their glasses as news editor Joel Robertson gave a toast. They clinked their glasses together after his speech and cheered exuberantly to the rhythmic beat of eighties pop music playing in the background. Robertson then asked Taylor to stand up for the staff to applaud him for getting the scoop. He bowed proudly as they clapped. About an hour later, Taylor left the celebration to go home so that he could get ready for his and Brianna’s date.

He stopped at the nearest local floral shop to pick up a bouquet of pink roses for his date. Taylor thought it would be a nice gesture. He wanted her to feel comfortable around him. Taylor also wanted her to see that he had a romantic side to him and that he saw her as someone who was special.

He would have about two hours to get ready for his date. He had a long-sleeve buttoned-down cobalt-blue shirt and a pair of ash gray pleated-front dress pants laid out on his bed. Taylor was nervous about the date. Brianna wasn’t like other women that he usually dated. There was an air of mystery about her. He needed to know more about the woman that has consistently appeared in his nightmares. Taylor wanted to know whether she was good or evil. He hoped it would all come clear after the date. It might help him sleep at night.

He relaxed on his couch and watched television for a while before taking a shower, putting on his clothes, spraying some cologne on him, and combing his hair. He felt all refreshed now that he was all cleaned up and smelled good. It was so quiet in the house that he could hear the ticking of the clock. He looked at himself in the mirror and was satisfied with what he saw. *She isn’t going to be able to resist me now,* Taylor thought to himself. He could hardly wait to go see her now.

On the drive over to her house, he turned on a radio station that played slow music. Taylor wanted to set the mood. He had to play his cards right in order to win over her heart. He checked his phone quickly for Brianna’s address. It was hard reading the numbers on the houses because it was dark out. He then spotted the number *245* on a metallic label attached to a wooden mailbox on the left side of a driveway near the curb. Taylor knew the mailbox belonged to Brianna and that he had reached her house. He pulled up into the driveway in his Jeep Wrangler on Belleview Avenue and parked. Taylor pulled down his rearview mirror and turned on the interior light to look at himself once more. He wanted to make sure there wasn’t a single strand of hair out of place. He placed the mirror back where it was originally after he was done. Taylor couldn’t figure out why he was so nervous. It wasn’t like it was his first date.

Taylor noticed she lived in a large two-story home that was white with black trimming. It had a wraparound porch with a black porch swing. It was intricately decorated. It was clear she was well off. She was either a brilliant businesswoman or she came from a wealthy family. He was curious about her past. The porch light was shining brightly. He carefully walked up the steps and sauntered toward the door. He then pressed the doorbell. He held the bouquet of flowers up so Brianna could see it when she opened the door. He could hear footsteps and then a click as the doorknob turned. He quickly smoothed out the back of his hair with his hand before the door opened.

He made sure to look up and smile at her. His breath was taken away when Brianna answered the door in a red plunge-neck satin dress. Her long, wavy hair ran down her back. Taylor was completely enamored by her beauty. Taylor stood silent for a few seconds before uttering a word.

“H-Hi,” he stuttered. “Wow! You look beautiful.”

“Thank you,” Brianna replied. “You don’t look bad yourself.”

“Here, I got these for you,” Taylor said while handing the flowers to her.

“Oh, they are beautiful,” she said. “Thank you. It’s been a long time since anyone has ever got me flowers. I’ll go put these in a vase quickly. Won’t you come in?”

She graciously took the flowers, led him into her home, and told Taylor to have a seat in the living room. He watched her leave the room. When he was alone in the room, he looked around and saw pictures of Brianna and her family. He then noticed a peculiar photo of Brianna and what appeared to be her identical twin when they were much younger. They both had long, straight brunette hair and were dressed in light-wash blue ripped skinny jeans and wore black long-sleeve crewneck T-shirts. Both stood smiling in front of a tree. One of them was wearing a necklace with a similar pentacle design that he had seen on the wooden disk in the woods. A chill then ran down his spine. Was the person wearing the necklace Brianna or her twin sister?

Taylor was startled when he heard Brianna enter the room. He quickly regained his composure and cleared his throat. Taylor tried his best not to look as if he was suspicious about anything.

“I’m ready whenever you are,” she said cheerfully.

“I notice here in the photo that you have an identical twin sister,” he said while pointing at the photo hanging from the wall.

“Her name is Tara,” Brianna said. “I can’t believe I never mentioned that my sister and I are twins. It must have slipped my mind.”

“Which one is you in the picture?” Taylor asked.

“The one on the right is me,” she answered. “As you can see, Tara dresses noticeably different from me in these other pictures hanging on the wall. That is how people can tell us apart. She has a boho-chic style, while mine’s preppy. We act completely different, too.”

Taylor looked closer at Brianna’s twin sister and noticed she was the one wearing a peculiar gold chain necklace with a symbol imprinted on a round gold pendant. He was wondering if it was witchcraft-related.

“What is that on her necklace?” he asked her.

“Oh, that is a pentacle,” she replied. “It provides protection from evil demons and evil spirits. She has always been curious about witchcraft, and she may practice it herself. It was her idea to open Utopia Galore. I told her I would help her get started with the business and that I would eventually return to being a librarian. Tara told me she was interested in joining a witch coven called the Night Shadow Circle a few months ago before I moved to Salem. She was already living here at the time. I had to open and start running our store, Utopia Galore, without her because she was attacked in the woods by an unknown entity. She is in the hospital now, so I had to take over. She has no idea who or what attacked her two weeks ago.”

“I am so sorry to hear about that,” Taylor asked. “I hope she is doing well and that she gets a speedy recovery. How bad of an attack was it?”

“The doctors found several gashes along her back, legs, and around the waist,” Brianna answered. They also believed something or someone had beaten her unconscious. She lost a significant amount of blood. Tara managed to escape somehow. I believe there was someone else in the woods that had helped her. She was lucky to have survived. Whoever attacked her was clearly trying to kill her.”

“You know,” he said, “there have been several people reported missing in the area. A search party recently discovered a few dead bodies in the woods that were among those missing. The victims were attacked, murdered, and then burned in what appears to be a cult-related sacrifice. I’m wondering if this might be a link to what had happened to those victims.”

“Maybe so,” she replied. “During these days, anything is possible. There’s a lot of misguided souls out there with serious mental health problems. There are a good number of cults and witch covens in Salem, and I am sure some of them have evil intentions.”

“Anyway, I don’t mean to dampen the mood,” Taylor said exuberantly. “Let’s just forget we had this conversation. I mean, we have a date to go on!”

“Yes, we do,” she told him while smiling. They both chuckled.

He then gently placed his hand on her back and escorted her out of the house. She looked up at him and smiled. He opened the door to his shiny white Audi R8 car for her. It was one of his most prized possessions. He also kept his old jeep for driving in more rugged areas and in snowy, icy conditions.

Taylor rapidly walked around his vehicle. As soon as he turned on the car, the sound of smooth jams filled the air. He flashed Brianna a dashing, debonair smile. She laughed. Brianna knew he was trying to charm his way into her heart. Brianna didn’t want to admit that it was working, so she played it off as if she wasn’t impressed by his attempts.

It was a quiet, pleasant drive to Rockafellas. Taylor noticed how her eyes sparkled as she laughed at his jokes. It wasn’t long until they reached their destination. The restaurant was lit up with strings of lights around the patio. The sound of smooth jazz was playing inside the restaurant. He walked up to the host and told her he had a reservation for Jesse Taylor.

The host guided them toward a patio table that was candlelit. She handed them menus and told them tonight’s special was New York sirloin strip steak with lobster tail, grilled asparagus, and herb-roasted fingerling potatoes.

“Your server should be out shortly to take your order,” the host told them with a pleasant voice.

“Thank you,” Taylor responded.

“Everything looks so yummy,” Brianna said. “It’s going to be difficult choosing an entrée.”

“Order whatever you like,” he replied. “Everything here is good. I think I’m going to be ordering the special. This is a special occasion, after all. It is our first date.”

“Well, in that case, I think I will have the special as well,” she said. “I couldn’t possibly turn down steak and shrimp on a special occasion such as this one. By the way, in case I forget, I wanted to thank you so much for taking me out.”

“It is a pleasure,” he said. “After dinner, what would you say to taking a stroll down Pickering Wharf? It’s a lovely night for stargazing. Maybe we can stop at my favorite ice cream joint called Captain Dusty’s Ice Cream. I mean, the night is still young, after all.”

“I would love that,” Brianna said. “It’s hard not to resist a night of stargazing and ice cream. This is turning out to be an amazing date. You really have outdone yourself, Mr. Taylor. By the end of the date, I just may have to plant a big, wet kiss on your lips.”

“Well, that will give me something to be excited about,” Taylor responded. “I don’t believe that I have ever been kissed on a first date before.”

“I’m sure you will,” she said.

“So, what is it like running an herb and holistic shop?” he asked. “I’m just curious. I’m sure you get a lot of interesting people.”

“I don’t know much about witchcraft or magic, but it was my sister who gave me the idea of opening one here,” she said. “I don’t ask questions. I just direct the customer to whatever merchandise they are looking for. My sister has shared some of her knowledge with me and has told me about the latest products that were taking off on the market. I admit I have met some out-of-the-ordinary individuals. I really don’t know how my sister got involved in witchcraft or what her interest is in it. I let her do her thing and she lets me do mine.”

“What were you doing before you started running the shop?” Taylor asked.

“I was a librarian at the Boston Public Library,” Brianna answered. “I’m not sure why I left my library job to run a place like Utopia Galore. I think it was so that I could be with my sister, and running the store with her would help bring us closer. It was a rather bold move on my part, I must say. I am not into witchcraft—as in, I don’t know much about it at all. Now, my sister Tara, on the other hand, knows all about that stuff and couldn’t wait to open Utopia Galore. Tara came to me for my help in opening the business, so I did.”

“I would say so,” Taylor said in an agreeable manner. “It takes a lot of courage to give up a steady job to open a business such as yours. I admire your tenacity.”

“Thank you,” she said. “I really appreciate hearing you say that. It is tough keeping a small, independent business running these days. There isn’t exactly a high demand for herbs and holistic supplies. Thanks for helping us get an article about Utopia Galore in the *Salem News* this week. Our business has doubled ever since it came out. My sister was ecstatic when she found out about it and how much of an impact it has made on our business. Both she and I really enjoyed reading it.”

“You are very welcome,” Taylor said. “I’ll tell the reporter who did the story that both you and your sister really liked it.”

Their conversation ended once their food arrived. They spent the rest of dinner engaged in lighthearted conversation. It was turning out to be a pleasant date and they were immensely enjoying each other’s company. Time just seems to have flown by. Following dinner, Taylor took Brianna out on a stroll and showed her some of the sites of Salem. They then indulged themselves in scoops of ice cream at Captain Dusty’s Ice Cream. Brianna laughed after Taylor had licked his ice cream cone and got ice cream on his nose. She took out a napkin and wiped it off for him. They both laughed afterward.

“Thanks,” Taylor said with a chuckle.

“No problem,” she replied. “I wasn’t going to allow you to continue going about with ice cream dribbling down your chin, although it would be rather funny. However, what kind of date would I be if I waited to see until you figured it out?”

They were having such a splendid time that it was going to be hard for Taylor to take Brianna back home. They both agreed to take things slowly in the relationship.

They chatted some more while Taylor drove Brianna home. When he parked his car in her driveway, Taylor kissed Brianna goodnight on the lips tenderly. She looked up at him and smiled. Taylor then told her to wait in the car so that he could walk her up to the front door of her house. He quickly walked around his vehicle and opened the car door for her. He held her hand as she stepped out of the vehicle. They couldn’t help but smile and hold hands as they approached Brianna’s front porch. He once again planted a kiss on her lips as they stood in front of the door.

“I had a wonderful time,” Brianna said.

“Me, too,” Taylor replied. “I would really like to go out with you again.”

“I would like that very much,” she said. “Have a good night.”

“You, too,” he said softly.

They waved to each other as Taylor clumsily walked back to his car. They both were feeling nervous, excited, and blissful. Taylor almost felt like he was walking on air. He hadn’t felt this way in a long time.

He couldn’t help but smile as he drove off. Taylor turned on a radio station that was playing an upbeat, happy love song to go in sync with what he was feeling. His heart was beating rapidly as he sang along. It was late in the evening now. It was pitch dark out, so he had to turn on his high-beam headlights. Taylor slammed on his brakes to allow a doe to run across the street.

About ten minutes later, he pulled up into his driveway. As he was exiting his vehicle, he could hear a snarling sound not far from him. There was then a sound coming from the bushes. Something was watching him. He tried not to get too excited about it. He lived near the woods, so there were plenty of creatures roaming around at night. He tried hard to convince himself it was nothing more than a cat or maybe even a raccoon searching for a midnight snack.

He approached the bush to get a better look at what was causing the noise. His heart leaped when something jumped out of the bush. It was a black cat. Its eyes glowed in the moonlight as it looked up at him. Taylor began to laugh. It must have been the same black cat he had saw last night trying to get in his trash can.

“Oh, my gosh,” Taylor exclaimed. “You gave me quite the fright, kitty!”

The cat then purred and rubbed its head and body up against Taylor’s leg. He then heard running footsteps off at a distance. Whoever it was, they were running back into the woods. An eerie feeling swept over him. Taylor was beginning to suspect that the black cat belonged to whoever or whatever was running into the woods because each time the cat was there, the mysterious figure was lurking about his property at the same time.

“There’s either something out there, or I am losing my mind,” he told the cat as he was stroking its fur. “Well, we better get inside quickly before whatever it was comes back.”

Chapter 4

It was another day of having mixed feelings for Taylor. On the one hand, he was happy that his date with Brianna was a success, but on the other hand, he was frightened about whatever or whoever ran into the woods last night. It appeared he was being stalked at night.

He was relieved that he had managed to not have any nightmares last night despite hearing something once again outside his home, yet something deep down inside him kept him from getting a good night’s rest. He woke up in the middle of the night a few times to make sure nothing outside had been lurking about and watching him. He was beginning to consider staying in a hotel for a couple of weeks so that he could catch up on his sleep without worrying about anything getting him.

Taylor found it to be a huge comfort knowing that Brianna was harmless. She couldn’t possibly be like the woman in his dreams. He may have run into her before and not known it. That could be the reason why his mind chose her face to be in his nightmares. Maybe it was stress that was causing him to have nightmares. He had been busy at work covering the disappearances and bodies being discovered in the area, after all. It would be enough to haunt anyone. However, he didn’t know much about her sister, Tara. Tyler was beginning to wonder if she was the one he had to keep a lookout for.

He was going to stop by Utopia Galore to pick up Brianna for lunch at noon. It would be his first time seeing the store. Taylor was wondering if he could learn more about the witch coven’s rituals and witchcraft by exploring the store. There had to be books on witchcraft and the history of covens available in the store. This kind of information could be helpful in determining whether witchcraft was indeed taking place in the woods behind his home. It is Salem, so the likelihood of witches being in his neighborhood was high.

Taylor had to be at the newspaper office in about thirty minutes. He knew he had to cover a city council meeting during the morning, so he needed to make sure to be in the office in time to prepare for it. There wasn’t much on the agenda, so it shouldn’t be a long one. He would only have to write a news brief about it for the front page. It was going to be a long, dull day, as usual. Taylor couldn’t wait to cover some more exciting news. Hopefully, a breaking news story will develop sometime during the day to make his workday more eventful. At least seeing Brianna during lunch would make him happy and would help make the day move along a little faster.

Shortly after arriving at the office, Taylor saw a note on his desk. It was a message from Benjamin. He wanted Taylor to call him back and said that he had something important to tell him. Taylor wasted no time in calling him back. It had to be something big.

He waited patiently as he listened to the dial tone on his cell phone. About five seconds later, Benjamin answered the phone.

“Hello?” Benjamin said.

“Hi, Benjamin!” Taylor responded. “I was just returning your message. You say you have some big news for me?”

“I just heard from one of the police officers that I once worked with that another body was found,” Benjamin said. “Some teenagers were messing around in the woods and found it lying near a riverbank. Just like the other bodies found, the body was charred. There also was an athame nearby, which is a ceremonial blade used in witchcraft and satanic rituals.”

“Are you trying to tell me that these people could have been used as a human sacrifice?” Taylor asked.

“Sadly, yes,” Benjamin said. “I believe we have a cult or witch coven that is kidnapping and murdering people for a ritual. DNA testing is being done at the police station to help us identify the victims. They also need to find DNA evidence that might link them to the criminal or criminals involved in this case.”

“Thank you for providing me with this information,” Taylor said. “I just can’t believe this sort of thing is happening in our town. I know there is witchcraft being practiced, but human sacrifices are not common in the area. I will be sure to contact Police Chief Lewis Huber to get additional answers and a few quotes. Be sure to contact me if you find out anything else. You are a valuable source of information for all my stories. I’ll talk to you later, Benjamin. Be safe out there!”

“I will,” Benjamin replied. “You be careful out there, Taylor, too. You might be next on their list once they find out you are writing about what they are doing. I know there have been some strange sightings and occurrences around your neighborhood.”

“I will try my best,” Taylor said. “Bye!”

“Bye,” Benjamin said before hanging up.

Taylor contacted the police chief to verify whether the information that Benjamin had provided was true soon afterward, even though he knew it was. He just needed a quote from the police chief about it happening and what law enforcement had planned to do next in the investigation. Once again, he had a juicy story to write about. He was eager to get started writing.

“You mustn’t let this information out there yet,” Huber told him. “We will hold a press conference at 3 o’clock today. It is there that you will hear all about it. You can get additional answers and quotes then. In the meantime, you can write out an alert to warn people to stay away from the woods and that it is not safe.”

“Thanks, Chief!” Taylor said. “I promise that I will not tell a soul until then. You can count on me to be at the press conference. I will see you there!”

*The story just keeps getting juicier by the minute,* Taylor thought. He was concerned about the location of his home because it was near the woods. Taylor had been on the lookout for a few weeks now with all the strange occurrences going on around his home. It was quite possible he had witches or cult members lurking about his property. They might be waiting for their moment to strike and come after Taylor so that he, too, could be used as a human sacrifice. This is Salem, Massachusetts, after all.

He looked up at the clock and noticed he had thirty minutes until he had to meet Brianna for lunch. Taylor looked through his emails and wrote a few paragraphs about the warning the police chief had given about going into the woods to post on the newspaper website and all of the newspaper’s social media pages. After he posted it, it was time for him to go and meet Brianna. Taylor quickly closed his computer and grabbed his wallet before heading out. He had texted her earlier to meet him at the restaurant instead of picking her up.

They met at the Deli House, a small and cozy restaurant near Utopia Galore. Brianna had already beaten him there and had a table picked out for them. The deli was packed with customers, so they had a long wait to order their sandwiches. Both were slightly annoyed by the wait.

“So, how has your day been?” Brianna asked. “Anything interesting happening in Salem?”

“Oh, it’s been busy so far,” Taylor answered. “I got some additional details from my source about the bodies that were recently found. Law enforcement found some similarities with how the bodies were found. They now believe the victims were used as human sacrifices by a cult or witch coven, based on the evidence. Do you or your sister know much about human sacrifices?”

“I don’t, but maybe my sister does,” she said. “She has studied different kinds of sacrifices and the dark arts before. I really don’t know why. Tara has always been the quiet, mysterious type. We may have some books on human sacrifices at Utopia Galore. I can look tomorrow when I open the store.”

“That would be great,” he said. “I would really appreciate it.”

“I’m not going to promise you that I will find anything,” Brianna said. “I’m sure there is tons of information on the subject on the internet. We can search online tonight.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” he said. “I will have to take a nap before we do because I am exhausted right now.”

“I wouldn’t doubt that one bit,” she said. “If I was in your shoes, I wouldn’t hardly get any sleep, too. I would be paranoid in the middle of the night.”

“Did it appear your sister had a gash on her arm where blood may have been drawn?” Taylor then asked.

“Now that you say something about it, I believe my sister had lost a significant amount of blood from an injury on her arm,” Brianna said. “She was in such a state of shock when the attack was happening that I don’t even know if she recalls exactly what happened to her, but I will ask her the next time that I see her.”

“Did she have any burns on her body?” Taylor asked. “All of the bodies that have been found were charred.”

“No,” Brianna said. “If I remember correctly, a hiker had heard her scream, and they heard her attacker run off. They rushed to find her, and they found her on the ground, severely beaten and knocked out. If it wasn’t for them, they would have murdered her. Although, I do recall them finding a bonfire nearby with what appeared to be a stake. Are you telling me a witch or a cult member could have attacked her?”

“Yes, that is exactly what I am saying,” Taylor said. “Could the witch coven your sister is a member of be responsible for any of the murders?”

“It is possible, but I am pretty sure that my sister would not get mixed up with an evil witch coven that was capable of murder,” Brianna answered. “If Tara ever found out, she would not participate in such activities. She joined the Night Shadow witch coven only a few months ago, so the coven could be doing human sacrifices right behind her back without her ever knowing. Tara hasn’t said much about the coven, so I am thinking that she isn’t allowed to speak about their existence.”

“Have you met any of the witches?” Taylor asked.

“No,” she said. “My sister, Tara, like I said, has been very secretive about it. I tried asking her about the coven one time, but she said she was sworn to secrecy and that anything that happened in the coven must stay within the coven. I never told anyone about it until now.”

“Sounds fishy,” Taylor responded. “I think you should tell the cops what you just told me. Maybe it will help them find out who is responsible for these murders and to prevent any more from happening.”

“Now that I know that allegedly a cult or witch coven is responsible for the murders, I feel I should report it,” she said. “When Tara is well enough, I will go visit her and try to get more information from her. I will try my best to get her to cooperate, but she may be fearful for her life. They might come back and get her if they find out she had given too much information if they are the ones responsible behind all of this.”

“Thanks, Brianna!” he said. “I’m sure law enforcement would be grateful for any information that they can get. If you don’t feel comfortable about confronting her about it, I can talk to her about it if you like.”

“No, that won’t be necessary,” Brianna said. “I think it is best for me to talk to her since I am her sister. I also don’t want her to know that I had told someone about her involvement in the Night Shadow coven. I don’t want her to be angry with me.”

“I understand,” he said. “I don’t want to do anything that you don’t want me to do.”

Their discussion about the witch coven suddenly ended as soon as they began munching on their sandwiches.

“How is your Reuben sandwich?” Taylor asked.

“It’s delicious,” she said. “How is your pastrami sandwich?”

“It’s good,” he said with a mouth full of food. “I have never tried this one before. I believe I have a new favorite sandwich to order here now.”

As soon as their plates were empty, they shared some lighthearted conversation. They enjoyed each other’s company a great deal. Both dreaded going back to work and wished they could spend some more time together. Unfortunately, their lunch break was only an hour long. They kissed and hugged each other before leaving for work. Taylor promised he would call Brianna later.

Taylor had to get back to the office so he could prepare for the press conference that Police Chief Lewis Huber had scheduled. He wrote down a few questions to ask him. Taylor would have to write up a story about it as soon as he got back to the office. *Life as a reporter is tough,* Taylor thought. Having deadlines added pressure to his daily work life. A reporter’s work is never done.

A couple of hours later, he found himself sitting amongst dozens of other reporters, ready to shout out their questions to the police chief in a small conference room located in the city hall. It was quite a frenzy. Taylor, himself, found it hard to compose himself. He had to get his answers quickly so he could finish his story before all the rest of the reporters in the room. It’s important to get the scoop on the story. People rely on news outlets that are fast and efficient.

As soon as Police Chief Lewis Huber took the podium, questions were being hurled out throughout the room. The police chief told the anxious reporters to save their questions for later so that he could speak first. Taylor sat anxiously waiting for the police chief to speak.

“As you may have heard by now, another body has been found,” Huber announced. “The body had severe burns and was cut on the wrist, the same as the previous two bodies. We also found an athame in the area, which is used for ceremonial purposes, usually in Wiccan rituals. The body was found in a firepit. There was enough evidence to support that the body was put on a stake. It is possible that the bodies are being used as human sacrifices for a cult or witch coven. We are questioning those who live around the location whether they witnessed anything unusual and if they saw anyone acting in a peculiar way. The area is now closed off for further investigation, and evidence is being uncovered from the site. We are warning people to stay away from the woods and other isolated areas. Also, people must be aware of their surroundings and have a plan in place if they are confronted by a suspicious person or individuals. Do not be alone at night, and always secure your home. I am now taking questions.”

Several reporters hurriedly asked their questions at once. Huber tried to remain calm and pick the first reporter in the crowd to answer their question. Huber pointed to a young female reporter with blonde hair in the front row wearing a black suit.

“Have you arrested anyone or found any suspects linked to the case?” she asked.

“At the present time, no,” Huber answered. “We will be sure to alert the press when we do find any suspects.”

Huber then acknowledged Taylor as he was trying to capture his attention. He pointed at Taylor and told him to ask his question. Taylor was surprised to be the second reporter chosen.

Without thinking, Taylor blurted out his question.

“Can you tell us what other evidence has been uncovered so far?” he asked.

“We have found a few strands of hair, which will be used as biological evidence,” Huber said. “We also found a chalice with a few drops of dried blood in it and several footsteps in the area. We are still waiting on the lab results.”

Taylor was excited to have his questions answered quickly. He quickly jotted down what the police chief had told him. Taylor made sure his recorder was on so he could go back to listen to the police chief speaking so he could type up the quotes accurately in his story. He listened to the rest of the press conference to get more information and wrote down a few more notes. He then rushed back to his office to type up the rest of his story. He added more information to his story and listened to parts of the press conference to make sure he quoted the police chief accurately. The editors then read through it and corrected a few grammatical errors before giving the story back to him to be posted on the website. Minutes after the story was posted, he noticed several people had already clicked on the story and had made comments. It brought him much satisfaction. Taylor couldn’t help but smile.

It was another exciting day at the office. The press conference was shown on national television, and it was one of the most talked about stories. Everyone was reading about it online, in newspapers, and on social media. Experts on witchcraft and cults were being interviewed by reporters with local news stations and newspapers, and Salem, Massachusetts, was once again in the spotlight for its history of witchcraft.

*It is so good to be back home,* Taylor thought. He walked outside to take out the trash. As he placed the trash bag into the dumpster, he looked up at his garage door and saw a chilling message written in all capital letters: **YOU ARE NEXT!** It was written in blood. This time, he knew he had to report the strange occurrences at his home to the police.

He ran back inside his home and dialed 9-1-1 on his cell phone immediately. He ran so fast that he was almost out of breath.

“Hello? Hello?” he shouted out frantically. “I want to report an act of vandalism on my garage door! There’s a threatening message written in blood!”

Chapter 5

The flashing red and blue lights from two police cars and the sound of sirens surrounded Taylor’s home. A police officer was questioning Taylor in his living room about the strange occurrences that had been happening on his property. The police officers listened carefully to what Taylor had to say with a look of disbelief on their faces. A few other police officers were searching for evidence around his home and in the nearby woods. Taylor handed over the rope, the bottles of dried herbs, and the candles he had found in the woods behind his home to the police officer. The police officer then placed the evidence diligently inside bags to take back to the police department lab to be examined.

“Thank you for alerting us about this, Mr. Taylor,” the police officer said. “When did you find these objects in the woods behind your yard?”

“I found them two days ago,” Taylor answered. “When I found out that law enforcement was finding similar objects that were confirmed to be evidence to the missing persons case, I knew I had to report it. The message on the garage door made me realize that whoever or whatever is out there lurking is now after me. I’m frightened, Officer. I’m afraid I will be the next person reported as missing.”

“We are sorry that you are going through all this,” the officer said. “We will keep a close eye on your house as we are patrolling the area. Hopefully, we will find out who is doing this by catching them in the act.”

Police Chief Lewis Huber, who was standing next to the officer who was questioning Taylor, told Taylor that there had been other phone calls about strange occurrences happening on other properties near the woods. Some believed there were bears in the area, some believed there were raccoons, and others, like Taylor, believed it was something other than a critter on their property. Huber told Taylor this was the first time that anyone had found any physical evidence that could explain what was happening and who was in charge. Taylor was surprised that no one else had found anything near their property.

Taylor thought the night seemed endless. Police officers were at his home for nearly two hours, searching and asking him questions. He texted Brianna and told her what was happening and that he could not call her tonight. She texted back, saying that she understood. Brianna was also shocked that someone would leave him with such a frightening message on his garage car door. She told him to be careful and that he was welcome to come stay with her anytime and that it would also save him money from having to stay in a hotel.

Taylor was overjoyed when the police had finally finished asking him questions and searching his backyard and garage. He was exhausted from all the excitement and having to answer all their questions. Taylor was now in desperate need of some alone time. Taylor was too exhausted to cook anything elaborate, so he just had a pizza delivered to his home. He thought about calling Brianna, but it was just too late in the evening. Taylor finished up his last slice of pizza and went straight to bed afterward.

The following day, it was business as usual at the *Salem News*. Taylor was a bit embarrassed when he saw the daily police report. People of Salem would now know about the police coming over to his home about the bloody message on his garage. Taylor hoped that nobody would know that the report was referring to him. He didn’t want anyone to come over and ask him about it at the office. Taylor was tempted to just leave it out of the police report, but he knew it was his duty as a reporter to give a complete list. Taylor finished typing up the police report and sent it to the copy editor.

Brianna sent him a text message about her needing to talk to him. She needed to tell him something about her sister, Tara. He could not wait to hear about it. Maybe Tara was well enough to give more insight into the situation to Brianna. Taylor was hoping that Brianna would be able to convince Tara to talk to the police about her experience as being a member of the Night Shadow Circle and have more details about who might have attacked her and what they had done to her. Brianna and Taylor planned to meet up for dinner tonight so they could discuss the matter then.

Earlier during the day, Taylor wrote about how all activities at Pioneer Village, the Charter Street Cemetery, and the Satanic Temple Salem would be closed until further notice for the newspaper because of the fear of evil witches and cults lurking about. Tourists were being discouraged by law enforcement from visiting Salem. The City of Salem was concerned about the safety of people because of the recent abductions and possible human sacrifices. More law enforcement officers were patrolling the area.

There was a widespread panic in the streets of Salem. Grocery stores and hardware stores were packed during the day. People were stocking up on food and supplies. No one felt safe going out at night. Everyone stayed at home. The streets were empty, and businesses closed earlier during the evening. Everyone was encouraged to secure their homes and have an emergency plan in place. It was quiet outside. There were normally sounds of children’s laughter at the playground, people honking their horns, chatter in restaurants. Now, it was like a ghost town. Taylor felt like he was in a movie about the zombie apocalypse as he drove down the streets of Salem.

Taylor had to finish his school board story before leaving for home. He sighed as he turned in the story about the closures and returned to working on his school board story. Taylor listened to his recorder carefully as the school board members spoke about the budget cuts. There was a teacher shortage in the school district. The school district couldn’t afford to give teachers raises, which led many of them to find higher-paying teaching jobs elsewhere. Parents were afraid it would harm the school’s progress and student learning.

It was not one of Taylor’s favorite subjects to write about, but he knew the issue was very problematic in the school system. It was important for parents to know about the situation. Some parents were pulling their kids from the school district and enrolling them in private schools instead.

He was relieved when the story was completed. Taylor read through it carefully to make sure he made no mistakes. As soon as he turned it in to the copy editor and made sure they didn’t have any questions for him, he headed out the door. A great sense of relief swept over him as he stepped out of the office.

There was still light out. Because of his fear of being out at night, he thought it would be best that he drove his jeep instead. It was much sturdier and bigger, so it would allow him to have more protection than his car. He briskly walked to his jeep while keeping on the lookout for suspicious individuals who could be witches out to get him. It was about a ten-minute drive from the office to his home. He checked his cell phone when he got home to make sure he didn’t miss any messages. Taylor then lounged on his recliner and watched some television until it was time to go pick up Brianna. He felt exhausted and his eyelids became heavy. Taylor then found himself slowly drifting off to sleep. He didn’t think it was a bad idea to take a nap, especially after losing so much sleep. He made sure the alarm was on so that he would get up in time for his date.

He fell into a deep sleep. His nightmare of the beautiful woman who looked like Brianna and Tara had haunted him in his dreams had returned. Only it wasn’t him who was in trouble this time. It was Brianna running away from something that he could not see. She was screaming out, “Jesse, help me!” Just as he was trying to get a vision of what was after her, the alarm on his cell phone went off. Taylor was slightly annoyed that he couldn’t finish his dream so he could see what happened next.

He groaned as he was trying to wake up, stretched out his arms, and then lazily got up from his recliner. Taylor sluggishly made his way into his bedroom to get dressed and cleaned up for his dinner with Brianna. It took him awhile to wake up. Luckily, the quick shower he took was enough to reenergize him. He also drank a cup of coffee to help him become more alert so he wouldn’t find himself dozing off behind the wheel.

He put on a pair of black slacks and a red long-sleeved buttoned broadcloth shirt. He sprayed some cologne on, put on some deodorant, and combed back his hair. He was pleased with the way he looked and how he smelled. *It’ll be hard for Brianna to resist me now,* he thought. He excitedly left his house. Taylor could not wait to hear what Brianna had to say about her sister. He desperately wanted answers for not only what was happening at his home and Salem but also what the meaning of his dreams was. He and Brianna could be in danger.

They chose a small and cozy Italian restaurant called Bella Verona. When they arrived at the restaurant, they noticed the parking lot was nearly empty. People were clearly taking the police chief’s warning seriously. When they stepped inside, they could see the staff had already cleaned up and stacked the chairs on most of the tables. It was clear they wanted to leave as soon as the restaurant closed. They, too, were probably scared.

“You two are surely brave to be out tonight,” the host told them as she guided them to their table. “We’ve barely had any customers all night. We sure do appreciate your business, though, especially coming here under the current circumstances.”

“I guess we’re willing to take our chances,” Taylor replied as he took his seat at the table.

“Can I start you off with any drinks aside from water?” the host asked.

“I’ll have a glass of Prosecco,” Taylor said.

“I’ll have a glass of Sauvignon,” Brianna said.

“I’ll have those out in a few minutes,” the host said as she handed them both a menu. “Your waiter will arrive shortly. I hope you enjoy your dinner.”

“Thank you!” Taylor responded.

They sat quietly, looking through the menu. They decided to wait until after they ordered their food to discuss what Brianna found out about from her sister, Tara. They would speak about it quietly so that no one would be able to hear them. Taylor couldn’t help but look at Brianna. She looked beautiful this evening. He loved the way she looked in her navy-blue notch-neck midi dress. She had a classic, elegant look. Taylor thought Brianna had a good sense of style, and he could tell her attire, accessories, hair, and makeup were all well thought out. Brianna looked up and noticed him staring at her. She smiled nervously and asked him why he was looking at her that way. He chuckled.

“Well, when I see something that I like, I can’t help but look,” Taylor replied. “But seriously, you look very beautiful tonight and, as usual, very stylish.”

“Oh,” she said nervously while blushing. “Thank you. You look rather debonair yourself.”

“I wanted to look extra special for you tonight,” Taylor said.

“Oh, that’s so sweet!” Brianna replied.

Ten minutes later, after the waiter took their orders, they started chatting quietly amongst themselves. Occasionally, they both would look around to make sure no one was near them as they were speaking. All the information that they were about to share was extremely confidential and must not leave the room.

“I got a call from the hospital this morning,” Brianna said. “The nurse told me that Tara was awake and that she regained consciousness. The nurse then told me that Tara was ready for me to come and visit. She then handed the phone over to Tara. Tara said she was excited to see me and that she was becoming bored at the hospital from just lying on her bed and watching television all day.”

“That’s great news,” Taylor said. “I am so glad to hear that she is doing well. I know this is a huge relief for you. You have been so worried about her well-being and have missed her a great deal.”

“I can’t wait to see her again, especially now that she has almost fully recovered,” Brianna said. “It will bring me so much happiness to see her smile again. I am excited for the two of you to meet. I told her all about you, and she cannot wait to meet you.”

“It is good to hear that she is nearly recovered and will be out of the hospital soon,” he said. “It means the world to me to see you happy. Anytime you are happy, I am happy, too. I am really looking forward to meeting Tara.”

He smiled, reached out across the table toward Brianna, and placed his hand on hers to show his support. She smiled, and then a tear ran down her cheek. Brianna felt so lucky to have met Taylor. She hadn’t been this happy for a long time. Brianna was starting to think that maybe Taylor was the one she had been looking for her whole life.

“Thanks, Jesse,” she said. “That means a lot to me. Well, I decided to go visit her this afternoon. I asked her how she was feeling, and she said she felt fine. Then I asked her what had happened to her afterward. At first, she refused to say anything about it. I then told her she could confide in me and that I wouldn’t let anything happen to her. I also said that if she didn’t tell anyone about it, several more lives could be at risk. She became silent afterward. A few minutes later, Tara told me that I was right and that she should come forward about it. She then told me about what happened that night when she was attacked.”

Brianna paused to take a deep breath and to recollect what was said to her. She then looked into Taylor’s eyes. Brianna could tell that Taylor was listening carefully and that she had his full attention, which she deeply appreciated.

“During the night she was attacked, Tara received a message from a few Night Shadow Circle members to come meet them at their usual meeting spot in the woods,” Brianna said. “She asked them what it was about. They told her she mustn’t tell anyone about her meeting them and where she was going. She thought the request was rather odd.”

“So, did she go and meet them?” Taylor asked.

“Sadly, yes,” Brianna responded. “It was about 8 o’clock that night when she arrived. She could see the fire and smoke rising from the bonfire as she approached them. All five of them were dressed in their witch attire and were dancing around the bonfire, which she thought was strange. It was as if they were having a secret ritual that she was not invited to. They were chanting out something, but Tara couldn’t make out what they were saying. One of them then grabbed her and pinned her down on the ground. She remembered kicking and screaming as loud as she could so that someone could hear her and come to her rescue. Tara tried her best to break free. She then looked up at the high priestess of the coven and her eyes began to glow red. Her fingernails turned into claws. It was almost like the devil himself was looking at her, she said. She then transformed into a terrible beast. It was then that it grabbed her and slashed her arm with one of its claws. As the blood was dripping, another member placed a chalice under the gash to catch the blood as it dripped down. They passed the chalice around so that each member took a sip of blood. They then began beating her one at a time.”

“Do you think the high priestess is some kind of a demon or is possessed by an evil spirit?” Taylor asked.

“I don’t know, but she definitely doesn’t seem to be a human,” Brianna answered. “My sister described everything in detail, and I know she is not the type of person who would make stuff up. The type of people we are dealing with are pure evil. My sister got mixed up with the wrong group of people, for sure.”

“So, what happened next?” Taylor said.

“As the high priestess held her down, the other witches grabbed a rope and tied her to a stake,” Brianna said. “They carried her toward the bonfire. Before they raised the stake and placed it in the fire, my sister once again screamed out as loud as she could. It was then that a mysterious figure hiding in the woods ran out and threatened the witches with a gun to untie her and let her go. When they refused to do so, he pulled out the Holy Cross. The high priestess shrieked and growled at the man. She covered her eyes as if the cross was blinding her. The coven then ran hysterically back into the woods and never returned.”

“Wow, it’s like something from *The Exorcist*,” Taylor commented. “This all sounds so unbelievable, but with everything that has been happening, I believe it. Does your sister remember what the mysterious man looks like, or did he ever give her his name?”

“No, I believe she passed out shortly afterward,” Brianna answered. “I believe it was because Tara was in such a shock and had lost a considerable amount of blood. She doesn’t remember much afterward. She then pleaded that I don’t tell anyone what I just heard. She is very fearful for her life.”

“I understand, but other people’s lives are at stake here!” Taylor said. “We must tell the police what she had just told us. She needs to trust us. I’m sure the police will offer her some protection.”

“I would hate to go against her word,” Brianna said. “I will try to convince her that it’s the right thing to do the next time I see her. Please, don’t say or do anything yet, Jesse.”

“I promise, but we are running out of time,” Taylor replied. “When will be the next time that you will see her?”

“I will go first thing in the morning,” Brianna said. “As soon as I get her approval tomorrow, I will let you know. My sister can be rather stubborn at times, so I will do my best to convince her to call the police and tell them what had happened.”

“Sounds good!” Taylor responded. “If for whatever reason you can’t see her, or she doesn’t approve of it, it’s okay to hold off on it. I don’t want to push her into doing something she doesn’t want to do. I’m sure we can find an alternative solution. I mean, she has been traumatized enough by the situation.”

“Thank you so much for understanding,” Brianna replied. “I truly appreciate it. I knew that I could confide in you.”

The waitress disrupted their conversation when she came over with the bill. They suddenly became quiet. Taylor handed over his credit card to the waitress. She smiled and walked away with it so she could run it through the credit card machine.

“Well, how was your meal?” Taylor asked Brianna as he waited for the waitress to return with his credit card.

“It was delicious,” she replied. “Thank you so much for taking me out for dinner. I just wished we didn’t have to discuss serious matters during our date. If only we could have gone under more cheerful circumstances and talked about subjects that are usually discussed during a date.”

“That is true,” Taylor said. “But regardless of what we talk about, I just want to be with you. I love spending time with you.”

“I feel the same way,” Brianna said. “There’s no other person that I would like to spend the evening with. I feel at home when I am with you.”

They then kissed each other tenderly. The waitress interrupted them when she placed Taylor’s credit card and receipt down in front of him.

“Oh, don’t mind me,” the waitress told them. “By the way, you two look super cute together.”

They laughed quietly amongst each other as the waitress walked away.

As they were walking out to the vehicle, Brianna suggested that Taylor come stay over at her house because she didn’t think it was wise for Taylor to go back to his place after finding a threatening message on his garage wall. Taylor agreed, so they went back to his home to pick up some of his belongings.

As they were packing the last bit of his belongings, they could hear footsteps and a growling from the distance. When they looked up and noticed a pair of red glowing eyes from behind some bushes, they got back into the jeep quickly, and Taylor drove off so fast that the wheels were making a squealing sound.

“What was that?” Brianna screamed out.

“I don’t know,” Taylor said. “But I bet you it is the high priestess of the Night Shadow Circle.”

Chapter 6

“I can’t believe that just happened,” Brianna said. “I don’t want you to go back to your home at night until we can stop whatever is coming after you. From now on, you are staying with me. I don’t want to hear any ifs, ands, or buts.”

“I would love to, but I don’t want to risk yours or your sister’s lives as well,” Taylor said. “Whatever or whoever is after me may follow me to your place, which I mustn’t allow to happen. You mean the world to me, Brianna. I don’t ever want anything to happen to you.”

“You are staying with me, and that is it!” she said defiantly. “I am not going to allow you to stay someplace where you are in danger. We are in this together now. We can fight this thing together. I swear if you go back over there, I will have no choice but to drag you out of there myself and bring you back with me!”

“Fine, you win,” he chuckled. “I can see that you already have your mind made up and that I am going to lose this battle.”

“This is not a laughing matter,” Brianna replied. “I would really like it if you would take it more seriously.”

“I am taking it seriously,” Taylor said. “It’s just that you look so cute when you get angry. I can’t help it!”

A smile then appeared on Brianna’s face. She had always been the serious, emotional type. He was right, though; she had been overreacting to the situation. When Taylor got a glimpse of her smile, it made him laugh some more. It was the most adorable smile he had ever seen. Brianna had a way of making him feel warm and tingly inside. It was sweet that she cared that much about him.

“All right, on the count of three, we are going to run into my house and grab what I need as fast as possible,” Taylor said. “One. Two. Three!”

They both opened their doors simultaneously, jumped out of the vehicle, slammed their doors, and ran like their lives counted on it. Taylor struggled to put the key in the lock because his hands were shaking.

“Hurry!” Brianna shouted out. “There’s something in the bushes!”

“I’m going as fast as I can!” Taylor screamed.

Within seconds, the door flew open. They scrambled up to his bedroom so they could grab some clothes. Taylor ran into the bathroom and grabbed a few personal hygiene products. They threw everything in a suitcase and ran like hell to the front door. Taylor took a quick glance out the door before they quickly got out of Taylor’s home with what he needed for at least the next few days without looking back. He would come back sometime during the daytime this week and gather a few more essentials and clothing to last him for an extended period until he knew it would be safe to return to his home.

Taylor slowly pulled up into Brianna’s driveway and parked his jeep. It was now 10 at night. Brianna helped Taylor unload his belongings from the trunk and helped carry his stuff up to her house. She would try to be as hospitable as she can. Brianna wanted Taylor to feel like he was at home. She felt relieved that she was able to talk some sense into him. Brianna wasn’t going to let him stay at his home all alone. He would be much safer with her.

She opened the door and allowed Taylor to go in first because he was carrying a huge load and needed help getting inside. Plus, he was her guest, so it would be rude if she hadn’t. Brianna told him to make himself at home while she went to the closet in the hallway to pull out a sheet, a couple of blankets, and a pillow for him to sleep on. He would be sleeping on the sofa bed in her living room. She felt bad that she didn’t have an additional bed for him to sleep in, but she would try her best to make sure he was comfortable by bringing in additional pillows and blankets if he needed them.

Brianna couldn’t believe she was going to have male company for a while. It had been several years since she last allowed a man to stay over at her house. Brianna knew it was too early in their relationship for her to truly trust him. Neither of them knew much about each other. As far as she could tell, he seemed harmless. She was already enjoying having someone stay with her. It was going to be nice having someone to talk to and spend her time with.

“Thank you for your hospitality,” Taylor told her. “I know this is a rather awkward situation. I promise you that I am not the serial killer type and that you have nothing to worry about. If it makes you feel any better, I can stay in a hotel instead.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she said. “I trust you. I’m going to leave a spare key to the house on the kitchen table for you. If you head out for work before I leave the house, make sure to lock the door on your way out. Also, help yourself to anything in the kitchen. I just went grocery shopping, so there is plenty to eat. Just make yourself at home.

“Well, I will leave you to it. You’ve had a long day and probably need some rest. In fact, I am feeling tired as well. Have a good night! And Jesse, I just wanted you to know that I really appreciate how great you have been to me. It has been nice having you around for company. I was a little afraid that I wouldn’t find any friends here.”

“You have a good night as well,” Taylor responded. “I, too, enjoy your company tremendously. Perhaps this whole ordeal will help us to really get to know each other.”

“I would like that very much,” Brianna responded. “I already am starting to feel close to you because we are dealing with this scary situation together. Living together might reveal whether we are compatible enough with each other to make a serious relationship work.”

“I agree,” Taylor answered.

She smiled, then nervously left him alone. Taylor sat at the edge of his bed, thinking about how lovely Brianna was. He knew it was too soon for him to make a move. She has been through so much with her sister, and now this. He needed to gain her trust first. Living together was a major step for their relationship.

He closed the curtains to the large living room window, changed into his pajamas, turned off the lamp light, then went to bed and fell asleep. Taylor was already feeling safer at Brianna’s home. He was hoping that he hadn’t made the mistake of coming here. It was nice of Brianna to allow him to stay at her home, even though they had just met. He would hate to put her life in jeopardy over this. Brianna was a warm and caring individual. She was just the type of woman he had been looking for. *This could be the beginning of a beautiful relationship,* he thought to himself.

Taylor slept peacefully throughout the night. He couldn’t remember when he last could sleep as well. There was something about Brianna that made him feel safe. She had a calm, trusting, sweet nature to her. Brianna could put even the most restless soul to ease.

In the morning, Taylor was awakened by the sound of Brianna walking through the hallway and closing a door. It was 6 o’clock. He had another hour until his alarm went off. Taylor tried to fall back to sleep, but it was useless. He got up to take a shower and get ready for work. He was tempted to see what she was up to, but he figured it was best that he leave her to some privacy. It was her home, after all.

As he was fixing himself some breakfast, Brianna stepped into the kitchen in her jogging outfit. She was sweaty and drinking from her water bottle profusely. She placed the water bottle down on the counter and took off her ear buds that she was listening to music through.

“I hope I didn’t wake you earlier,” she said. “I try to make it a habit to jog on the treadmill and lift weights every morning before I go to work. I have to watch my figure, you know.”

“I did wake up, but don’t worry about it,” Taylor responded. “I was planning to do so shortly afterward anyway. It’s good that you have a daily routine of working out. Not many people are disciplined enough to get up every morning to exercise. That takes some dedication. I should make a habit of exercising in the morning before work. Maybe you could help me get back into shape. Perhaps I could join you tomorrow?”

“That would be nice,” Brianna said. “It would be great to have someone to talk to while working out. It might motivate me to do it more often. I get up a little after five o’clock in the morning on most days of the week. We can arrange to get together at 6 o’clock to work out. I am glad to see you found something to eat for breakfast. I don’t know what you normally eat in the morning.”

“A bagel with cream cheese will do me just fine,” he said. “I don’t typically eat much for breakfast. I usually just grab a cup of coffee and a bagel, and that is all I really need to get me through until lunchtime.”

“I don’t eat much during the morning either,” she replied. “If you ever want me to cook something for breakfast, such as eggs, bacon, or pancakes, just let me know.”

“I believe that won’t be necessary, but thanks for offering,” Taylor said. “It feels so good to have someone to talk to in the morning. It is a nice way to start the morning. I feel like we are already getting to know each other.”

“Yes, it is,” she said. “Well, I am going up to take a shower now. I will let you finish up eating your breakfast and getting ready for work. I hope you have a good day!”

“You, too!” he said.

Taylor took the last bite of his bagel and drank the rest of his coffee. After putting his dirty dishes in the dishwasher, he headed off to work. He got caught up in a traffic jam on the way to work. Taylor grew frustrated by it. Luckily, he did not have far to drive. He decided to turn on the radio to help take his mind off it.

When he arrived at the office, he stepped into the building in an unenthusiastic mood. He was less than thrilled about having to take on mundane tasks and what stressful situations lay ahead of him. All the exciting stories had already been done, so he no longer had anything to look forward to.

With all the excitement in his life, Taylor was having problems staying focused on his work. He walked a few laps around the office to try to calm himself. He also had another cup of coffee to help him stay alert. Taylor looked up at his computer and sighed. It was going to be another long day at the office. He had an editorial staff meeting in about ten minutes. Taylor grabbed a pen and notepad. He was sure the news editor would ask him about the discovery of new bodies found in the woods and about the latest disappearances in Salem. Taylor dreaded telling him that he had nothing new to report about it, and in a way, he was glad about it. He always felt as if he should be ahead of the game, but this time he wanted to forget all about witches and missing people, especially now that he was a target himself.

During the editorial staff meeting, just as he predicted, Taylor was asked about the disappearances of mysterious deaths in Salem. He dreadfully announced to everyone he had nothing new to report and that he was still working on it. Taylor said he would be sure to have a news story on the road construction that is about to take place in one of the busier parts of Salem and about how it could slow down traffic. It wasn’t the greatest story, but at least he was contributing to today’s newspaper. Taylor was relieved that it was a short meeting. He had other things to worry about.

He knew he had to stop by his house to pick up some more clothes, personal items, and his laptop. Taylor feared what he might find when he went there. He thought about having a police officer escort him inside his house so he would have some protection but figured since it was broad daylight, he should be safe. Taylor dreaded the time it got closer to when he had to go to his house.

The whole day dragged on. The only part of the day that went by quickly was lunch. He enjoyed his meal of lobster bisque and a baguette this afternoon. It was a nice, healthy lunch and was just the right amount of food to fill him up. Taylor was glad that he was able to relax some during lunch. He had such a pleasant time that he dreaded returning to work.

He only had three more hours to work. The trick was to keep himself busy in order to make time move along faster. He started working on an election story about the mayor of Salem rerunning and his challenger. Taylor read through his notes and listened to his recorder simultaneously while typing up the story. He tried hard not to keep track of the time too much. Taylor got so wrapped up in writing the story that he almost forgot to check what time it was. He was happy when he noticed he only had thirty more minutes of work left. He was just about to wrap up his story.

After he added his final touches to the story, Taylor turned in his story to the copy editor before leaving. He nearly sprinted out to his vehicle. Taylor stopped, stretched out his arms, and inhaled the fresh air before stepping into his jeep. He made sure he had his concealed weapon in his glove department and a baseball bat on hand to protect himself while going inside his home. He was just going to run right in and run right out. *It should be a piece of cake,* he thought.

He pulled up to his driveway. Everything looked as it did yesterday, to Taylor’s relief. He cautiously stepped out of his car with his baseball bat and concealed weapon. He took a quick gander around his yard before walking toward his house. All appeared to be safe. He quickly ran up the steps on his porch and walked straight to the front door.

He took out the keys to his house from his right pocket. He turned the key slowly, then partially opened the door. He stuck his head in to see if everything looked normal before stepping inside. He tiptoed quietly at first into the house. Taylor then sighed in relief when he managed to get inside without anything attacking him. He packed up some more clothes, his laptop, a few personal items, and another pair of shoes. Just as he felt like he was the only person in the house, he heard a mysterious voice. It sent a chill down his spine. He grabbed his belongings, ran out of his bedroom, then rushed toward the front door.

Just before he stepped out of his house with the remainder of his belongings, he heard a whisper coming from inside his kitchen. The voice was calling out his name, “Jesse,” over and over. A beautiful woman then appeared in his living room. She had long, flowing blonde hair and green eyes and was nude. Taylor then became entranced by her. As she stepped closer to him, he studied the curves of her body and her plump breasts. Taylor tried to snap out of it, but he could not help it. Her voluptuous body was hypnotizing.

She then placed her hand on him and began kissing his mouth. Taylor was quite taken aback by it. He suddenly felt aroused. Just as he started kissing her back, he looked up and saw the same red glowing eyes that had been haunting him. His eyes widened. Her fingernails suddenly turned to claws, and horns came out of her head. Taylor then tried to pull away from her. She had a strong grip on him.

Taylor screamed when the she-demon clawed him and attempted to sink her fangs into him. He took out his gun and shot at the demon. She screeched and wailed after he had shot at her three times. He ran out to the car as fast as he could while she was lying on the floor in agony. She began to crawl slowly to the door with her arms reaching out toward him.

“Leave me alone!” Taylor shouted.

Taylor was beginning to wonder if the high priestess of the witch coven was a demon. Could the Night Shadow Circle have summoned a demon to help them gain power? He dashed away in his car with his belongings as fast as he could from the house. Taylor didn’t even look back to see if the demon was following him. He was in such a state of shock that he could not think clearly. He had to tell Brianna about his discovery.

Blood was dripping down his arm as he spun around the corners of his car and toward Brianna’s home. There was a searing pain in his upper left arm and on his abdomen. Taylor didn’t even think about how badly he was injured or whether he should go to the hospital. He just kept driving. He was worried that the demon was following him and might come to Brianna’s home next. *What if I’m risking her life, too?* he wondered. Taylor made sure she wasn’t behind him once again before he drove into Brianna’s driveway. He made sure the area was clear before stepping out of the vehicle.

He ran up to the house with his belongings. His hands were shaking as he pulled out the key to the lock on the door. He could barely put the key in the lock from all the shaking. When he got inside, he made sure every door and window was locked and all the curtains were closed. He called Brianna up quickly to tell her to be careful when she got home. Taylor told her to text him when she arrived at the house so that he could go outside and make sure she was safe to come out of her car. He told her he would explain everything to her when she got home.

It was now 6 at night. Brianna would be home soon. He then remembered her telling him that she was going to try and talk to her sister, Tara, today. Hopefully, Brianna would have more to report. They could both go to the police headquarters and tell them everything that they knew about the Night Shadow Circle and about all the strange occurrences. Maybe the police could link the witch coven to the recent disappearances and murders in the woods. They were in desperate need of answers.

He took a quick shower and put on some clean clothes. Just as he was about to make himself comfortable on the couch, Brianna texted him that she had arrived and was sitting in her vehicle in the driveway as instructed. The buzzing on his phone that notified him of a text startled him at first. He walked up to the front door and peeked outside to make sure nothing was lurking about. He then cautiously walked up to Brianna’s car and signaled to her that it was okay for her to come out. He guided her up to the house while being on the lookout.

“Jesse, what’s wrong?” she said. “You look like you just saw a ghost! Did something happen at your house?”

“Oh, let’s just say the head priestess was waiting for me inside my house,” he replied. “She was a real charmer, let me tell you.”

“Oh no! What happened?” Brianna asked.

“Well, as I was picking up the rest of my stuff, she walked into the living completely nude and used her sex appeal to enchant me,” Taylor said. “She then attacked me. I was lucky enough to escape her. I found out the red glowing eyes that had been peering out at me from the woods were coming from none other than the high priestess, which I think may be a demon. She at first appeared to be an enchanting, beautiful woman before transforming into a demon. She grew claws, horns, a tail, and her eyes glowed red. She struck me with her long, thick, and sharp claws. She then tried to sink her pointy teeth into me. I shot at her with my gun, then escaped. We are dealing with a real she-devil.”

“Oh my gosh,” she replied. “That sounds awful. I am so glad to hear that you got out of there safely and unharmed. I don’t know what I would do if I had lost you. Do you think it is what attacked my sister?”

“It’s a possibility,” he said. “It sure matches the description that your sister had provided, plus I kept seeing those red eyes glaring at me from behind the bushes or in the woods late at night. Did you have a chance to talk to her today?”

“Yes, I did,” Brianna answered. “I don’t know how I managed to do it, but I have convinced her to share what happened to her during the attack in the woods with the authorities with me by her side. I also told her about you and what has happened to you. Tara said she would like to meet you.”

“I am glad to hear she is willing to cooperate,” Taylor said. “I’m sure it will be hard for her to talk about the attack to officers and have to remember all the gruesome details. It’s good she will have someone close to her by her side to offer her comfort. I will call the police department and arrange a time we can all three be together to tell them what we know at the hospital in Tara’s room. You get back with Tara and find out what time works for her.”

“I will call her tonight,” Brianna said. “I am so glad that you will have the opportunity to meet her in person. She has heard so much about you and is eager to meet you.”

“I hope all good things,” he joked. “I do want to leave a good impression on her.”

“Nothing but good things,” Brianna said, smiling while trying to reassure him that she would never say anything bad about him. “You should know me by now. Why would I want to ruin what we have in our relationship when everything has been going so well?”

“That’s a good question,” Taylor remarked.

Chapter 7

After Brianna called her sister, Tara, up last night, it was decided that all three of them would talk to the police today after work. Taylor was a little worried about meeting Tara because of the dreams he had been having recently. What if the woman in his dream wasn’t really Brianna? Maybe it was her identical sister. That would mean it might be Tara he needed to keep a close eye on. Taylor was beginning to wonder if this attack on Tara was a scheme to get him to trust her so that Tara could trap him and possibly kill him, too.

Taylor had never told Brianna about his nightmares. He was afraid she might freak out if she found out he had been dreaming about a woman attacking him who looked exactly like Brianna and Tara before she had even met him. Taylor had just started having feelings for Brianna and didn’t want to ruin their relationship, especially now that he was living with her. He thought it was best to just keep it to himself.

After all the excitement from the high priestess attacking Taylor last night, Brianna made spaghetti, baked some garlic bread, and made cheesecake for dinner to help brighten the mood. The delicious food and endless chatter were enough to settle their nerves and allowed them the opportunity to enjoy the rest of their evening. They avoided further discussion about Taylor’s encounter with the high priestess. They cuddled on the couch and watched *The Sound of Music*. The light, cheerful melodies also helped put them both at ease. Once again, Brianna left Taylor sleeping on the pull-out bed while she slept in her bed. Taylor said he really didn’t mind and that he felt comfortable in it. Brianna was beginning to think maybe it wouldn’t hurt to let him sleep with her in her bed. He would feel much more comfortable in it, and she wouldn’t mind having someone to snuggle with at night.

During the morning, Taylor and Brianna woke up at 5:30 to work out together. They both took showers and had breakfast together. They were starting to act like a real couple. He was wondering if they were taking things too fast, though. It was too soon for them to be in a serious relationship. Taylor then thought there weren’t really any rules or restrictions in the matter of love. Maybe they should just let it take its natural course.

Taylor once again dreaded going back into the office. He felt like the energy had just been drained right out of him. He worked sluggishly behind his cubicle. His editor, Joel Robertson, wanted a story about a charity fundraiser sponsored by the City of Salem and the United Way done by the end of the day. The fundraiser was taking place on Saturday morning at Gallows Hill Park. He called the chamber of commerce, a few event organizers, and the mayor of Salem to get information about the event and some quotes. He quickly started writing a short story about it for the front page of the newspaper. He was just about halfway done with it.

Brianna asked him if he wanted to meet up for lunch today. He text messaged her back and told her after he was finished with his story, he would. Right now, he was focused on getting his story done. It was now eleven thirty in the morning and he had most of the story done. Flashbacks of the demon that attacked him at his home yesterday kept haunting him. He tried hard to keep them from distracting him. He then put on his headphones to listen to some soothing music to keep his mind at ease and to block out unwanted noise.

By 1 in the afternoon, he completed the story. They decided to meet up at Essex’s NY Pizza & Deli for lunch. They enjoyed a quiet lunch until it was suddenly interrupted when Taylor received a call from his source, Saul Benjamin. He rolled his eyes and thought, *What could it possibly be this time?*

“I’m sorry, but I am going to have to take this one,” Taylor said apologetically to Brianna. “My anonymous source has some more information regarding the missing people.”

“That’s alright,” she said. “You go on ahead and take care of your business.”

“All right Saul, what do you got for me?” he said on his cell phone.

“Another body has been recovered,” Saul said. “This time, it is of a woman. The body was badly beaten and there was an identical gash on her body from the previous ones. Mysteriously, there was a large claw stuck in the gash. There was talk that a bear may have attacked her. However, we didn’t see any bear footprints in the area. All we saw were several human footprints. Someone was running after the person barefooted. So far, the police are puzzled by the claw found in the slash mark on her arm.”

Taylor knew exactly what attacked the woman but chose to keep silent about it. He did not want Saul to think he was losing his mind. He would write another story but leave it to where the readers would think there is a bear behind it all. The readers could draw their own conclusions about what had happened. He’d just write about whatever Saul and law enforcement tell him.

“Thank you, Saul, for that information,” Taylor said. “I will try to write up something for tomorrow’s paper. People need to be aware that a bear might be on the prowl in the woods and attacking people. It’s important to keep people safe.”

“You’re welcome,” Benjamin said. “I hope I didn’t catch you at a bad time.”

“No, you haven’t,” Taylor responded. “You caught me in the middle of lunch. That’s all. Besides, a reporter’s workday is never over. Please continue sending vital information regardless of the time of day. It is much appreciated.”

He quickly returned to eating lunch with Brianna. She asked him if everything was all right.

“It was, indeed, my anonymous source that has been providing information about the recent searches for the people who have been missing for the past few months,” Taylor answered. “They found a claw stuck in a woman’s gash on her arm. They believe it is a bear, but no bear footprints were found, which means only one thing. It must be the high priestess of the Night Shadow Circle behind it.”

“Are you going to tell people that it is the high priestess of the Night Shadow coven?” Brianna asked.

“Of course not,” he said. “I can’t inaccurately quote him and put my own spiel to the story. That would be considered unethical. A journalist is never supposed to put themselves in the story. I will have to lead readers to believe that a bear is responsible for these attacks and not some demon. I can only write what he has told me, and that is all.”

“Good,” she said. “I want my sister to trust you. If you start writing about the Night Shadow Circle or anything else about witchcraft, my sister may not want to tell you what she knows. She doesn’t want to be quoted in the newspaper. In fact, she doesn’t want anyone to know about her being a part of the Night Shadow Circle. She also is afraid that one of the members of the coven may come after her for it.”

“You can trust me,” he said. “I will leave her name out of it completely. However, if she has committed any criminal acts, I must write about it, and her name will be included in the story. I may need to use her name if she becomes a suspect as well.”

“I understand,” Brianna said. “And that is the way it should be. If she is at fault for anything or is being tried in court for a crime, the public has the right to know about it. I understand your responsibility as a journalist is to inform the public, and I won’t stand in your way of it.”

“Thank you for being understanding,” Taylor said. “And if she ends up being in a story, I promise to be fair and accurate.”

Taylor felt relieved that Brianna was so understanding about what he did as a journalist. He really appreciated that.

After lunch, he returned to his office to write up the story regarding the body being found in the woods and what evidence law enforcement had found. He called up multiple sources to get more information and quotes for his story. The story took up much of the time he had left at the office. He quickly turned the story in to be edited for tomorrow’s newspaper. It would be the main story on the front page. It would help bring up circulation, and the news would spread across town like wildfire. Seeing his story up front and on top of the newspaper brought Taylor much satisfaction.

He could not wait to get out of the office now. He took in the fresh air as he walked to his jeep. He felt free now and was ready to relax. He decided to take a walk through the park to help him unwind. He picked up a cup of coffee and a croissant at a nearby bakery. He knew that Brianna was not home yet, so he decided to take some time to be by himself and to think about things more clearly.

A few hours later, Taylor met Brianna at her place to go over to the hospital to meet with a police officer and Tara. They were going to have to build up enough courage to tell the police officer everything they knew about the Night Shadow Circle and the head priestess. The officer might have a hard time believing them, but it would get them to meet with the witch coven and ask them questions. Taylor thought the police might be able to gather some important information and find enough evidence. Hopefully, it would be enough to lead to their arrests.

It was a busy day at the hospital. An ambulance came whirling around the corner and pulled up in front of the emergency room doors. Several patients were at the front desk waiting to be checked in, and people were coming in and out of the cafeteria. Taylor tried to pay no attention to a screaming patient who was being wheeled in on a gurney toward the emergency room. It was quite the commotion.

Brianna led him to the elevator that would take them up to the intensive care unit. The elevator was also occupied by a nurse, a doctor, and an elderly couple. Everyone stood silent as the elevator transported each of them to their floors. Everyone smiled at each other and was patient about getting to their floor. Taylor and Brianna were the last ones to get off the elevator. Taylor’s heart fluttered when Brianna reached out to his hand and held it while they were leaving the elevator. A smile appeared on his face. He felt all warm and fuzzy inside.

They stepped up to the registration table to let them know they were visiting Tara. The woman at the desk told them it was okay for them to go visit her now. She then directed them to where they needed to go and what the visiting hours were. As they stepped into the patient room that Tara was staying in, Taylor saw the police officer standing near the window that had a good view of the hospital parking lot. The police officer was having a friendly conversation with Tara. They both chuckled as Brianna and Taylor entered the room.

When the officer noticed them coming in, he finished conversing with Tara and immediately acknowledged their presence by introducing himself as Officer Connor Valenzuela as he shook their hands. Tara Rush glanced at Taylor. Taylor could tell she was studying him because she was curious about who her sister was dating.

“Hi!” she said. “We haven’t been introduced yet. I am Brianna’s sister, Tara Rush. It’s a pleasure to have finally met you. I haven’t seen my sister this happy with a man for quite some time because she has always been quite particular about the type of man she wants to date. There must be something special about you or else she would not have wanted me to meet you.”

“Okay, that’s enough, Tara,” Brianna said. “I’m sure Jesse is not interested in my love life. Plus, that is a rather personal topic for you to bring up. We haven’t even been dating for very long, and that would be something we would discuss when we are a little bit further along in the relationship.”

Taylor listened to the two sisters conversate with each other. He was curious to see how they interacted with each other, especially since they were identical twins. He had only met a few twins in his life.

“Hi,” Taylor said. “It is a pleasure to meet you. Brianna has told me nothing but good things about you.”

“Oh, has she?” Tara said with a smile. “It’s good to see you again, Sis.”

“Now, what kind of sister would I be if I didn’t come check up on my sister?” Brianna said. “I love you, Sis. I just hate seeing you here alone in the hospital with nothing to do other than watching television and eating less than desirable hospital food.”

“I love you, too,” Tara said. “It’s always good to see you. As soon as I get out of the hospital, we should all go out and get some lunch together.”

“That would be nice,” Brianna replied. “It’s been a while since we last did that.”

“So, Jesse, you told me on the phone that you have some vital information regarding who is responsible for the recent disappearances and murders in the woods,” Officer Valenzuela said. “Can you tell me what you mean by that?”

“I would be happy to, Officer,” he said. “Within the last few weeks, I have been hearing noises and having strange sightings outside of my house. I have heard growling sounds, footsteps, and the bushes shaking. I have seen a pair of red eyes, human footprints, claw marks on the trees, witchcraft or cult items—such as herbs, a chalice, an athame, and items with a pentagram on them in the woods behind my house.

“Last week, there was a threatening message written in blood on my garage car door. It said I was next. Yesterday, as I was collecting some of my belongings to take back with me to Brianna’s house, I was attacked by the head priestess of a witch coven. We believe it is the Night Shadow Circle witch coven who has been performing human sacrifices in the woods.”

“We also have collected various wiccan items around the crime scenes where these murders may have taken place,” Officer Valenzuela said. “Did you happen to get a good glimpse of the person that attacked you?”

“The woman had long blond hair and green eyes,” he said. “She didn’t have any clothes on. I would say she was about five foot and four feet tall. She had creamy white skin. Now, this part is going to sound weird. But Officer, you have got to believe me. As she was attacking, her eyes began to glow red, and her body transformed into a demon-like figure. She grew claws, sharp teeth, horns, and a tail. I shot at her three times with my pistol and managed to escape my house. I have not been back there since then. I know this sounds crazy, but I can assure you I am not mentally ill, and I know what I saw.”

“Were you taking any drugs or drank any alcohol just before the incident?” Officer Valenzuela asked. “I’m sorry, but I must ask so I can write a more thorough report. It’s not that I don’t believe you. Strange occurrences happen all the time around Salem. This is witch country, after all. We have a lot of weirdos in the area that do strange things. I’ve even seen a few things myself.”

“I perfectly understand,” Taylor responded. “I was not drunk or high during the time, Officer. I would never make something like that up. I know what I saw. Tara said she was also attacked by the Night Shadow Circle. She was a member of the coven at the time, and she met the woman who is the high priestess in person. Tara knows what the high priestess is capable of and can provide further insight into the witch coven. She also can give you the names of the witches and where you can find them. Tara has even witnessed the transformation of the high priestess herself.”

“Why yes, Officer,” Tara replied. “I would be willing to give you a list of names right here if you don’t tell them that I was the one who handed you the list. I can also assure you that what Jesse is telling you is true. I was also attacked by the high priestess, and she, too, used her sharp claws on me. I stared into those red glaring eyes in fright. I was so scared that I could hardly scream. I can’t tell you exactly what she is or how she became that way.”

“A list of names would be very appreciated,” Officer Valenzuela said. “I am sorry that the both of you had to undergo something so frightening and life-threatening. You should think of yourselves to be lucky. God was watching out for you.”

“Yes, I feel extremely blessed to escape the high priestess and her witch coven,” Tara replied while she was jotting down the names of the members of the Night Shadow. “I feel so sorry for those poor unfortunate souls whose lives were taken away from them too early because of the Night Shadow. I wished I only knew what they were capable of at the time that I was a member of the witch coven. I would never have joined the coven had I known of their intentions.”

She then handed the paper with several names written on it to the officer. The officer took it from her hand graciously.

“The high priestess’s name is Minerva Yaga,” Tara said. “By the description that Taylor had provided of the high priestess, she does match the description of the woman that had attacked Jesse. She is an extremely evil woman who uses her beauty to enchant her prey before attacking them. I believe she is immortal. Nobody knows exactly how old she is or what she is. Like Jesse said, she might be a female demon. She may have formed some pact with the witches. She is luring men to the witches for human sacrifice. The blood of the victims is being used to make the witches more powerful.”

“Can you describe what happened to you during the time of the attack?” Officer Valenzuela asked. “I know this must be hard for you. Take as much time as you need.”

“Yes, as much as I can recall,” Tara answered. “The incident is a little blurry in my mind since I was knocked out unconscious part of the time. I remember the witches dancing nude around the bonfire, chanting and singing. The next thing I know, the high priestess approaches me. She then grabbed me, slashed my arm with her claws. As the blood was dripping, another witch held a chalice under the blood dripping from my arm. There was enough blood for each of the witches to take a small sip from. They then began beating me and tied me with a rope to a stake. Just before they could lift me up and set fire to me, a man dashed out from behind some trees and saved me. I had already blacked out by then.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that happened to you,” Officer Valenzuela responded. “Have you ever witnessed the coven doing this to anyone else?”

“No,” she said. “It surprised me. I never thought they would do something like that to me. Had I known their evil intentions, I would not have joined. You must believe me. I am not the type of person that would commit such a crime. I would never murder anyone or hurt anyone in any way. I just got mixed up with the wrong crowd. The only reason why I joined was because I was intrigued with the mystery behind being a witch and to have some kind of thrill in my life.”

“Do they have a meeting place, and what time do they meet?” Officer Valenzuela asked.

“They meet every Saturday at midnight,” Tara said as she found a map online that would point the officer in the right direction to the place where the Night Shadow coven held their midnight rituals. “Here is the location where they meet. It’s not that far from Salem and is in the woods. Please, Officer, whatever you do, don’t tell them I told you anything. I’m afraid they will come after me again. They for sure will kill me the next time. As of right now, I don’t even think they know that I am here, and I would prefer that it stays that way.”

“Don’t worry, we will provide you with protection,” the officer said. “I will make sure this room is always guarded. I will send some police officers over to oversee their next ritual. They will be hidden in the woods with police surveillance all around. If we witness any attempts for a human sacrifice, we will for sure arrest them and have enough evidence to find them guilty in court.”

“Oh, please be careful, Officer,” Tara said. “They are capable of anything. Be sure to have plenty of backup. They have magical powers that are hard to beat, but if you can find a way to sneak up to them and create a diversion, you might be able to take them down before they can even cast a spell. If you are too late, they can kill you with just a wave of their wands. It might be best to bring someone with experience in the dark arts with you.”

“We will, madam, and thank you for your cooperation in the matter,” Officer Valenzuela said. “In fact, thank you to all of you for providing me with this information. We are much closer to cracking the case than we were before. If you find out anything else, please give me a call. With your help, we could end all this once and for all.”

The officer handed out his business card with all his contact information on it to all three of them. He then stood quietly as if he was waiting to see if they had any more questions for him.

“And thank you, Officer Valenzuela,” Taylor said. “Your effort in the matter is very much appreciated, and we will do whatever we can to help you.”

“Have a good evening, folks,” Officer Valenzuela said before stepping out of the room.

“You, too,” all three of them said simultaneously while waving goodbye to the officer.

All three of them then exchanged looks in silence. Tara was the first person to break the silence.

“So, I heard you are now staying at Brianna’s house, Jesse,” Tara said. “How has that been so far? I know my sister can be a bit of a control freak sometimes.”

“It’s been great so far,” Taylor responded. “Your sister has been very hospitable so far. In fact, she has inspired me to get back into shape. We just started working out together.”

“That sounds like my sister,” Tara said. “She has always been quite the go-getter. She earned a bachelor’s degree in business management at Boston University. Brianna later got a master’s degree in library science. I wish I could say the same for myself, but unfortunately, I do not have the same drive as my sister. I dropped out of college at Bunker Hill Community College, where I was majoring in art history. We look the same, but we have very different personalities. She has always been responsible, highly motivated, studious, and ambitious. I have always been the creative type with a rebellious spirit.”

“Don’t listen to her, Jesse,” Brianna said. “I am not that perfect. I keep telling her she has great potential. Tara is an amazing artist, and I bet she could make a lot of money for some of her work at art shows. I have tried to convince her to do it, but she just kind of marches to her own beat. I should really take you to her art studio inside her home and show you some of her artwork. You would be amazed by what she can do.”

“I would love to see your work,” Taylor said. “I have a great deal of respect for artists. They are so passionate about their work, so much so that it is never about the money. You must be an extremely talented artist in order to make it.”

“Thank you so much for saying that; it means a lot to me,” Tara said. “I keep trying to convince Brianna to go back to working in a library again. Utopia Galore isn’t the sort of establishment that my sister would be normally associated with. She gave up working at the library to help me open Utopia Galore. Brianna has been teaching me everything that I need to know in running a business. Once I know everything that I need to know, she will give full ownership of the business.”

“So, what do you plan on doing, Brianna, after Tara learns enough to run the business herself?” Taylor asked.

“I haven’t quite thought about that,” Brianna said. “I imagine I will try to get a job at another library or open a bookstore. Reading has always been a passion of mine.”

“I can see that about you,” Taylor said. “You have this curious nature. You get excited when you tell me about things that you have learned from a book, magazine, or on some webpage. When I stop by Utopia Galore to pick you up, I often find you reading a book when there aren’t any customers in the store.”

Tara yawned, then stretched out her arms. Brianna and Taylor could tell she was getting sleepy and that they should leave now to allow her to get some rest.

“Well, it was so nice to meet you, Jesse,” Tara said. “I hate to see you all go, but I really need to get some rest now. Maybe we can all go out and do something after I get out of the hospital.”

“That will be great, and it was nice meeting you as well,” Taylor said. “Well, Brianna, should we go and let your sister get some rest now?”

“Yeah, that would be a good idea,” Brianna said. “Besides, we need to get back so I can make dinner, plus I need to get plenty of rest for tomorrow. We are supposed to get a new shipment of products for the store in the morning.”

“Alright, well, I will talk to the both of you later,” Tara said. “Have a good evening.”

“You, too!” Brianna said.

Taylor looked back at Tara to see if she had a devious look on her face. He was still trying to make heads or tails of her. She was a member of the Night Shadow Circle, after all. Tara gave him a bad vibe. He tried hard not to get it into his head too much. There were still many missing pieces in the puzzle.

Taylor took a glance at Tara one last time before heading off. She gave him a devilish smile. The kind of smile that gave you the creeps. Something told him that she knew more than she let on about the witch coven and that he should be on guard whenever she was around. There was something off with her. He knew she was up to no good. Taylor didn’t know how he was going to tell Brianna about his suspicion of her. He knew she loved and trusted her too much for her to believe him.

Chapter 8

Taylor couldn’t shake the feeling that something bad was about to happen. He had a hard time concentrating on his work all day. The way Tara looked at him last night had been haunting him throughout the day. She also appeared to be as cool as a cucumber when describing what had happened to her during the attack. *What is she up to?* Taylor couldn’t help but wonder.

He was relieved that he and Brianna were going to stay in tonight. He had enough excitement within the past few weeks. Brianna told him that she was going to be cooking lasagna Bolognese and French bread for dinner tonight. She asked Taylor to stop and pick up a bottle of Sangiovese wine for dinner on his way from work today. This was something an old married couple would do. It put a smile across his face just thinking about them being married.

Once again, he felt like the whole day had dragged on at the office. By the end of the working day, Taylor was ready to get back to Brianna’s home and relax. He felt so tired that he could barely concentrate on what he was writing. Taylor had to get up and move around a bit a few times to wake himself up.

He was also tired of running and living in fear. Taylor just wanted to return to having a normal life. It wasn’t that he didn’t enjoy spending extra time with Brianna by living with her, and he wasn’t in a hurry to move back into his own place. This just wasn’t his ideal way of doing it. However, the experience brought them closer together, and they seemed to get along very well, which made him very happy.

It was Friday, so he was excited to spend his first full weekend with Brianna. Officer Connor Valenzuela had called him to ask if it would be all right for him and another officer could search his home for evidence. Taylor told him to stop by his office and he could give him the key to his home. He was hoping that the officer would find the high priestess dead inside his home after he had shot her three times a few days ago. It would help free him of a considerable amount of fear.

To help move the day along faster, he put on some classic rock music. He moved along to the beat of the drums and at times lip synced as he wrote out the police log for the cops and courts page. Once that was finished, he looked up at the clock and noticed he only had about an hour more to work. He spent the rest of the time trying to get story ideas for tomorrow’s newspaper.

Once the workday was over, he headed out of the office quickly, picked up the bottle of wine from the grocery store, and rushed over to Brianna’s house without looking back. By now, Officer Valenzuela would have already searched his home. He wondered what officer Valenzuela had found during his search. Since he hadn’t heard from him yet, Taylor was worried that the high priestess had attacked him, too.

He was surprised to find a cop car in Brianna’s driveway when he pulled up in front of her home. Taylor was afraid to go inside. He feared that whatever news the police officer had to share was bad. Taylor sat inside his jeep for a while until he was able to gain enough courage to get out of the vehicle and go inside the house. He felt a wave of uneasiness inside of him once he stepped out of the jeep. He put on a brave face and walked slowly to the front door.

Taylor pulled out his key to the house, unlocked the front door, and then stepped inside quietly, trying not to startle anyone. Officer Valenzuela was sitting in the living room, having a conversation with Brianna. There was a look of fear on Brianna’s face that worried Taylor. He waited until their conversation ended before saying anything.

When they acknowledged his presence, their conversation ended abruptly. Officer Valenzuela cleared his throat. He gave Taylor a solemn look. Taylor braced himself for the bad news.

“I stopped by your house earlier today,” Officer Valenzuela said. “I was quite disturbed when I found puddles of blood in your living room. There were also bloody handprints on the walls and footprints on the floor, but there was no body inside the home. I then followed a bloody trail of footprints on up to the woods. I then spotted something beyond my comprehension lying in a grassy area. It was the human body of a woman with claws, horns, and a tail, just as you described. I had the lab team come over and take a DNA sample from the body. There was a sample of human flesh on its claws, which I believe came from your arm after it had slashed it with its claws inside your home. There did appear to be a struggle within your home. There were broken lamps, a television set that was smashed in, a broken window, scratch marks on the wall and the door. I’m not sure how to report this. It is something that the police department has never seen before.”

“I’m still trying to comprehend it all,” Taylor responded. “All of it seems like something you would read about in a horror novel. Who knew something like this could happen in real life?”

“I will reach out to all of the members of the Night Shadow Circle on the list that Tara Rush had given me at the hospital,” Officer Valenzuela said. “I will make sure that your sister is protected, Brianna, from the witch coven. I will make it sound like we had been following the coven and had our suspicions of their involvement in this case all along without the help of you or your sister.”

“I trust you will,” Brianna said. “Please do be careful, Officer, especially after what they had done to my sister. They are a dark, sinister brood of witches that will stop at nothing to get what they want. My sister told me so.”

“Don’t worry, I will have backup,” Officer Valenzuela assured her. “We are well-trained and highly skilled individuals. I can assure you that we will get down to the heart of the matter and do whatever we can to put an end to it and protect the citizens of Salem.”

“And please, please, *please* don’t tell them what Tara had told you and that she sent you a list of names and contact information for each one,” Brianna pleaded. “I know I have already asked you this, but I need some reassurance from you. I want her to be able to trust the police in handling the matter and not be angry with me for suggesting her talk to law enforcement.”

“I won’t,” Officer Valenzuela said. “I am a man of my word. There’s no need to worry, I promise. Well, I will let you two be. I don’t want to take up too much of your time. I also got work to do. Have a good evening!”

“You, too, Officer, and thanks for everything,” Taylor said. “Be safe out there!”

“You won’t have to worry about me,” Officer Valenzuela said. “I can protect myself. I am trained for this line of work, as I was telling your wife earlier. I have dealt with a lot of strange and dangerous occurrences throughout my career that has helped me to prepare for situations like this one.”

Brianna led him out to the door and waved goodbye to him. Taylor came up from behind her shortly afterward, wrapped his arm around her, and kissed her neck.

“I am so glad to get that out of the way,” Brianna said. “I always get nervous talking to police officers. I feel like I am the one that they are questioning for a crime and that I am the main suspect. They are so stern and unfaltering. At the end, I am quite certain they will handcuff me and throw me behind the slammer.”

“He is just following protocol,” Taylor said. “You have no need to be frightened unless there is something about you that I don’t know about.”

“Don’t be silly,” she responded. “No one could ever imagine me doing anything wrong. I have always been known to be the good one in school that could never do anything wrong. I was quiet, studious, and always set a good example for my peers. You would have found me to be quite a bore.”

“You know, I have always been into shy, nerdy girls,” he said. “I, too, was quiet and quite the bookworm. If I went to your school, we would have totally hooked up at some point.”

“You are right,” she said. “I would have had a huge crush on you, and I am sure we would have gone to prom together. See, we have so much in common. It must have been destiny that brought us together.”

“Taking you to prom would have been nice, so much more than me taking Elaine Blackburn,” Taylor replied. “It was a very awkward date because she was heartbroken when her ex-boyfriend asked a different girl to prom. I would look at Elaine and I could tell she was really trying hard to fight back her tears as she watched him dance with his date. She barely said a word to me, and I could tell she didn’t really want to be there with me. I would have loved asking you out to prom and taking you out for a nice dinner instead. I know we would have had plenty to talk about.”

“That sounds awful,” Brianna said. “Well, at least you had a date.”

“Are you trying to tell me that you didn’t have a date to prom?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said softly. “It was so embarrassing. While everyone else had someone to dance with, I was sitting all by myself, watching everyone else dance while drinking punch and tapping my toes to the beat. I felt so out of place. I couldn’t figure out why no one had asked me to prom. I felt like something was wrong with me.”

“Are you kidding me?” Taylor responded. “You are amazing, Brianna. You are beautiful, smart, fashionable, fun to be around, and have a great sense of humor. I have never met anyone quite like you!”

“Thank you for saying that to me,” she said. “That means so much to me.”

Brianna then grew quiet. Taylor knew something else was bothering her. She then looked up at him suspiciously. He became worried that she might not trust him. Maybe she could tell that he had been holding something back from her.

He held his tongue. Brianna still didn’t know anything about the dreams he had been having that might involve either her or her sister. She would absolutely be petrified about it. Taylor decided to avoid the topic, but he knew that someday he would have to tell her about the dreams he had been having involving her and her sister.

“So, aside from what we discussed with Officer Valenzuela tonight, how has the rest of your day been?” Taylor asked.

“Oh, it was a pretty mundane day,” she answered. “Business has been slow lately. I think many people in Salem have been scared about being out with all the murders and disappearances being reported on the news lately. I wonder who is responsible for that.”

“Hey, I am just doing my job,” Taylor said. “It is my duty to inform the citizens to be extremely careful, especially at night. You should understand that. Right?”

“I know,” Brianna said. “I was only teasing you. Occasionally, I got to give you a hard time to keep things fresh between you and me. So, on the flipside, tell me, how has your day been?”

“It’s been an ordinary day,” he said. “There were no exciting stories to write about today. It’s been quiet lately on the streets. No new developments on the murders and disappearances have been reported other than what just occurred at my home lately and what information we got from your sister. Sooner or later, people will find out about what has happened to me, the Night Shadow Circle, and your sister’s involvement with them. We won’t be able to keep it to ourselves much longer. Reporters have been hounding the police about the situation and I am sure some anonymous sources will come out and talk. I guarantee you that.”

“I was afraid of that,” Brianna said. “I really don’t like us being in the spotlight. I really wish there was some way we could remain anonymous, but I know in this type of situation, it is available to the public with or without the press. Anyone can request this type of information in the courthouse or attend any of the trials. For there, the word will spread out like wildfire because no one can keep their nose out of other people’s business.”

“They sure can’t,” he said. “Just so you know, I don’t really want to write about you or your sister. However, I am a news reporter, and this is part of the job description, to inform.”

“I understand,” she said. “I knew from the beginning who I was getting myself involved with, and I accepted you just the way you are. There was nothing that led me to believe that something like this could possibly happen. If I did, I may have stayed away from you once I found out that you were a reporter.”

“Thank you for understanding,” Taylor said. “I know this is a very delicate situation, and I will try my best not to have it ruin our relationship. I want to both do my job and keep our relationship on good terms at the same time. This is very difficult for me.”

“I appreciate that,” she said. “I don’t want to lose you either. I am willing to accept whatever challenge heads our way.”

“That’s good to hear,” he replied. “I felt like I was walking on a tight rope with the subject, but now I feel like I can ease up a bit about it now.”

Chapter 9

It was twenty minutes past 11 o’clock at night. Officer Connor Valenzuela and a squad of policemen surrounded the meeting ground of the Night Shadow Circle coven. They planted surveillance all over the area. Valenzuela wanted to witness one of the coven’s nightly rituals to see what he was up against before questioning each of the witches.

There was complete darkness in the woods. It was silent enough that they could hear an owl screeching and flapping its wings, the crickets chirping, and the wind blowing. Officer Valenzuela shuddered as the cold breeze blew up against his skin. He briskly walked back to his patrol car, then quickly pulled out his thick coat from the back seat of the car and put it on without any hesitation. It was a peaceful night. He hated that everything could go to hell once the first round of bullets started flying if anything were to go wrong between the coven and the police and lead to violence. If so, he had a feeling that it was going to be a long, bloody battle between law enforcement and the witch coven. Valenzuela was hoping that wouldn’t be the case.

Everything was calm until the officers witnessed dark figures carrying torches through the woods. They could faintly see their faces from the glow of the fire. They noticed a couple of the individuals were carrying firewood to the area. They were wearing black hooded ritual robes while walking in sync with each other. The coven chanted softly amongst themselves. Officer Valenzuela commanded that the officers move to their assigned positions in case the coven noticed them and tried to attack. Each of the officers quietly squatted down so they could be hidden.

The ritual was nothing that the police officers had ever seen before. There was an eeriness in the air. A few witches set up a bonfire while the others continued chanting. Once the bonfire was set up, a few witches stood around it and lit it with a torch. The coven of witches stood around and watched the fire rise into the midnight air. There was a full moon out tonight, which made the ritual even more dark and mysterious. The officers were surprised when they saw the witches remove their robes and start to dance around the bonfire in the nude while singing and chanting. It was both mesmerizing and spooky. There was an eeriness in the air.

Their attention suddenly turned to a beautiful, tall, slender woman who looked like she was twenty-something years old. She had long dark hair, almond-colored eyes, pale skin, and arched eyebrows. She stepped forward and stood in front of the witches. The young woman got down on her knees and closed her eyes. It looked as though she was bowing down to them. She also looked as if she was in a trance. The dancing of the witches surrounding the young woman got fiercer, then suddenly came to an abrupt stop. All the witches then focused all their attention on the woman.

The witches approached her. They did a rhythmic chant while one member of the coven placed her palm on the woman’s forehead. The woman then stood up and danced spiritually to the sound of a pulsating beat coming from a drum that a witch was playing. She was like a wild, timid animal as she danced. It was hypnotic. Her eyes flashed as they were directed toward the flames, and her body movements were graceful at times. Other times, they were quite wild. Valenzuela felt entranced by her beauty and mysterious ways.

A tall, dark figure in a red robe then approached her. The woman walked up to the figure and then removed the red robe from their body. Under the robe stood a man with devilish-looking eyes and spiky black hair. His eyes glowed red. The woman then offered her body to him. She seduced him by stroking his muscular chest—kissing his full, sultry lips—and neck. His fingernails then turned to claws, and horns grew from his head. The scary transformation did not frighten the woman.

They moaned as he pushed her down on the long, flat rock. She wrapped her long, slender legs around him. Her hips began to pulsate as they started to have violent sex. The demonic male figure scratched her smooth, milky-white skin with his claws as she squealed. Officer Valenzuela couldn’t tell whether she was in pain or was feeling pleasure from the wild sex. The witches watched with amusement until it was over before dancing once again. Their arms flapped and their feet pounded the ground rhythmically. Valenzuela’s heart was beating wildly, and he was feeling aroused as he imagined himself being the one making love to the woman.

The man put back on his robe, walked away from the ritual, then disappeared into the woods. The woman slowly rose from the rock. She suddenly transformed into the same beast as the male she had sex with. She, too, grew claws, a couple of horns on her head, and her eyes glowed red. She then leaped up with great force, moved about wildly, snarled, and growled. It appeared she was now the high priestess of the coven. Officer Valenzuela was completely astonished.

One of the officers was frightened when the high priestess’s eyes beamed in the officer’s direction. The officer believed she had spotted them. He held up his gun at the devilish woman and pulled the trigger without even thinking about the consequences. Bullets flew in the air toward the high priestess, but they narrowly missed her. She growled ferociously and started to charge toward the officer. Several more shots sprung out. She managed to duck under the bullets and leaped out at the officer. More policemen shot at the woman as she sunk her claws into the police officer’s chest, who screamed out in agony. Minutes later, the officer was lying on the ground dead. Officer Valenzuela’s heart was broken when he saw the young officer on the ground. It was always a sad day when an officer died during duty. He was going to have to be the one to tell his family that he died.

Just before a group of policemen could reach the woman, she vanished off into the woods, leaving them dazed and confused. Police officers then ran toward the Night Shadow Circle members with handcuffs and guns in their hands. Luckily, the witches did not have their wands with them to cast any spells on them. A few of the witches were arrested and two were fatally shot. Several others managed to escape.

Despite feeling traumatized by the overall experience, Officer Valenzuela was happy they had footage of what had happened. It would be used as evidence against the coven. The police searched all over the woods to find the mysterious male who was wearing a red ceremonial robe, but not a single trace of footprints, a lock of hair, or even a thread from the red robe were to be found. They couldn’t figure out where this demonic man had come from or where he had vanished off to. It was as if they were living an episode of the show *Unsolved Mysteries*.

The police were left dumbfounded by how the coven was turning young women into demonic beings. *Is it a spell, or are we being visited by the Devil himself, and is he transforming us into demons?* they wondered. They were facing some sort of paranormal activity in the woods. They couldn’t figure out what their next move would be.

The following day, Officer Valenzuela was viewing the footage of the freakish events from last night in the woods. He then zoomed in on the witches’ faces. Valenzuela was left shocked when he came across a familiar face. He couldn’t believe his eyes when he saw it. The face either belonged to Tara or Brianna Rush. *How did she get out of the hospital when I have police officers guarding her room all night?* he wondered. It had to have been Brianna. She was the only one of the two who had the freedom to attend the ritual. This meant that Jesse Taylor could be in danger by staying over at Brianna’s house.

He had to contact him immediately to warn him about the possible great danger he was facing. Officer Valenzuela quickly dialed Taylor’s cell phone number. It rang once, then twice. He was relieved once he heard Taylor’s voice after the phone had rung a third time.

“Hello!” Taylor answered.

“Hi, this is Officer Valenzuela,” he said. “Jesse, you need to get out of that house. The police were at last night’s Night Shadow Circle ritual. We witnessed something unexplainable. There was a male demonic figure who seduced a young female and somehow transformed her into a horrendous monster after making passionate and violent love to her. We believe she is the new head priestess because she is exactly how you described the head priestess that had attacked you at your home.

“One of the officers was afraid of her and began shooting at her, which led her to attacking and killing him. We tried to kill her by shooting at her from every angle, but she managed to escape. However, we do have a few of the Night Shadow Circle members in custody. They are not willing to talk to us about the events that took place last night. Luckily, we had video surveillance all over the area. While I was viewing the footage, I saw Brianna among the coven members. She is a witch, and she could be after you.”

“Are you sure?” Taylor asked. “She was with me most of the night. I would have known for sure if she had left the home in the middle of the night. I sleep downstairs in the living room, so I could have heard her open and close one of the doors to go out.”

“Was she at her home at midnight?” Officer Valenzuela asked.

“I think so,” Taylor said. “I don’t know for sure. I was in a deep sleep, and as far as I know, she did not get out of bed during that time. I do know she got up around 5 o’clock to exercise. She had acted normal at the time, like nothing unusual had happened overnight.”

“She may have snuck out late last night without you knowing about it,” Officer Valenzuela said. “You need to have your guard up. You could be in danger.”

“Okay, Officer,” Taylor said. “Thanks for letting me know, but I don’t believe she had been at the ritual. It could be someone who looked like her and Tara.”

“Well, I hope you are right,” Officer Valenzuela said. “I still need to take her into custody for questioning. As of right now, she is a suspect. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Keep me posted, Officer, and take care,” Taylor replied. “Bye!”

“I will,” Officer Valenzuela said. “Bye!”

Taylor’s hands had begun to shake as he hung up his phone. He didn’t want to believe Officer Valenzuela, but he couldn’t take any chances. He had to leave and stay in a location where the coven couldn’t find him. Taylor was beginning to think that it was Brianna he had been dreaming about nearly every night. His dreams were warning him to stay clear of her. Tara was in the hospital with injuries, so it couldn’t be her. Or could it?

He checked his phone and noticed he received a text message. It was from Brianna. She was asking if he wanted to meet up for lunch. Taylor texted back, saying he was too busy at work and that he only had time to pick up something fast and eat it at work. She sent him a sad face emoji in response to the message. Taylor felt bad and did not want to hurt her, but his life was far more important now.

Taylor couldn’t believe he was behind enemy lines and what he was up against. Brianna seemed perfectly harmless. She was always so caring and loving. Now, he didn’t know how he was going to escape her. He had been developing feelings for her, so now it was going to be hard to let her go and move on without her. He was not ready to do that. Taylor felt like his whole world was beginning to crumble all around him. He thought life could be so cruel sometimes. Just as he thought he was beginning to turn his life around, a new obstacle had presented itself to him.

Luckily, he was caught up with his work, so he could leave work earlier. He would be able to sneak out of the office while Brianna was working to gather all his stuff and check into a hotel outside of Salem, somewhere that she would never expect. He knew that Brianna might be at the house eating lunch, so he waited until after lunch to go pick up his belongings.

He was able to make a reservation at Harbor Light Inn in Marblehead. It seemed like a cozy place for him to stay in and possibly get some of his work done there as well, judging by the pictures of the Inn on the Internet. Taylor thought it was a good opportunity to get out of Salem. It was not safe for him to be there anymore, especially with Brianna, Tara, and the Night Shadow Circle around. It also would be a nice change of scenery. It wasn’t often that he would leave Salem. He was a bit of a homebody.

About an hour after picking up a sandwich at a deli near the newspaper office, he snuck out of the office to go get his stuff from Brianna’s house. Several thoughts whirled around his mind. He drove past her house at first to make sure she wasn’t home before pulling up into the driveway. When he noticed that none of the lights inside the home were on and her car wasn’t parked in the driveway, he knew it was safe to come to the house.

He drove around the block one more time, then parked his car in the driveway. He quickly got out of his car, skedaddled across the front lawn, and headed up to the front door. He was so confused and frightened by what was happening to him that it was hard for him to even put the key into the lock. His hands shook as he turned the knob on the door. He took a quick glimpse into the home before proceeding into the house.

He scrambled over to his few suitcases and bags that were put in a closet in the hallway. Taylor quickly packed a few things without even thinking. After loading up the trunk, he locked Brianna’s front door, placed the key in an envelope, and placed the envelope in her mailbox. He didn’t leave a message about why he was leaving. Taylor still didn’t want to believe that Brianna was a witch. He was hoping that Officer Valenzuela was wrong about it.

Taylor rode back to the office to finish his workday. He only had two hours of work left. Taylor felt like time was at a standstill. He would consistently check the clock for the time. Taylor knew it wouldn’t be long until Brianna started leaving him messages asking him why he had left and what she had done wrong. He felt terrible for not leaving an explanation, but he was afraid that he might hurt her if she found out that he thought she was a witch and that he didn’t trust her.

Once his time was up, he grabbed his laptop and left the office in a hurry. He drove straight to the Harbor Light Inn. His phone kept ringing as he was driving on the highway to Marblehead, but he did not answer. Taylor knew right away who was trying to contact him. It was Brianna. He kept his phone on in case a source or someone from work called him. He would see Brianna’s name displayed on his phone each time she tried to call. The guilt was starting to sink in, and he began to feel hurt. Taylor didn’t expect to feel this way again. He thought for sure that he would never, ever let any woman break his heart again.

He pulled off the road to go to a convenient store to get gas and use the restroom. He listened to his voice mail first while he was parked at the gas pump. Sure enough, it was Brianna crying and asking him why he had left. She was begging him to come back. He hated leaving her without even saying goodbye, but he could not take any chances. Taylor knew it was the right thing to do. There was another message from Brianna asking him why he was not picking up his phone. She begged and pleaded with him to answer the phone. It broke his heart to hear her this way. He now realized that he wasn’t the only one with a broken heart.

He was relieved when he finally reached the inn. Taylor needed some alone time after so much had happened to him. He turned off his cell phone, watched some television, ate take-out food, then went to bed with a broken heart. He had trouble sleeping throughout the night because of his guilty conscience about what he had done to Brianna, but it was the last of his worries.

Chapter 10

Brianna couldn’t sleep after Taylor left her. She buried her face in her pillow and continued weeping. Brianna didn’t know what she had done to cause him to leave her so abruptly. She then heard police sirens and a knock on the door. She looked out the peephole on her door. It was Officer Connor Valenzuela. She quickly opened the door.

“Why, Officer Valenzuela, what brings you here at this time of night?” she asked. “Is everything all right? Did something happen to Jesse? He left the house with no explanation. I have been so worried about him.”

“Ma’am, you’re coming with me,” he said. “You are under arrest. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you. Do you understand the rights I have just read to you? With these rights in mind, do you wish to speak to me?”

“I don’t understand what I have done wrong,” Brianna said. “I just came home and noticed that Jesse had packed his baggage, then left without leaving me a letter or a message about why he was leaving. I haven’t done anything wrong, Officer. You’ve got to believe me.”

“We’ve got surveillance footage of you being a part of the Night Shadow Circle ritual that involved the death of Officer Josiah Guerra from last night,” Officer Valenzuela said. “There was also some paranormal activity in the footage that we would like you to explain.”

“But I was not at the ritual last night,” Brianna declared. “There must be some kind of mistake. It had to have been my sister in the footage. She is the one that joined the Night Shadow Circle coven. Not me!”

“How can that be?” he asked. “I had four officers standing outside of her door at the hospital. They would have seen your sister leaving the hospital. They had been keeping a close eye on her.”

“She had to have cast some spell on them,” Brianna said. “My sister is crafty that way. You cannot trust her. There must be some footage of her sneaking out of the hospital. Besides, I was the one that asked you to protect her. Also, I had closed the store last night. You can even ask the other employers at Utopia Galore. They would know.”

“As of right now, we are taking you into the office for questioning,” the officer said. “We will review surveillance footage from the hospital afterward. If she did sneak out, there had to have been witnesses inside or outside of the hospital. I am not saying that I don’t believe she used magic to get out. The most logical thing that could have happened is you being at the ritual at this moment, but I am going to need an alibi to back up your story.”

“Okay, Officer, but I can assure you it is my sister that you need to be concerned about and not me,” she said. “You still haven’t said anything about Jesse. Is he okay?”

“Yes,” Officer Valenzuela answered. “I told him earlier in the day that you were our primary suspect in this case as of right now. That is why he left in a hurry without an explanation. You can’t blame the guy. He is frightened after being attacked and stalked by the Night Shadow coven. He is just doing this as a precautionary step.”

“Oh, no!” she cried out. “How am I going to make him believe that I am not a witch? I would never hurt him in any way. The whole point of him staying with me is to keep him away from the Night Shadow!”

“Ma’am, you’re going to have to let us take you in now,” the officer told her. “If what you are saying is true, then you have nothing to worry about. For the time being, you are a suspect, and we have orders to arrest you.”

She calmly allowed the officers to handcuff her and escort her to the police car. Brianna now understood why Taylor was frightened, packed up his things, and left. Officer Valenzuela must have contacted him and told her she was involved in the ritual last night. She was saddened by her sister’s behavior and how it led up to her arrest. Now, Brianna had to prove to the cops that she was not there. Plus, she had to find a way to earn Taylor’s trust and get him back.

As the police car sped off, Brianna was beginning to feel like her sister had betrayed her. She tried to keep calm the entire time. Brianna remained optimistic that they would soon find out she had nothing to do with the murder of the officer and that she was nowhere near the site of the ritual as it was taking place. The police car sirens were going off the entire time, and she could see people looking at her through the windows with utter dismay. If only they were aware of her innocence. *Will anyone believe me?* she wondered. Brianna doubted it.

Meanwhile, Tara was at the hospital eating food that was anything less than delicious. She miserably took another bite of the slimy lime Jell-O on her tray. Tara could not believe she easily tricked the cops into believing it was Brianna at the Night Shadow Circle ritual last night. Her magical skills had come in handy. Also, forming a pact with the coven and the Devil himself was quite beneficial. Brianna had no idea it was her who called Police Chief Lewis Huber and told him that Brianna was posing as her at the Night Shadow Circle ritual because she had become obsessive about being just like her. The police chief had called her up last night to confirm it was Brianna in the surveillance footage taken at the ritual. Naturally, she said yes. Tara also said she knew the Night Shadow Circle had been planning something major that night. As soon as she told him that, Huber sent out an officer for Brianna’s arrest. The police chief promised not to tell Brianna that she had told him it was Brianna in the footage.

It was clever how she cast the guards outside her hospital room under a sleeping spell and made herself invisible as she snuck out of the hospital. She made sure there wasn’t any evidence of her ever leaving the hospital behind. Tara magically cleared her tracks and erased anyone’s memory who saw her leaving the building. Not one of them had any recollection of her ever leaving her room. It was a brilliant strategy.

Tara knew what she did to her sister was wrong, but a witch’s work was never done. At times, drastic measures had to be taken. Soon, the Night Shadow Circle would fulfill their master and savior, the Devil’s, commands in order to gain more power. Her sister, sadly, was merely a pawn. Tara had no remorse over what she had done to Brianna. For once, she would be the one to come up on top. Tara refused to continue being in her sister’s shadow. The coven and she orchestrated her attack before Brianna even moved into Salem and helped her start the business Utopia Galore. Everything has been according to plan so far. They made sure there were no loose ends in the plan.

Brianna was always the good one. Their parents thought of Brianna more highly than Tara. Brianna had always got what she wanted, unlike Tara, who was considered the rebel, the outcast, and overall, the bad one. It was Tara’s turn to call the shots. Soon, she and her sisters of the witch coven would reign over all of Salem while her sister would spend the rest of her life behind bars. It’s such a shame for her sister, but it was time for payback for getting all the glory while they were growing up, Tara thought.

Tara felt like she owed her sister no apology for all the hell she put her through. The only person who may suspect her of being at the ritual and orchestrating the attacks against Jesse Taylor is Taylor himself. She had been telepathically visiting him in his dreams. She wanted him to fear her sister and suspect her of being the one haunting him in his dreams. Tara didn’t expect her sister to bring him to the hospital to visit her. Tara was hoping that he would never find out that Brianna had a twin sister. He could be the only person that could stand in her way.

For now, she had to continue playing the innocent victim and fooling everyone by casting a spell on them. Sooner or later, Tara knew people would begin to suspect her of foul play. She couldn’t stay in the hospital forever. For now, the only thing she had was playing the blame game with her sister.

At the police headquarters, Officer Connor Valenzuela was showing footage of the ceremonial ritual to Brianna. She was stunned by the events that transpired at the Night Shadow Circle ritual. Officer Valenzuela then zoomed in on the face that looked like hers. She knew right away it was her sister. Brianna pointed to a large brown mole that was on the suspect’s left arm and then pointed to her left arm to the officer to show him that she did not have that mole. She also told Officer Valenzuela that her sister had a mole the same shape and size on that arm. Valenzuela observed both arms very carefully to see if what she was saying was true.

“You do raise a valid point,” he said. “I will take note of this, but first I am going to have someone take a photo of your arm for proof.”

“I swear, Officer, that is not me,” she pleaded. “It is my sister. She cast a spell on those guards outside of her hospital room. There has got to be footage from the hospital of her sneaking out of the hospital. I’m telling you, my sister is a crafty one!”

“That may be so,” he said. “We will need to find more evidence in order to get you off the hook. Do you have an alibi?”

“Jesse was there the entire time that night while I was sleeping,” Brianna said. “I admit I was having trouble sleeping, so I got up and took a walk around the neighborhood to get some fresh air and to clear my head of everything that has been bothering me. He must not have known that I had left the house. When I got back, I took a shower, then went to work early. Wait a minute! There’s a security camera in the store. You can call my cashier tomorrow morning. Her name is Tilly Jacobson. She can release the footage from that morning when I arrived early.”

“We will send someone over to watch it,” officer Valenzuela said. “Also, we might be able to get some footage from the cameras that are set up at some of the intersections in town. We might be able to prove that you were out taking a walk during the time of the crime.”

“Does Jesse know that I’m in jail?” she asked.

“We have not contacted him yet about your arrest,” he said. “In fact, I don’t even think that I told him that the police department would be arresting you. We will be contacting him soon to let him know.”

“Can I call him and let him know about it instead?” Brianna asked. “I would much prefer him hearing it from me first.”

“Yes,” Officer Valenzuela said. “He may be frightened of you, though, since I told him about your possible involvement in the ritual. He told me he didn’t believe it, but obviously he did, or else he would not have left your house with all his things.”

“Yes, I am well aware of that, Officer,” she replied. “I remembered you told me about it earlier. I understand that he may never want to speak to me ever again, but he still deserves to hear it from me. Hopefully, he will allow me to explain it all myself. How can I ever get him to trust me?”

“If he really loves you, he will listen to you,” he said. “I’m sure he will be at least willing to hear your side of the story. It might take him awhile to work up the courage to pick up the phone and talk to you again, but I know he eventually will.”

“I sure hope you are right about that, Officer,” Brianna said. “I don’t want to lose him.”

Officer Valenzuela then led her to the phone to call him. She nervously followed him. Brianna wasn’t quite sure of what she was going to tell him. This was so like her sister to take every bit of happiness from her, including sabotaging her love life.

Chapter 11

Taylor was awakened by the ringing of his cell phone. He couldn’t figure out who would be calling him at midnight. Taylor didn’t recognize the phone number, but he knew he had to answer the phone because it could be his editor or a source calling him about some breaking news. He cleared his throat before answering.

“Hello!” Taylor said while he was trying to wake up, so he could comprehend what was being told to him. He was extremely exhausted from all the excitement earlier in the day.

“Jesse, it’s me!” Brianna responded. “It’s Brianna. I was calling to let you know that I was arrested for being involved in a witch ritual that took place last night. It was not me there! It was my sister! You’ve got to believe me. I’ve been framed. My sister and the Night Shadow Circle are up to no good.”

“Why should I believe you?” he asked.

“Because I would never lie to you, Jesse,” she said. “I love you. You don’t know what my sister is capable of. I have always been our parents’ favorite, and she absolutely can’t stand it. Tara wants to ruin me so she can get her revenge. She got herself mixed up in the wrong crowd. I also believe I have an alibi, and there is surveillance in the neighborhood that proves I was not there.”

“I am having real trust issues right now, and I really do want to believe you, but I just can’t,” Taylor said. “I’ve only just met you. It would be completely careless of me to believe every word you say to me. I do know one thing, and that one thing is that I have fallen in love with you. In my heart, I believe you are innocent. However, my mind is telling me to steer clear of you until I have further proof that you were not there just to be safe.”

“That, I can understand,” Brianna said. “But you have got to trust me. Many lives could be at stake. I need you to go check on my sister and try to get as much information as you can from her. Also, somebody from the hospital must have seen her leave or come back in. I know you are a reporter, so you must know how to uncover the truth by doing research and questioning witnesses or sources close to the accused.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” he replied. “Are you in jail now?”

“Yes, I am calling you from the jail right now,” she said. “Will you please come and visit me tomorrow? I am frightened. There are some real scary women in here. I’m afraid to say anything to the inmate that I share a cell with. She seems like a real bully.”

“I’ll visit you as soon as I get out of work,” Taylor said. “I’ll make a few calls tomorrow and see what I can find out about Tara and the Night Shadow Circle. Maybe I can find out enough to prove your innocence. In the meantime, sleep tight and try your best to protect yourself by avoiding any communication or contact with anyone. I will try to get you out of there as soon as I can.”

“Thank you so much!” Brianna said. “I will see you tomorrow. Have a good night.”

“You, too,” he said.

Taylor was too tired to fully comprehend what he had just been told. He sluggishly rubbed his eyes and went back to sleep. Taylor needed to be fully rested in order to properly investigate the situation with what happened at the ritual and if it really was Tara at the ritual and not Brianna. He was still feeling unsure about Brianna’s innocence. If she was, indeed, innocent, he would feel massive guilt for not bailing her out. Taylor knew he had to be sure first. His eyelids begin to feel heavy. He slowly drifted back to sleep. Taylor mustn’t worry about it right now. He needed to concentrate on getting some sleep.

The following morning, while well-rested, Taylor came to realize that the phone call from Brianna was real and that he needed to find out the truth behind who was at the ritual. After all that he had been through, anything was possible. Tara may have been the sister at the ceremonial event, but there was only one way to find out. He was going to do his own investigation. If there was a demon lurking about, there very well be a person who has the magical ability to leave the hospital unnoticed. She was a witch, after all. If so, he had to save the woman that he loved. But first, he had to get to work and focus on getting his stories done.

In between work, he called the hospital to find out who was on duty during the night of the Night Shadow Circle ritual. He also asked if it was possible to view the surveillance footage of that night. The receptionist said that she would get back to him and that she had to talk to her manager first before releasing any information. Taylor was agitated but knew it was standard procedure. He left his name and phone number for her. Taylor realized that he had to be patient with the receptionist, that it did no good to argue with her, and that he should feel lucky enough that she would even do it for him. He was in a hurry to get to the bottom of the situation.

It wasn’t until 2 o’clock that the receptionist got back with him. She had a list of guards, nurses, doctors, and receptionists who were present during the evening hours of the night of the ritual. She emailed the list to him. Taylor then asked about viewing the hospital footage. She told him that law enforcement would be viewing the footage and that he should contact them about what they found out. He thanked the receptionist. Taylor decided to start off by going to the hospital and finding some of the employees who may have seen Tara sneak out that night. He would do so first thing when he got off work. Afterward, he would try to visit Brianna and tell her everything that he found out.

After typing up a press release for tomorrow’s paper, Taylor was about twenty minutes away from leaving work. It was just enough time for him to type up a news brief. He sighed as he began typing vigorously. Taylor had a deep love for writing, but at times he just didn’t feel like doing it. Sometimes it had to do with what type of subject he was writing about. Press releases and news briefs weren’t exactly his thing. He enjoyed writing about exciting events and stories that required a great deal of creativity. He was happy that he was only minutes away from leaving. Once the news brief was typed up and turned in to the news editors, he gathered his things and headed out the door.

Taylor felt exhausted from the long day at the office and staying in contact with the hospital, but he knew he couldn’t let Brianna down. He also wanted to end being afraid of demons and witches and having to confront them. Taylor wanted to feel safe again at his home, and if Brianna was indeed innocent, he wanted to focus on spending a life with her. He was tired of being lonely. Brianna could be the cure for his loneliness.

He sped out of the *Salem News* parking lot and headed toward the hospital to question a few employees who were present the night of the ritual. Taylor drove so fast that it only took him about five minutes to get there. He then marched up to the receptionist desk. He figured since he was already there, he would start off his investigation by asking the receptionist a few questions.

“Are you sure you didn’t see Tara Rush walk past the receptionist desk?” Taylor asked.

“I’m sure of it,” she said. “I speak to everyone that passes by. I wouldn’t forget a face, and most certainly not Tara’s. We went to school together and were close friends. Both of us would get in trouble for talking to each other in the middle of class in elementary school. We also liked to goof off quite a bit in high school and stayed out late at night, going to parties and sneaking off with boys. Our parents frequently grounded us. Ever since she has been here, I have frequently visited her.”

“Are you aware that she is a member of the Night Shadow Circle, a witch coven?” he asked.

“Oh wow,” the receptionist said. “I always knew that she had a rebellious side, but I never imagined she would take part in something like that. I know she had her struggles at home with her parents, but she had never once mentioned becoming a witch, so this comes as a complete shocker to me. I can’t believe she never told me about that, with me being a good friend and all.”

“That’s interesting. Would it be possible she could leave the receptionist desk without being seen?” Taylor asked.

“We were awfully busy that night, so it was possible she could have,” the receptionist answered. “I was busy filling out paperwork, making copies, and filing documents. I asked the other receptionist here, and she said she didn’t see Tara walk past the desk either that night. She was helping patients check in and answering phone calls. I am sure she would have stopped by and said something to me if she had saw anything happening. It would be unusual if she hadn’t.”

“Well, thank you for all of your help,” he said. “I will let you get back to work. I’m sure you have a lot of work to do. I appreciate you for taking the time to talk to me. I need to ask a few more employees questions. Where can I find the nurse, Abby Green, who checked up on Tara?”

“I will call ICU and let Abby know you are heading up,” the receptionist said. “She might know of Tara’s whereabouts during that night. Abby checks up on her frequently. Just let me call her and check to see if she is available to talk to you. I know she would be willing to talk to you. She is a very sweet person, and she loves talking to people.”

Taylor watched as she dialed the number to the ICU. He listened to her tell Abby about him being there and that he had a few questions for her regarding Tara. Taylor heard her say that he was already there and that he was on his way up. The receptionist then told him that Abby was now available to talk and where he would find her. Taylor thanked the receptionist and then walked over to the elevator. He went up to the third floor. It was there that he saw a nurse with blond hair and blue eyes. She was short and appeared to be in her forties.

“Hi! I’m Abby,” the nurse told him. “You must be Mr. Taylor. I understand you are here to ask me a few questions about Tara Rush. I can try and help you. I cannot answer any questions involving her medical treatment or her health record, but for pretty much everything else, I am an open book.”

“I am, indeed, Mr. Taylor,” he answered. “Thank you so much for helping me. You see, there was a murder last night in the woods, and there is video footage that may have shown Tara present at the exact location during the time of the murder.”

“Oh, dear!” she exclaimed. “That’s awful news, and with all the latest disappearances and murders lately, too. Do you suspect she or her sister is the killer?”

“I’m not really sure, but it is possible that either one of them could have been involved with some of them,” Taylor said. “So, by what I was told, you were in the hospital at the time, and you had checked up on Tara about 9:30.”

“That is correct,” she answered. “I also came in with her medication about forty-five minutes later. I don’t see how it is possible that Tara had left the building, though. It would be nearly impossible unless she was somehow sneaky about it. We were full staff that night. Surely someone would have seen her. I still believe it was her identical sister, though. It makes logical sense.”

“I understand your theory,” Taylor replied. “But Tara has been involved with a witch coven who is responsible for the death of a police officer during a ritual. Tara is currently a member, and we believe she was there at the time of the murder. You may not believe me, and that is fine. I just want you to be aware there has been some unexplained activity in the area, and it seems witchcraft is behind it all. Therefore, anything is possible.”

“This all sounds so surreal,” the nurse said. “How do I know that this is some kind of a hoax?”

“I can assure you that it is not,” he said. “The police may come into the hospital and ask you and other employees a few questions themselves during the coming days about the situation. I’m telling you now just so you have a heads-up before the police come in and talk to you about it. At least you are now aware of the situation.”

“Well, is there anything else you need to know?” she asked while appearing uncomfortable with where the conversation was heading.

“Have you noticed anything suspicious about her?” he asked. “I mean, has she been acting strangely lately?”

“She has been a little on edge lately,” the nurse said. “We notice that she has been awake at odd hours of the night. Some employees have heard her talking in her room to some unknown entity during the late-night hours when she has no visitors. We are not sure if she is talking to herself or is talking to someone on the phone. Tara sleeps mostly during the daytime and gets up just to eat breakfast and lunch in between her daily sleeping rituals. Tara recently has requested that we not allow any visitors other than her sister to come see her.”

“Is she well enough to get out of bed and walk?” Taylor asked.

“She sure is, but she insists on being bedridden,” the nurse replied. “We don’t understand why. It’s quite the mystery. We were thinking the attack may have frightened her so much that she was now afraid to leave the hospital. We think she feels safer here where there is security on the premises. I mean, she could have been killed. If I was in her position, I would be afraid, too, that the person who had attacked me would come back and get me.”

“Have you ever seen her try to leave the room?” he asked.

“No, I haven’t,” she said. “I wouldn’t be surprised if she did because her behavior has been rather odd. Some other nurses and her doctor have sworn they have heard strange voices coming from her room, but no one has checked in at the registration desk to come visit her, and no one has seen anyone coming into her room or out of her room. The whole thing is super creepy. I have knocked on her door to ask her if everything was all right after hearing her talking to a mysterious thing or human being. She would shout out at us that everything was fine and that there was no need for us to come and check up on her.”

“And there is no way the windows can be open for someone to sneak into her room?” Taylor asked.

“None whatsoever,” she responded. “We have been keeping a close eye out on her to see if she has been sneaking anyone into her room. So far, we have not seen anyone.”

“Okay,” he said. “Well, thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate it. Now, can you tell me where I can find Philip Walker, the janitor?”

“I just saw him push his cleaning cart onto the elevator and taking it up to the fifth floor,” the nurse said. “Why do you need to see him?”

“He claims to be a witness of some bizarre occurrences during that night,” Taylor answered. “Walker told a few employees shortly after the occurrences what had happened. Everyone did not believe him.”

“How do you know all of this?” the nurse asked.

“Let’s just say I have some connections,” he said. “I am a news reporter, so I know many people throughout the community who are willing to talk to me.”

“Well, good luck with that,” the nurse said. “It was good meeting you, Mr. Taylor.”

“It was good meeting you, too,” he said. “I know this talk has been very awkward for you, and I am sorry for putting you in this position. I appreciate your willingness to talk to me. It will help me out tremendously.”

He then started walking down the hallway toward the elevator. He was most interested in hearing what he had to say. The janitor was the only person at the hospital who had claimed that he had seen anything during the time. Tara must not have known about his presence somehow, or else she would have had him under her spell just like all the other employees and visitors that night. He must have been hidden from her sight.

Taylor was beginning to feel as if he was working on an investigative piece for the newspaper with all the questioning he had been doing. If he was lucky, maybe he could dig up enough information on the cause of the recent increase in disappearances and mysterious deaths in the area. His news editor would want him to jump on the story immediately so the newspaper would get the latest scoop. He knew that Brianna would not approve of him including both her and her sister, Tara, in the story, but it would be unethical for him as a journalist not to. Brianna also understood that it was part of his job and there wasn’t much that she could do about it.

He stepped into the elevator and pressed the button to go up to the fifth floor. Taylor stood quietly as he was in the presence of a doctor and two people visiting a loved one in the hospital. After each stop on the elevator, there would be the sound of a ding. After the second ding, Taylor looked up and noticed he had reached the fifth floor. He patiently waited for the elevator doors to open and then calmly stepped out.

He then walked up to a nurse who was talking to a doctor in front of a patient’s room and asked where he could find the janitor, Philip Walker. She pointed in the direction of an empty patient room. Taylor noticed the door to the room was wide open and there was a pile of dirty linen in a hamper nearby. He quickly made his way to the room.

An old, scruffy-looking man was putting fresh linen on a bed. Taylor knew it had to be the janitor because no one else was in the room. He softly asked the man if he was Philip Walker so that he wouldn’t startle him. The janitor quickly turned his head and made eye contact with him.

“Yeah, what do you want?” Walker asked.

“My name is Jesse Taylor, and I was wondering if you had witnessed anything peculiar happening outside of patient room number 305?” Taylor asked. “We believe its occupant, Tara Rush, may have sneaked out of the room and cast a spell on anyone whom she confronted last night. The spell may have made them forget she ever left her room or made her invisible so that no one could see her.”

“Are you a cop?” Walker asked.

“No,” Taylor replied. “I am a friend of Tara’s sister. We believe Tara may have been involved in the recent murder of a police officer that took place during that night. Brianna is Tara’s identical twin sister. The police believe they had caught footage of either Tara or Brianna at the scene of the crime. Currently, Brianna is being held in a jail cell. She believes it is her sister that was involved. I am just trying to find proof of Tara’s whereabouts so that an innocent woman isn’t convicted of the crime. If you could tell me anything, it would be greatly appreciated.”

The janitor rubbed his chin and tilted his head. He then looked up at Taylor and gave him a stern look. Taylor could tell that he was thinking hard about whether he could trust him or not before answering his question. He then took in a deep breath and began to speak.

“What I am about to tell you will shock you,” Walker said. “I just want you to know that I am a man of the right mind. I also don’t do drugs, and I am not an alcoholic, so I was completely sober during the strange occurrence. You promise you won’t try and have me committed to a mental institution after you hear about my bizarre experience?”

“I promise,” Taylor said. “Trust me. You have my word.”

“I had just finished mopping the floor in the hallways,” Walker said. “It wasn’t until I went into the cleaning supply room when I noticed something unusual outside of Tara Rush’s room. It appeared the guards outside of her room were under a trance. Their eyes were wide open, they stood still, and they were in a half-conscience state. They also didn’t appear to acknowledge what was happening around them. Tara stepped out of her room in a black hooded robe and had a magic wand in her hand. There was a bright glow coming out of the tip of the wand. She walked up to each of the guards and cast another spell on them so they would fall into a deep sleep. They awoke from the trance with no recollection of what had happened after she had left the floor. I hid in the closet until she was gone. Her facial expression was frightening, and her eyes were very menacing. I was extremely lucky that she had no idea I was there at that moment, or else she could have put me in the same trance.”

“What time did this occur?” Taylor asked.

“It was around 11 o’clock,” Walker said. “Nearly all the patients were asleep and with their doors closed. After she had walked past the guards, she suddenly disappeared into thin air. All I could see was the first-floor button light up and the elevator doors opening. There was the sound of footsteps, then the ding of the elevator. I swear I have never seen anything like it. It was as if she was a ghost.”

“What did you do afterward?” Taylor asked.

“I went over to the guards and asked if they were all right,” Walker said. “They both said they were fine and that they were guarding Tara’s room as if nothing strange had happened to them. They didn’t appear to have felt anything at all after the spell. They were just in a trance. I then lied and told them that one of the nurses ordered me to go change the linen on Tara’s bed because she had spilled some of her drink on the bed. They didn’t say or do anything, so I walked past them and went into the room. As I went inside, I noticed that no one was in there. I went ahead and changed the linen on the bed anyway so the guards wouldn’t suspect anything.”

“So, did you tell the guards about what had happened?” Taylor asked.

“I tried to, but all the guards could tell me was ‘Tara is asleep in her bed’ over and over,” Walker said. “I waved my hands in front of their faces and tried to get their attention, but I couldn’t even get them to blink. They just kept standing up straight while gazing at the wall in front of them. It was so weird.”

“Did you do anything else?” Taylor then asked.

“Nope, I was ready to end my shift,” Walker answered. “I was so frightened that I had to get out of there. I didn’t want to be there when she returned. Who knows what she would have done to me had she known I was in her room after she had left?”

“You need to tell the police what you had told me,” Taylor pleaded. “An innocent woman is being held for a crime that she did not commit. I’m sure you would not want to live with a guilty conscience after sending an innocent person to prison.”

“What if they don’t believe me?” Walker said. “What if they think I am crazy?”

“They will believe you,” Taylor said. “Trust me. They have had a few strange occurrences happen to them as well. The police believed they had witnessed members of the Night Shadow Circle resurrect a demon and transform one of the witches into a high priestess. The high priestess charged at an officer and murdered him. That is why I am here.”

“Oh wow!” he said, stunned. “After what I had just seen, I can believe it. I am glad I had not witnessed anything like that.”

“Thank you for your help,” Taylor said.

“Yeah, anytime,” Walker replied.

Chapter 12

Taylor checked the time on his cell phone while he was walking across the parking lot to his car. It was 8 o’clock. He rushed over to the police station to tell them what he had found out from the janitor and that Brianna was innocent. Taylor figured by now the police had reviewed the surveillance video and that they would realize what the janitor was saying was true.

He called the police station first to let them know he was on his way to visit Brianna. Taylor also informed them that he had new information regarding the incident at the Night Shadow Circle ritual, which involved the death of a police officer, and that he would like to discuss it with both the police and Brianna. They told him they would contact Police Chief Lewis Huber and tell him to come to the police station to hear what he had to say. Taylor asked if law enforcement had reviewed the surveillance footage outside of Tara’s room in the ICU yet. Taylor found out that they reviewed it and had witnessed some bizarre occurrences take place during the same night of the ritual. He was relieved that they did find something unusual. If the footage included Tara leaving her room, it would be enough evidence to prove that Brianna was not involved in the crime.

Taylor stopped at a convenience store to pick up a soda because his lips had become parched after talking so much. He was so excited about the recent developments and his newfound information that he nearly walked out of the store without his change. From there, he zoomed over to the police station. He could not wait to see the footage caught by the hospital surveillance cameras during the night. Tara snuck out to tell the police everything that was told to him by the hospital employees who had worked that night.

When he arrived at the jail, Taylor went through security and was led to the visiting room, where Brianna was waiting for him. The police chief escorted him. Taylor cleared his throat, then spoke excitedly about what he found out from the janitor, the nurse, and the woman at the receptionist desk. The police were surprised to find out that the receptionist personally knew Tara. They were jotting down everything that Taylor was telling them in their notebooks.

“Everything you just told us matches with what happened in the surveillance footage,” Police Chief Lewis Huber said. “We will investigate the matter some more. It looks as though Tara had snuck out of the hospital and quite possibly attended the ritual, based on the footage that we’ve seen. Brianna, do you know of anyone who would have an alibi for you?”

“Well, I did close up the store that night,” Brianna told the police chief. “I closed the store about 10 o’clock, then I stopped at the Sunoco Gas Station to pick up a cup of coffee at about 10:30 p.m. As I pulled up into the driveway, I waved hello to my next-door neighbor, Emma Gardner, who happened to be sitting outside on her porch. She is a friendly old lady who recently lost her husband. She sometimes has problems falling asleep at night, so she sits out on her porch and looks up at the stars. Maybe she could tell you that I was at home that night. If I left the house, she would have for sure seen me. I also mentioned earlier that I went out for a walk shortly after midnight to get some fresh air and that there might be street cameras to prove it.”

“Do you by any chance have your neighbor’s phone number?” the police chief asked her.

“Yes, I do,” Brianna replied. “Does anyone have a pen and paper so that I can write down the phone number and her name?”

The police chief chuckled because all the officers had been writing down notes with a pen in their notebooks. She laughed, too, because it was so obvious. One of the officers handed over a sheet of paper and pen. Brianna quickly wrote down the number, then handed over the paper with her neighbor’s phone number on it to the police chief.

“This might help us get enough evidence to let you go, Miss Rush,” Police Chief Lewis Huber said. “If everything you say is true, we could have you out of here in less than a week. As far as your sister’s fate is concerned, that is another story. It is becoming more and more evident that your sister is involved in this crime. If that is the case, I am so sorry. We know just how much your sister means to you.”

“Mr. Taylor, thank you for alerting us with this newfound evidence,” the police chief told him. “We will get in touch with the both of you soon. I’ll let you have a moment to talk amongst yourselves. I’m sure you have a lot to say to each other. Have a good evening, the both of you.”

“Thank you,” both Taylor and Brianna said simultaneously.

“You do the same as well, Officer,” Taylor said.

Police Chief Lewis Huber then walked off to let the two of them talk in private. Brianna’s face lit up because she knew she wouldn’t have to stay in her jail cell much longer, and it was all thanks to Jesse Taylor and soon her neighbor. She owed them a great deal of gratitude. With the video footage, they now had actual proof. Brianna was also very disappointed in her sister for putting her through all of this.

“Thank you so much for doing all of this for me, Jesse,” Brianna said. “I hope you can now believe me that I am innocent and that you will never catch me involved in something like that. If you need more proof, I can give it to you.”

“Brianna, I now believe you that you were not at the ritual,” he said. “I can’t be entirely sure that you are what you say you are because I don’t know much about your background. Throughout time, though, we can learn more about each other. I want to say I trust you entirely, but not quite yet. I hope you understand.”

“I understand,” Brianna told him. “I know we just met. You can’t expect anyone to trust someone after knowing them for a short period of time. It takes time to build a relationship, and I am all for that.”

“Exactly,” Taylor replied. “I am so glad that we are both on the same page in the matter. It also shows we have something else in common. I like the idea that we are slowly developing our relationship and not rushing into anything. It shows that we are fully committed to the relationship. Hopefully, you can get out of here soon. I miss you.”

“I miss you, too,” she responded. “It’s so lonely here at night. Nobody trusts each other around here, and with good reason. Some of the cellmates are locked up here for violent crimes and even murder. I hope being in jail for a crime I didn’t commit doesn’t damage my record. I would like to go back to working in a library. I don’t want to have anything to do with Utopia Galore or the Night Shadow Circle anymore. The idea of selling products to witches or having anything to do with them is appalling.”

“I can believe it,” Taylor said. “I would not want to be put in your shoes at all. I deeply sympathize with you. You are a good person, Brianna, and you don’t deserve any of this. If proven innocent in the court, I believe you will have a clean slate after all of this, and your no-good sister, along with the rest of the Night Shadow coven, will be behind bars.”

“Thank you,” she said. “That is nice to hear, especially during a time like this. I’m glad to hear someone believes me and offers me the support that I badly need. I am being wrongfully accused of a crime that I did not commit. It really hurts me that my sister would do this to me. I have always been good to her.”

“She isn’t worthy of your love,” Taylor said. “You deserve so much more. Also, I want to apologize for not coming to your rescue sooner. It was rotten of me to skip town without telling you, but Officer Connor Valenzuela was so sure it was you at the Night Shadow Circle ritual that I began to believe him. I was frightened at the time, and I didn’t want to wait until something bad happened to me.”

“It’s okay,” Brianna said. “I would have done the same. Before you go, I want you to stay far away from your house and my house. Also, keep a close eye out for my sister. You saw what she was capable of in the surveillance footage. She is lurking out there and waiting to attack again.”

“I will try my best, my love,” Taylor replied. “I hate to leave you this way, but I really must go. Unfortunately, I must go to work tomorrow, and I need my rest. Also, I am absolutely famished. Please, give me a call if you need anything.”

“I will,” she said. “Have a good night!”

“You, too,” he said.

Brianna waved at Taylor with tears streaming from her eyes. Taylor turned his head back and smiled at her as he headed out of the visiting room. He hated seeing her this way. He watched a guard escort her back to her cell.

He picked up some fast food on the way back to his hotel room. He kept visualizing the sadness on Brianna’s face in his mind. Taylor just wanted to hug her and comfort her. Ever since her arrest, he had begun feeling lonely all over again.

He missed her laugh and smile. He missed having someone to go home to and to be able to share what was happening in his life. Brianna filled the void that was in his life. He went from having date nights to picking up fast food from burger joints and eating all alone in a hotel room. A part of him wanted to turn around and drive back to the jail and take her away from that godforsaken place. They were so close now to revealing the truth and proving her innocence. He could not wait for her release. Soon, they would be together again.

Chapter 13

Police Chief Lewis Huber wasted no time in sending out police officers to arrest Tara Rush. Huber alerted the police officers guarding the outside of her room that they were coming over to arrest her and to make sure that she didn’t leave the premises. The officers knocked on Tara’s door to see if she would let them come in. She told them it was fine. They came in and asked her if she was doing fine, and she told them she was while several more police officers arrived and swarmed the hospital. They then left the room and waited for more officers to arrive.

The officers standing outside of Tara’s room signaled to the police officers arriving that she was inside and was unarmed. The officers arriving quietly gathered around outside Tara’s room and stood outside the door with their guns raised, waiting for their cue to enter the room. The police officers guarding her room also raised their guns. One officer gestured to the other three officers that he was about to open the door. The officers nodded.

He slowly opened the door and then peeked inside. There was complete silence. He then looked around the room, checking to see if Tara was waiting inside the room to attack them. When there didn’t appear to be an immediate threat, he charged into the room with the other officers following. They quickly searched the room. Tara was nowhere to be found.

“I thought you said she was inside!” one officer shouted out to the officers who had been guarding her room.

“We checked about ten minutes ago, and she was still in there,” one of the officers said with a puzzled look on his face. “I just don’t get it. She was sitting right here reading this book that is on this night table right here. Where could she have gone?”

“Quick, check the windows!” another officer said. “She may have found a way to escape that way.”

They were stunned when they found out the windows were securely closed and left untampered with. There was no way she had enough time to figure out how to open them and escape. A few police officers got down on the floor and checked under the bed while another officer searched the bathroom. They couldn’t figure out where she had gone. It almost seemed like she had just evaporated into thin air or something.

What they didn’t know was that Tara was invisible and standing next to the bed. She flashed a smile as she tricked the officers. One officer pulled out a walkie-talkie and shouted out something to the police chief.

“Hey, Chief!” he said on the walkie-talkie. “She isn’t here. Police Chief Lewis Huber, can you hear what I am saying? We believe she may have escaped.”

Everyone stood in silence as they waited for the police chief to answer. They couldn’t figure out what was taking him so long to respond. Then suddenly, they heard a noise. It sounded like someone was approaching them. There was the sound of footsteps, but they couldn’t figure out which way they were coming from. They felt an unknown presence in the room. One of the officers claimed a ghost may have breezed past him.

Tara then slowly tiptoed up to the officer on the walkie-talkie. She tapped his back lightly and gave a maniacal laugh just before she quickly exited the room and slammed the door. She then started running down the hall. The officers jumped up in fright as she passed them. The officer she snuck up on then dropped the walkie-talkie with his hands shaking, and his eyes widened.

“Hello?” Police Chief Lewis Huber could be heard saying through the speaker on the walkie-talkie lying on the floor loud and clear. “Will somebody tell me what’s happening?”

The officer standing next to the walkie-talkie was still in a state of shock. After a few minutes of the police chief trying to get an answer from them, the officer snapped out of it and then quickly picked up the walkie-talkie to respond to the police chief.

“Chief Huber, you won’t believe what just happened,” the officer said. “The suspect appears to have supernatural powers. She made herself invisible somehow, then snuck past us. She had a hysterical laugh before running and slamming the door behind her. How are we ever going to catch her? We don’t even know where she is!”

“Don’t worry, I know someone who is knowledgeable about witchcraft and the supernatural,” the police chief responded. “His name is Dr. Hector O’Neill. This is the type of opportunity he would love to take on. He spent some time in the Philippines studying the practice of Filipino witchcraft called Kulam. He learned about sorceresses and black magic while there.”

The officers stood around, completely speechless. This was a whole new problem that they had never faced. They were not sure if they could trust a person with knowledge of witchcraft. They wondered if this Dr. Hector O’Neill would end up being just as villainous as Tara Rush. However, Police Chief Lewis Huber had been with the police force for more than fourteen years, and he had always been of sound mind when coming up with solutions. He gained their respect and trust.

“What are you standing around waiting for?” the police chief shouted. “Quit talking to me on the walkie-talkie and go after her!”

They immediately headed out the door and took the elevator. By the time they got down to the first floor, Tara had already made it passed the entrance doors and was running across the parking lot. One officer shouted out they had seen her run out the doors and pointed out the direction she was heading toward. The officers sprinted toward the entrance doors.

Tara Rush’s hysterical laugh and footprints could be heard, then a window shattered in the parking lot. She had broken into a jeep, used her magic to turn on the vehicle, and sped away. Tara was still invisible to the public eye. People in the parking lot were spooked out by what they had just witnessed. They had never seen an invisible force smash the driver’s side window, unlock the door, and drive away. They swore they had just seen a ghost leave the hospital parking lot. Tara laughed as she drove past them and honked the horn. The sound of squealing tires and the horn startled them and caused them to jump up. Their jaws dropped as they had looks of disbelief on their faces. She drove past them so fast that they could feel a gush of air blasting at them as the car spun around them. People were now running frantically out of the parking lot to avoid getting hit by the jeep and police cars chasing the jeep. Complete chaos broke out in the hospital parking lot. People were grabbing ahold of their loved ones and screaming in fright while they were trying to get to a safe location. None of them were aware of what was happening.

Police continued to pursue the red jeep that was being driven by an invisible entity. Police Chief Lewis Huber issued a statement to the public warning them about the chase and to stay clear of the area. He also had a picture of Tara Rush aired on television and posted on social media to warn people that she was armed and dangerous. He asked viewers to report any sightings of Tara to help law enforcement track her down.

Tara looked back and noticed a couple of police cars were nearly driving on her tail now. She picked up the pace, then swerved in the opposite direction to throw them off. She then took a sharp turn in the middle of a busy intersection. On police car crashed into a streetlight. Another police car got stuck in traffic. Tara laughed maniacally. She was enjoying the thrill of the chase.

Tara zoomed past a red light. She headed toward the site of the witch rituals in the woods a few miles outside of Salem. Tara would be meeting with the new high priestess, Sophia Laforeze. She had to protect the high priestess in every way she could. It wasn’t Sophia’s fault that the police had sabotaged the ceremonial ritual that crowned her the new high priestess after having sex with the high priest. The officer that the high priestess murdered had to die because he wouldn’t stop shooting at her. Tara knew it was part of her elaborate scheme to get Brianna in trouble, so it was really her fault that the officers were there. She was now tired of playing the victim and acting like an angel. She sought her revenge; now, everyone was going to feel the wrath of the Night Shadow coven.

Tara was still a witch in training, but she would one day become powerful, and all her deepest desires would be fulfilled. Tara’s biggest desire was to become a high priestess, and protecting the current high priestess would help further her chances of becoming one. To Tara’s relief, she found that she had finally lost the police and now had a clear path to her destination.

It was now 1 in the afternoon. She was only about thirty minutes away from the coven’s meeting site. Tara checked her rearview mirror to make sure no one was following her. No one must know where their new ritual site was. They were no longer safe in the old one because the police had been investigating the area for days now. It was hard to find a new location because several locations were already being used by other witch circles.

Tara’s invisibility spell had finally worn off. She was now visible to the public eye, so she had to be careful about being seen now. She was sure there were photos of her posted on social media and broadcasted on the television because she was now a wanted woman. Tara continued to drive toward the meeting site while being on the lookout for law enforcement officers who may be in the area.

She almost missed her turn when her attention was turned to a herd of deer standing near a stream. A doe and her fawn were drinking water while a majestic-looking buck stood guard. A few other deer were eating in a grassy area under some pine trees. Tara watched in awe. She slowed down in case one of them tried to cross the highway so she wouldn’t hit them.

When she looked up, she saw her exit nearby. Tara was so distracted by the deer that she nearly missed it. She spun off the highway quickly and followed the dirt road that led her deeper into the woods. It had just rained, so as the wheels turned on the muddy road, mud splattered all over the jeep. Tara was worried about the jeep getting stuck out in the middle of nowhere. Fortunately, the jeep was able to maneuver its way through the messy road.

Minutes later, she spotted a black SUV parked at the end of the road near an old vacant house next to a couple of trees. Tara begrudgingly got out of the jeep and could hear a mushing sound as she walked across the mud until she was able to reach a grassy area. Her sneakers and lower pant legs were now covered with mud.

She walked about a mile until she reached the new sacrificial site, where several large boulders were lined up next to each other and formed a circle. There was a large stake in the center of a huge bonfire. High Priestess Sophia Laforeze had ordered a few witches to capture a male they could use for a human sacrifice. The blood of the human mixed in with a magical potion would give each of the members of the coven more magical powers and make them stronger. Soon, they would be strong enough to be immortal. Nothing would stand in their way.

The high priestess then magically appeared before her. Without thinking, Tara bowed down to the high priestess. She looked up at the high priestess in complete admiration. The high priestess was like the mother that she had never had.

“I just had another vision,” Sophia said. “Another one involving a young man named Jesse Taylor and a Dr. Hector O’Neill setting out to destroy us. You must not allow this to happen. We are not powerful enough to overtake them completely yet. We must complete enough human sacrifices in order to be all-powerful and immortalized. You must kill them both.”

“I know Jesse Taylor,” Tara responded. “He is dating my sister, Brianna. The previous high priestess was having the same visions. She came close to killing him when attacking him. He ended up killing her instead. We don’t know where he is currently residing, but I do know his place of employment.”

“Good,” Sophia said. “Now, go find him and kill him. If you succeed, I will reward you with powers that will exceed the other witches, and you, too, will someday become high priestess.”

“I will do my best,” Tara replied. “Thank you so much for trusting me with this mission. I swear I will not let you down, High Priestess. It is an honor to just be by your side.”

“I always knew you were my most loyal witch,” Sophia replied. “You have made me very proud.”

Chapter 14

Dr. Hector O’Neill was sitting in his study room researching defense against the dark arts in an old, dusty book. He was suddenly interrupted when his phone began to ring loudly. O’Neill checked his phone to see who was calling. He answered the phone once he realized it wasn’t a telemarketer calling. O’Neill recognized the number right away. It was one of his closest friends calling him.

“Hello?” O’Neill said.

“Hi, Hector!” Police Chief Lewis Harris responded. “How have you been doing? I know it’s been a long time since we last talked, but I have a small favor to ask you.”

“I’ve been keeping busy as usual,” O’Neill asked. “You know, doing research on the paranormal and the dark arts for my upcoming book. Lewis, what can I do for you? I knew it was you as soon as I saw your phone number flashing on my cell phone. You usually call when something is up, so what is it this time, Chief?”

“The police force needs your guidance on dealing with a high priestess of a witch coven called the Night Shadow Circle,” Police Chief Lewis Huber said. “We believe she and the coven are holding human sacrifices in order to gain power. We also believe that they are responsible for several of the recent murders and disappearances in Salem. Several of the officers attended one of these rituals one night and saw the high priestess transform into a grisly beast. One of the officers was frightened and began shooting at her. She then ran toward the officer and jumped out at him, killing him. We need someone with experience on how to stop her or, if necessary, destroy her.”

“There’s only one way to get rid of the high priestess, and that is to kill her,” Dr. Hector O’Neill replied. “Lucky for you, I have done plenty of research and learned through personal experience with fighting evil witches and sorcerers to know how. I usually charge people for this sort of stuff, but since we are friends, I’ll do it for you for free. Also, I have heard of some strange happenings in Salem that only could be done by an evil witch coven.”

“When can you come to the police station?” the police chief asked.

“I’ll come in tomorrow morning, let’s just say around 10 o’clock,” O’Neill answered. “Does that work for you?”

“That is fine,” the police chief said. “I will see you then. There will also be a person who has escaped the wrath of the former high priestess. His girlfriend’s twin sister is a member of the Night Shadow Circle, believe it or not, who we believe is involved in the human sacrifices done by the coven. We currently have her in custody because we originally believed that she was the one involved in a Night Shadow Circle ritual where a police officer was murdered by the high priestess. We now believe she is innocent after we got proof that her sister had left the hospital using magic to attend the ritual. They could be of some help to this matter.”

“Sounds like I got my work cut out for me,” O’Neill said. “This is the sort of stuff that I was trained to do. You can count on me to be there. Have a good evening.”

“You, too,” the police chief said. “Thank you for doing this. I don’t know of anyone else with this expertise that can take on this sort of case.”

“No problem,” O’Neill said. “I will see you then.”

“Okay, bye,” the police chief responded before they both hung up.

Dr. O’Neill put away his book on the dark arts and walked over to his cabinet filled with potions, tools, and weaponry to fight off wizards, witches, and evil spirits. He performed an exorcism last week. A wife and a mother of two children had been possessed by a demon spirit. Luckily, none of the family members were hurt. Her husband took the children over to a hotel to keep them safe from her. The husband had called him about a month ago about his wife’s odd behavior, especially late at night. He suspected that it was an evil spirit that had taken over her body because he kept hearing strange noises from her, and she would talk in a demonic voice in a threatening manner. Dr. O’Neill was so frightened that he took their two sons and left the house immediately. It took him several hours to perform the exorcism. The demon did leave the body, and the family could now live together happily and in peace.

He had just placed a bottle of holy water, a cross, and a copy of the Bible in the cabinet. In this case, neither of those would fight off the dark arts. He was going to need something much stronger, and for safety purposes, he was going to need other people with magical skills to help him combat the high priestess and her witch coven. Getting rid of evil witches and wizards was a bit trickier than someone who was possessed. Sorcery, magic, and witchcraft were powerful weapons. You must be prepared to go to battle with them by bringing your own magic with you.

He took out his messenger bag and placed a few items and his notebook that contained spells, fighting methods, and information about evil witches and sorcerers that he had jotted down. This hadn’t been his first time facing evil witches, and it wouldn’t be his last. It was a game of wit, and he was ready for the challenge. Dr. O’Neill couldn’t wait to meet his adversaries. He was ready to kick some witches’ asses.

Dr. O’Neil had been cooped up inside his home studying and writing in his upcoming book about the dark arts and how to defend oneself from it for way too long. His book was nearly completed. He was ready to use his defensive skills against the dark arts once again. It would be good for him to brush up on his skills. Dr. O’Neill was beginning to feel as if his services were no longer needed. He was thrilled to put his skills back to good use. This phone call was just what he needed to get him hyped up about his job again. Dr. O’Neil had been cooped up inside his home for way too long.

He then realized that he was very tired and needed his rest. It was important that he was well-rested and had enough strength to defeat a witch coven, especially the high priestess. The high priestess was one of the most powerful beings on Earth. It took a special person who was highly skilled and knowledgeable in the dark arts to overtake the high priestess. Dr. O’Neill was going to have to find a group with either witchcraft experience or train them himself. Dr. O’Neill had trained many people in witchcraft and the dark arts. Some of them became highly skilled magicians and went off to fight evil witches and sorcerers themselves. He was very proud of them.

Dr. O’Neill tried his best not to worry about it so he could fall asleep. He didn’t know why he let Police Chief Lewis Huber convince him to take on these extremely dangerous tasks, but then he realized there was no one else with his knowledge and skill in fighting the dark arts. Besides, he enjoyed doing it anyway. It gave him an adrenaline rush. He was one of those thrill seekers.

Police Chief Lewis Huber and Dr. Hector O’Neill had known each other since they were kids. Huber was always aware of O’Neill’s fascination with witchcraft, sorcery, and the supernatural through playing *Dungeons & Dragons* and reading the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series. As kids, they were both very adventurous. They loved riding their bikes on trails, going camping, telling spooky stories around a campfire during the night, and going to the arcade.

They spent so much time together that people began to wonder if they were brothers. It was amazing after all these years, they were still close friends. Occasionally, they would find the time to go out and get a beer together at the bar, where they would talk about all the good times they had together as kids and how times had changed since then. They both swore that they would get the heck out of Salem when they were in high school, but somehow managed to find themselves back in it.

They went to each other’s weddings, and their children grew up to be friends with each other. The two families became close-knit. Dr. O’Neill’s wife passed away three years ago from breast cancer. Huber was always there for him when he needed support after his loss. Dr. O’Neill’s and Huber’s children were now all grown up and going to college. Dr. Hector O’Neill wished he could find another love but felt like he was too old now to date. He also hadn’t quite gotten over his wife’s passing. It was good that he could still count on his best friend to offer him support when needed.

Lately, Dr. O’Neill has been feeling exceptionally lonely. It was nice to have a close friend to call or visit, but it just wasn’t enough. Life had changed considerably since his wife’s passing. His children were much too busy with their studies, classes, extracurricular activities, and life outside of college to come to visit him. Every time he tried to call them, he felt like he was interrupting what they were doing. About the only time he saw his children was during the holidays. Dr. O’Neill cherished every amount of time he got to spend with them, even if it wasn’t much.

All the excitement from hunting down witches would be just the ticket to getting out of his slump. It rejuvenated him, lifted his spirits, gave him a sense of purpose, and made him feel young again. Adventure and danger took his mind off all his worries. Dr. O’Neill made a vow that he wouldn’t let old age stop him from living an adventurous life and doing what he wanted to do. He believed that age was just a state of mind.

He quickly took a shower, put on his pajamas, then curled up under the blankets and drifted off to sleep. Dr. O’Neill knew he would have dreams of hunting down witches and killing them victoriously throughout the night. It was what he was good at. He could hardly wait to get started.

Police Chief Huber smiled after he got off the phone with his friend. He knew this was the sort of thing that he thrived on. Huber knew he had been mourning his wife and that he preoccupied himself all day alone in his house with his studies. It was time for Dr. Hector O’Neill to get out of the house and live his life fully again. It made him happy that he was able to give him that opportunity.

Chapter 15

The following day, Jesse Taylor received a phone call from Police Chief Lewis Huber. The police chief wanted him to meet with him, Officer Connor Valenzuela, and Brianna to talk about meeting Dr. Hector O’Neill and how he was an expert in witchcraft and sorcery. He also told Taylor how Dr. O’Neill was going to help with the case.

Taylor was relieved that someone with this type of knowledge would be willing to help them. He felt for sure that Dr. Hector O’Neill would be able to shed a little light on the matter but, most of all, put an end to all of this. Taylor tried not to have high hopes because he knew it was not going to be easy and that it may take a considerable amount of time. However, he was eager to hear what Dr. O’Neill had to say and what his plans were.

They were going to meet at 6 this evening at the Salem Police Station. It would be then when Taylor would try to bail Brianna out of jail. He was sure of her innocence now after hearing about the video footage showing Tara sneaking out of the hospital. Taylor would feel bad leaving her in jail longer. She needed to be home with him. He couldn’t fight the witches without her by his side. Taylor couldn’t wait to surprise her with the news and to see a great big smile spread across her face.

All throughout the day at the *Salem News* office, all he could think about was what life had been like without Brianna and currently being hunted down by witches. He kept wondering if he was happier back before he was a target for the Night Shadow Circle. Before all of it, Taylor was living a normal life. There was no excitement, no romance, and he was bored with all the mundane tasks and his less-than-thrilling job. Life had not been what he had expected it to be. Taylor wanted a life full of adventure, romance, and opportunities of a lifetime. Now, all of that was being presented to him and he wasn’t sure what to think of it. Parts of it were good, and other parts were bad. It was all becoming too much for him to handle. He now felt like he understood the expression “watch what you wish for.”

Taylor also felt like life had just given him the opportunity to have romance in it now that he had Brianna in the picture. He wanted to make the best of it. Taylor was eagerly waiting for someone to share his life with for quite some time. His loneliness was now beginning to fade. He wasn’t going to let that opportunity slip from his hands. It would be a complete waste if he did.

News got around about the midnight ritual and the officer who was killed at it, but the police did not mention anything about a high priestess or a witch coven at the ritual. They didn’t want to cause panic on the streets. Taylor had written a news story about it for today’s paper. Speculation about what really happened was already spreading all over the town. Taylor didn’t want to tell his news editor, Joel Robertson, that he was involved in the case. It would be considered unethical for him to cover the story because he was a conflict of interest. Someone else on the news staff would have to cover it. Plus, he was trying to avoid getting his name in the newspaper for being involved with the case.

The police did release photos of Brianna and Tara Rush to show they were suspects in the case. They did include in the story that they were still investigating to find out who else was involved in the crime. Taylor’s heart was broken to see Brianna’s face on the front page of the newspaper. He had hoped she would understand that it was not something that he wanted and that there wasn’t anything for him to do to prevent it from happening.

It would not be long until the police would be able to prove her innocence, though. Taylor would be so relieved to see her clear from the case and to write in an article that she was found innocent. He would be so happy to finally have a normal romantic relationship with her without all the fear and drama in their lives. Taylor didn’t like seeing her unhappy and being punished for a crime she did not commit. This was so unfair to her, and her sister should feel ashamed of herself for putting her through all of this. He could not wait for the police to arrest Tara and punish her heavily for all the crimes she had helped the witch coven commit.

He was startled and nearly jumped out of his seat when Robertson approached him at his cubicle. Taylor hated it when that happened. He had been on the edge for the past few months that even the slightest sound would make him fall right out of his seat from being easily frightened.

“Nice job, Taylor,” Robertson blurted out loudly. “I really like having a reporter with a nose for the news. You are a good example for the rest of the news staff.”

“Well, thank you, sir,” Taylor responded. “I have been working hard at getting more details on the case that I haven’t even thought about what kind of reception the story has been getting from the public. Your approval means so much to me.”

“Keep it up,” Robertson said before returning to his office. “I’ll let you get back to whatever it was you were doing.”

As soon as his editor left, Taylor picked up his cell phone to check the time and to make sure he hadn’t missed any messages. He sighed when he noticed he still had about another hour of work to do. Taylor spent the remainder of his time skimming through other local newspapers to help him get new ideas for stories. He was hoping to find another good story to cover that didn’t involve the disappearances and murders in Salem committed by the Night Shadow Circle. It was only a matter of time when the community was about to find out about the Night Shadow Circle and the crimes they committed. All of them should be behind bars.

After work, Taylor went to a coffee shop to help kill some time before he had to go to the police station. He could use another cup of coffee because he felt so tired from commuting to work, working on his story, and dealing with everything else happening in his life. He sat quietly at a table with his cup of coffee while reading the *New York Times*. He was skimming through book reviews when Taylor’s attention suddenly turned toward a young couple who had just walked into the coffee shop. He could hear them giggling and chatting amongst themselves. The man wrapped his arm around her waist as she was ordering her coffee. He then looked up at the cashier and ordered a macchiato with a gleam in his eye. They turned away from the cashier after paying her for their coffee and walked hand in hand to an empty table. They gazed into each other’s eyes, smiling warmly, and appeared to be completely enamored by each other. Taylor suddenly felt a hint of jealousy because he wanted to be so in love with someone like that. He quickly looked away when the couple noticed him looking in their direction. Taylor pretended he had been reading his newspaper the entire time so they wouldn’t know that he was staring at them.

Taylor then looked out the window and watched the sunset. He was mesmerized by its splendor. There were silhouettes of birds flying in the sky. Couples were sitting on benches watching the sunset across the street at the park. They snuggled up against each other while holding hands or having an arm around the other. Taylor was so caught up with the moment that he almost forgot about the time, then he noticed it was almost time for him to go after checking the clock hanging on the wall. He quickly sprung out of his chair and walked up to the register, where he left the barista a tip before heading out.

When he arrived at the police station, Officer Connor Valenzuela was already waiting for him in the lobby. Valenzuela greeted Taylor, then escorted him into one of the empty interrogation rooms where Police Chief Lewis Huber, Brianna, and Dr. Hector O’Neill were already sitting and waiting for him. All of them looked up at Valenzuela and Taylor as they entered the room. Taylor felt bad for coming in late and making them all wait on him.

“Dr. Hector O’Neill, this is Jesse Taylor,” the police chief said. “He will be helping us with this case as he, too, has experienced some terrifying events involving the Night Shadow Circle and the former high priestess. He was attacked by the former high priestess, who was later discovered dead in the woods just outside his home.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Taylor,” Dr. O’Neill said.

“It is nice to meet you as well,” Taylor responded. “I am so glad that someone with your expertise is here to help us. I really do appreciate it.”

“I heard about your encounter with the high priestess,” Dr. O’Neill said. “That must have been a terrifying experience for you. I have had a few close encounters with high priestesses in the past. It is a frightening experience. There were a few instances that I barely escaped. Luckily, I only received a few minor wounds that I was able to recover from.”

“I can imagine,” Taylor said. “I still have a few scars on my upper abdomen from the last attack that I had with a high priestess. I can still feel the stinging pain from when she sunk her claws into me. It won’t be the last attack that I will ever experience. I’m sure of it, especially now that we will be working together on fighting the coven. Although, I have had a few brushes with death during my time.”

“You are a brave man for your willingness to confront the Night Shadow coven again,” Dr. O’Neil replied. “Not many men would do that. Trust me.”

The two shook hands. Taylor then pulled himself a seat out at the table and sat down next to Brianna, who was surprisingly not handcuffed. A security guard sat on the other side of her. On the other side of the table, Dr. O’Neill, Police Chief Huber, and Officer Connor Valenzuela sat. They sat in silence for about two minutes so that everyone had a chance to settle.

“So, Jesse, the police chief told me that you were attacked by a high priestess in your home,” Dr. O’Neill said. “He also told me that you believe you had killed her by shooting at her three times with a pistol. I can tell you right now that it is impossible to kill a witch by just simply shooting at her. One of the most common methods is burying several witch bottles in an area where you know the witch frequently passes through. A witch bottle contains a special potion, which includes items such as human hair and urine, wool fibers, pins, and leaves of prickly grass. Since she was found dead in the woods, I believe someone else with this knowledge is responsible for her death. Another way is by burning them with fire before they can cast a spell to prevent the fire from burning them or allowing them to escape unharmed, which is extremely difficult to do since they have the power to cast a spell before the fire kills them. You may have to cast a spell on them first to not allow them the power to use magic. Do you have any experience with magic?”

“I’m afraid not,” Taylor replied. “But I am willing to learn if it helps me get out of this situation. Just tell me what I need to do, and I will do it.”

“You will definitely need me to show you how,” Dr. O’Neill said. “I know a few spells of my own that I can teach you and whoever else that will be fighting the witch coven. We will start by going over to your home and burying witch bottles all over your property. There must be plenty of them, so they cannot avoid crossing paths with one. I will cast some protection spells around your property to keep the witches away until after all the bottles are buried. If this doesn’t work, we will have to go with plan B, which is somehow bringing the entire witch coven together and burning them all. And that includes your sister, Brianna. She is not to be trusted.”

“You mean you are going to kill my sister!” Brianna shouted.

“I’m sorry,” Dr. O’Neill said. “She is partially responsible for several deaths, and she cannot continue being involved in any more murders. Tara represents evil, and she has a very vengeful heart. She chose to be a part of the Night Shadow Circle and she knows what they are capable of. Plus, she set you up. I mean, her own sister! What kind of person would do that? Don’t you see she is a danger to society? You mustn’t let her get away with it.”

“I just don’t know if I can go through with this,” Brianna said. “I hear what you are saying, but it is going to be hard for me to see my sister go down this way. However, I know she must be punished for her crime. She helped organize a murder, which is a serious offense, and there is no good excuse for it.”

“So, will you help us?” Dr. O’Neill asked.

“Yes,” Brianna said regrettably, with tears rolling down her face. Taylor wiped the tears from her cheek with his hand and gazed at her eyes to comfort her. He wished he could do more to ease her pain.

“Okay, so we can start enforcing the plan on Saturday morning at 10 o’clock at Jesse Taylor’s home,” Dr. O’Neill said. “Will that time work for everyone?”

Everyone said they were available at that time. They looked at each other nervously, not knowing what they were about to get themselves into. It all seems too surreal to them. They had never imagined themselves fighting off an evil witch coven before.

“Let the games begin,” Dr. O’Neill said with a grin on his face. “I will need all of you to get a good night's sleep. I need you to be fully energized. This is some serious stuff that we are dealing with. Be sure to get Jesse’s address before you head out.”

Just before everyone had left, Taylor looked up at Brianna, then at the police chief. Brianna knew Taylor was up to something because there was a grin on his face. He asked the police chief if he could talk to him in private. The police chief nodded. They stepped away from the crowd. Brianna watched Taylor as he spoke quietly to him. She tried to make out what they were saying by reading their lips, but she didn’t have the faintest clue. Brianna slowly began to walk away as the security guard escorted her back to her jail cell.

About an hour later, the security guard came back to her jail cell. Brianna was surprised to see him there. He opened her cell and told her she was free to go because Taylor had paid for her bail bond. Brianna was so happy that she cried. She found Taylor waiting for her in the lobby. She rushed over to him and ran right into his arms before planting a big, wet kiss on his cheek.

“So, why did you do it?” she asked him.

“Because I love you,” he replied. “Plus, I know now that you would have never done anything like that. There’s now even proof that you wouldn’t!”

“Oh, Jesse!” Brianna said. “I love you, too.”

Chapter 16

Dr. Hector O’Neill was busy in his study, creating several witch bottles. He filled each of the bottles with the magical ingredients that would kill off the witches entering Jesse Taylor’s property. O’Neill watched Philippine residents carefully mix this concoction. He admitted it didn’t always work, but the results were significant. It helped ward off witch covens from the premises. He knew from firsthand experience. Dr. O’Neill watched over an area in the Philippines that had the bottles laid out all over. He would see a few witches about to trespass the area, but once they stepped foot into it, they screamed when they realized they were in a trap. They then slowly sunk onto the ground and were stiff as a board. You could see the white of their eyes, and their jaws dropped. Dr. O’Neill would run over to them afterward and poke them with a stick to make sure they were dead.

Once he declared they were dead, he would alert the local authorities and clergymen that a witch had died. They then made a public announcement on television by interrupting the viewer’s programming on every channel. It would also be announced on radio stations.

The villagers would then come over and burn their bodies while singing spiritual tunes to rid all evil spirits that may be lurking. They left the ashes in an abandoned area away from civilization to let them scatter off in the wind. The evil witches were disgraced and condemned for their actions. The remaining coven members who were alive were no longer welcome to the village and were banished from the country.

A villager who trusted Dr. Hector O’Neill shared the magic potion for the witch bottles and told him to help get rid of the evil in the world. O’Neill was also told to share this knowledge with others who also shared a passion for getting rid of evil witches and everything that they stood for. He promised the villagers that he would carry out that responsibility.

The potion was powerful enough to kill off regular witches, but a witch with a higher power, such as the high priestess, would not be killed by it. It would weaken her power for a little while, but then she would regain it shortly after she left the area where the witch bottles were located. She was going to need a much more powerful potion and would have to be burned completely into ashes. O’Neill would also use a counteractive magical spell to prevent the high priestess from ever returning. It was risky for him to do it alone. O’Neill would need backup to help him carry out the task.

In Salem, there was always a witch coven to fight off. This was why O’Neill chose to make his living here. There was so much mystery, intrigue, and excitement in the area. Protecting people from evil witch covens made him feel like he was doing a service for the people of Salem. It was his purpose in life. Lucky for O’Neill, Salem was a major hub for witchcraft. Dr. O’Neill found after stopping one witch coven from completing their mission, another one tried shortly afterward. It was the same cycle repeatedly.

He finished creating the witch bottles in about three hours. He wrapped each one with a cloth to prevent the glass from breaking and placed the witch bottles in a cardboard box to be transported over to Taylor’s home on Saturday. O’Neill was proud that he was able to get all the bottles done when it was only Friday afternoon. Now that was done, he could enjoy some time for himself. Dr. O’Neill then laid back in his chair and stretched his arms out. He let out a sigh of relief.

He wondered what he should do next. O’Neill had been cooped up in his study for way too long. He was beginning to think that it was probably best that he went for a walk to get some fresh air and to stretch out his legs some. It was a nice day out. The sun was shining through his windows in the study, and he could hear the birds chirping out a sweet melody. He felt completely enraptured by the atmosphere. O’Neill smiled during the moment.

O’Neill stood up from his seat and felt too tired to go for a walk. He felt like either taking a nap or vegging out in front of the television for a few hours to allow himself to have an energy boost. He figured he would feel energized enough to go out and take a short walk afterward.

O’Neill looked down and checked his cell phone to see if he got any messages. He then decided to take a short nap. Being self-employed had its advantages. He could set his own schedule and work at his own pace. It was a wonderful feeling not having to work under a superior. He was his own boss, and that was just the way he liked it. There was no pressure involved.

Meanwhile, at the *Salem News* office, Taylor was just about finished writing his story about last night’s school board meeting. There was nothing special to write about. It was just a typical meeting with no major announcements. He read through it one last time to make sure there weren’t any major edits or corrections that needed to be made before turning it in to the news editor. Covering school board meetings was one of his least favorite things to cover as a news reporter. There hadn't been any pressing issues in the education sector for several months.

Once it was 5 in the evening, he hurried up and gathered his laptop, reporter notebook, and a couple of pens before heading over to Brianna’s house. Taylor could not wait to see her face. She had been in jail for almost two weeks, so it had been a long time since they last had an actual date night. Taylor was glad that Brianna was able to go back to work at Utopia Galore. It would help her get back into a daily routine. He wondered what the employees thought of her being back and if they welcomed her back warmly and with open arms. She needed the additional support. Taylor also was hoping that everything went smoothly for her today.

He had been longing to talk to her about their relationship and about how he was sorry about not trusting her. Taylor wanted there to be no rift in their relationship. It was important that they trust each other from there on out. No relationship could exist without trust. He felt like a fool for breaking his trust in her. It would take him a long time to make it up to her.

He decided to stop by the floral shop to pick up a bouquet of flowers to surprise her with. Taylor knew she had been through so much already, and he wanted to put a smile on her face. Her happiness meant a lot to him. Seeing Brianna smile would brighten his day tremendously. He was excited to rush up into her arms and give her a great big kiss.

Taylor arrived at her place about twenty minutes later. As he pulled up into Brianna’s driveway, he could already see her vehicle parked there. A smile broke out on his face and his heart pitter-pattered with excitement. Taylor quickly pulled out his comb from his back pocket and combed his hair back before stepping out of his vehicle. He wanted to look his best for her. He quickly strutted over to her front door and pressed the doorbell.

Taylor could hear the clicking sound coming from Brianna unlocking the door. She then quickly opened the door. They both couldn’t contain their excitement. They hugged, then they kissed for the first time. Their hearts melted as they embraced each other. He then pulled out the bouquet of flowers from behind his back to hand over to her. Her eyes gleamed and a smile broke out across her face. It warmed his heart to see her that way.

“Oh, Jesse,” she said. “You didn’t have to. All I need from you is your presence to bring me comfort and joy. That’s all it takes to make me happy. I can’t remember the last time that I can honestly say that I was this happy in my life. It would have been sometime before Tara and I’s parents had passed away. Ever since their passing, there has been a feeling of emptiness in part of my heart. You have made me feel complete again.”

“I am sorry that you have felt that way for so long,” Taylor said. “I just wanted to brighten your day a bit more. I feel bad that you had to spend all those days in jail over a crime that you did not commit. I’m so glad you are back. I needed you here with me.”

“I thought that I would never see you again,” Brianna said with tears streaming down her cheeks. “I couldn’t imagine my life without you. Now, here you are, standing right in front of me!”

“I’m here now,” Taylor replied. “This is where I belong. I promise that I will never leave you again.”

“You better not,” she said, smiling and wiping away the tears. “You had me worried for a while. I didn’t think you could ever trust me again.”

He then kissed her forehead. They decided to celebrate the reunion by going to a nice restaurant later that evening. Taylor made a reservation at a popular restaurant that served exquisite entrees in Salem. Brianna had never eaten there before, so he was excited to take her there. In the meantime, they would spend some time curled up in each other’s arms on the couch while listening to soothing romantic music next to some candlelight.

“Thank you so much for bailing me out, Jesse,” Brianna said. “I know that it was hard for you at first to believe that I didn’t take part in the ritual after seeing that video footage. I am not angry with you. I know I would have been afraid of you if you had been the one there and knowing that you were part of an evil witch coven. I can’t imagine how you were feeling at that time, but that is all in the past. Let’s have a fresh start and work on building something great between us.”

“That is kind of you to say, and thanks for understanding,” Taylor said. “I am very sorry to hear about your sister’s involvement and that we must destroy her before she and the entire coven continue going on a murder spree. I know it will be a hard loss for you. Just remember, I am always here for you if you need anything. I love you so much and I care about you.”

“Do you think we can trust this Dr. Hector O’Neill?” Brianna asked. “I mean, he sounds a bit on the eccentric side, but he supposedly knows his stuff.”

“We must,” he said. “I don’t see any other alternative. I just want us to have a normal life together, Brianna. If we must put our trust in his hands, then I think we should. We really don’t have any other choice in the matter for now. He does, however, have experience with witches and has done extensive research on destroying them. I don’t know anybody else with that kind of knowledge or experience.”

“I suppose we should,” she said. “That’s all we can do. We must try to do whatever we can to prevent them from gaining any more power. If he said this approach has worked, then it must. I mean, who am I to say that he isn’t right? I am no expert in witchcraft.”

“Exactly,” Taylor responded. “I am so glad you are taking all of this well and that we can see eye to eye on the matter.”

“So, what time is our reservation at Ledger Restaurant & Bar?” Brianna asked.

“It is at 8 o’clock,” Taylor answered. “I figured that would give us enough time to take a shower and get dressed up.”

“I guess I better get started then,” Brianna said. “It takes me extra time to get ready. I need enough time to make sure I put my makeup on, style my hair, and choose a dress. I will go ahead and take a shower right now.”

“Perhaps I should join you,” Taylor said. “That is, if you are all right with it. I don’t want to do anything that makes you feel uncomfortable. I just figured we would save enough time by taking it at the same time.”

“It is rather soon to be taking that next step in our relationship, but I am fine with it,” she said. “It all makes sense to me, and besides, you are not the first man to have seen me naked.”

They both giggled. Taylor could tell that Brianna was nervous. She shyly looked away while her hands were shaky. He pretended not to notice. Taylor then walked away to give her some privacy so she could gather her thoughts about what they were about to do. It was a major milestone in their relationship. He would be fine if she chose not to shower with him. Taylor just thought he would throw the idea out there to see what she would say.

Brianna went upstairs to choose the perfect dress for the evening. She wanted it to be a special night and wanted to look her best. She chose a black Verilla draped high-low sheath dress. It would show off her long, sexy legs. Brianna laid it out on the bed. She pulled out some stockings and chose a pair of black high heels. She also had to choose her jewelry to complete her attire.

Moments later, she turned on the shower. Brianna began to slowly slip out of her clothes. When the water temperature was just right, she stepped into the shower. She began to feel butterflies in her stomach. She knew that any minute now, she was going to have company. Brianna tried to remain calm so that when Taylor arrived, she wouldn’t look like a small, frightened animal.

Brianna started to wash her hair. As she was running her fingers through her hair, she could hear a pair of pants being unzipped and dropping to the floor. Her heart dropped. Then suddenly, the shower door slid open. Nothing was about to prepare her for what was about to happen next. Her eyes widened when she caught Taylor’s gaze.

Her handsome male companion then stepped into the shower and joined her. She couldn’t help but look down at his brawny physique. Without thinking, she ran her hands down his toned pecs. Taylor kissed her forehead softly as she was touching him. Brianna then took a quick peek at his erect phallus. Taylor then took her by the arms, and they began to kiss passionately. Making love to him was everything that she could ever imagine. She felt safe and secure in his arms.

“I guess you are having your dessert before dinner,” she teased him.

“There’s always room for more afterward,” he said with a devilish grin on his face. “I do have quite the sweet tooth.”

They laughed as they finished cleaning each other off in the shower. He planted a tender kiss on her forehead. Her heart melted. His heart leaped with joy. Both were feeling complete ecstasy.

When they were done, they cleaned each other off before stepping out of the shower. They shared a few more kisses before dressing up for their date. They couldn’t help but smile at each other as they were putting on their attire and making themselves look more desirable. After they were done, they couldn’t help but think about going for another round of lovemaking later that night.

It took them about two hours to prepare for their date. Both agreed not to talk about anything that had been troubling them. They didn’t want to do anything to spoil the evening. They just wanted a quiet, pleasant night. Whenever Brianna and Taylor were together, they felt like they could take on the world together. They loved everything about each other. If they weren’t close to each other physically, they were too far apart. They were completely in sync with each other.

It was a clear, starry night. Brianna and Taylor held hands, laughed, and quietly talked amongst each other as they gazed into each other’s eyes. It was the first time that they felt comfortable being themselves around each other and not worrying about what was going on in their lives.

They had a romantic candlelit dinner, along with soothing, romantic music playing in the atmosphere. They couldn’t help but smile as they looked at each other. Tyler reached out to Brianna’s hand and held it as they talked. It was the perfect date.

The rest of the evening was spent lying in each other’s arms in bed throughout the night.

“That was the best date ever,” Brianna whispered in Taylor’s ear. “I wished it could be like this forever.”

“Yes, it was, my love,” he replied after kissing her forehead and brushing her hair back behind her ear. She smiled at him. They then gazed into each other’s eyes for a long time before drifting off into sleep.

Chapter 17

As Saturday approached, Tara Rush was making plans of her own. This would be the day of reckoning. She had to prove her loyalty to the high priestess by finding Jesse Taylor and killing him. If she succeeded, the high priestess would grant her immortality and allow her to forever stay young. Tara also was promised to be the next high priestess.

Tara had followed Taylor from the *Salem News* office yesterday as he was leaving work. She was surprised to have discovered that he had gone straight to her sister’s home afterward. It was then that Tara had found out that he had bailed Brianna out of jail for her to be home. Tara was hoping she would have stayed in jail long enough for the high priestess to achieve what she had set out to do. She did not want her sister to end up in the middle of everything. Tara didn’t want the high priestess to see Brianna as a threat.

She was going to do everything that she could to not get her sister involved. Tara had no intentions of murdering her sister, but if she did get in the way, she would have no other choice. It was going to be either her or Tara to be killed by the high priestess if things went awry. Even though Tara had always been envious of her, she still loved her very much. She would hate to be responsible for the death of her sister.

She wanted her sister to be completely oblivious to what she was doing. Tara didn’t want her sister to know that she was a cold-blooded murderer and that she was partially responsible for all those people found dead in the woods. She wanted Brianna to continue seeing her in a positive way, but sooner or later her sister would find out about her dark side. Brianna would be so frightened of her, and her parents would later find out about it as well. Tara preferred to keep all of her dark secrets in the closet.

She felt awful about having to murder her sister’s boyfriend, Jesse Taylor. The last thing she wanted her sister to see was her killing him and seeing her cry in agony. Tara wished there was some other way to get out of doing it, but the coven had already decided his fate, and it was her responsibility to carry out the duty. For Brianna to not see her do it, she would have to wait until the two were separated before attacking him. Her sister then would put the blame on the Night Shadow Circle for the death of Taylor. She would wait outside Brianna’s house until she knew Taylor was all alone. Sooner or later, one of them would leave the other behind, and then it would be the perfect moment for Tara to make her move. Tara decided she would head over to Brianna’s house a few hours later that morning.

Tara sat at her kitchen table nervously, eating the scrambled eggs, pancakes, and toast she had made. She took a sip of fresh squeezed orange juice before returning to completing a crossword puzzle in the *New York Times* she had started. Tara was having a hard time concentrating and could not think of some of the words to fill in the blanks. The idea of murdering someone kept distracting her. She wasn’t sure if committing murder was something she really wanted to do. Murdering Taylor could take away a great deal of happiness from her sister. Did she really want to do that? She pushed the crossword puzzle off to the side.

Being a part of a witch coven and co-owning the herb and holistic store Utopia Galore had given her meaning to life. She finally felt like she was a part of something. Brianna was always the person that people looked up to and adored. Tara had always felt like she was an outcast. Their parents constantly praised Brianna for all her good behavior and accomplishments. No matter how hard Tara tried to win their approval, she was never good enough. When her sister quit her job as a librarian to help her start her own business, it was the first time she felt truly loved by her. Tara knew how much Brianna’s job meant to her.

When she joined the Night Shadow Circle, she met others who were also outcasts and just wanted it to be their turn to shine. This was their opportunity to outshine everyone by having supernatural powers and getting even with those through magic who crossed them. Sisterhood had brought them close enough together to make them feel as if they were family. But was it enough to fill the void in her life?

Tara knew she had to get started right away to complete her mission. She thought the best thing to do was start by driving past Brianna’s home and seeing if Jesse Taylor was there. Tara knew there was a good chance she might run into her sister, which made it difficult. She put on some shades and a baseball cap, hoping that it would make her look less recognizable.

Tara soon left her house and headed over to her sister’s home. It was going to be tricky trying to stay hidden from her sister. Brianna would recognize Tara’s car instantly if she parked too close, so she decided to park her car a few blocks away from Brianna’s house next to a tree. The parking spot was behind a huge truck that helped her stay hidden. Tara pulled out her binoculars to keep a close eye on Brianna’s home. She could see both Jesse Taylor’s and Brianna’s vehicles parked in the driveway. Sooner or later, one of them would leave. Hopefully, it would be Brianna. She was eagerly waiting to cross off killing Taylor from her list of things to do first because it was her hardest task.

Tara sat patiently in her car while listening to some music and eating a bagel she had picked up at a bakery. She quickly took a sip of her caramel latte. Tara became agitated as she spilled some coffee on her new beige top. She quickly wiped some of it off with her napkin.

Tara was starting to get impatient. It was now after 10 in the morning. She suddenly looked up at Brianna’s house and got excited when she saw both Brianna and Taylor step out of the house. She was disappointed when she saw Brianna leave with Taylor in his vehicle. Tara grumbled to herself. She just knew it was going to be impossible to separate the two of them. Just as Taylor was backing out of the driveway, she turned on her ignition, then slowly pulled out of her parking spot. Tara planned to follow them.

She tried to keep her distance from them so that her sister wouldn’t recognize her. Tara continued wearing her baseball cap and sunglasses to disguise herself. She made sure no driver could cut her off so that she could stay right behind them. She soon got aggravated when a stoplight took a long time to turn green. Tara watched them drive off further and further away. Then, a car turned at the light and was now behind them. As soon as it turned green, Tara sped up to catch up with them before they could leave her sight and got in front of the vehicle that was behind them. She began feeling like a spy on a top-secret mission. Tara knew she had to be sly with her approach.

She suddenly found herself in a familiar neighborhood. Tara then knew exactly where they were going. They were headed toward Jesse Taylor’s home. She couldn’t believe it. Tara thought for sure the previous high priestess had scared him out of his home for good. Taylor was much braver than she had thought. She also couldn’t figure out why her sister would want to go there.

Taylor slowly turned the corner and traversed a four-way crossing. He then drove up a block and turned into the driveway that led him to his home. Tara crept up behind them, pulled off onto the side of a street about a block away, and parked behind a minivan. She then noticed they were not alone. There was an SUV already parked in Taylor’s driveway. A few minutes later, a police car drove up and parked in front of the house. Tara began to wonder what was going on. Was this a plot to go after the Night Shadow Circle, or were they making sure Taylor’s home was safe enough to stay in? Whatever it was, she was going to have to report it to the high priestess.

The man in the SUV was unloading his vehicle. She could see him carrying boxes up to the house, with Taylor following him to the house. Taylor unlocked the front door to allow everyone in the group in. Tara thought the whole situation was rather peculiar, and she knew they were up to something. She had to sneak up to the house and take a closer look at what they were doing. If they were securing the home in order to protect Taylor from the coven, High Priestess Sophia Laforeze was not going to be happy about it. When the high priestess was angry, Tara was frightened of her. She really had quite the temper and could use her powers to threaten—or even kill—anyone. Tara would not want to face the wrath of the high priestess.

Tara gradually opened the door to her vehicle, then slowly closed it to avoid making a loud sound. When Brianna, Taylor, Dr. Hector O’Neill, Police Chief Huber, and Officer Connor Valenzuela were all inside Taylor’s house, Tara slowly crept up to the house. She finally found a spot to hide behind a bush just outside the house. She grew agitated because she could not hear what they were saying inside the house. Just as she was about to creep up closer, the group stepped outside with boxes and shovels. Her heart leaped as soon as the door opened. She then suddenly jumped back behind the bush before they could spot her. Tara looked up and saw that no one had noticed her. She felt relieved that she had not blown her cover.

Tara could now hear their voices faintly from a distance. All she could hear them say was that they were going to be burying something across the yard, but what? She had an urge to find out. Tara’s suspicion of it being a method to protect the home from the witch coven grew. She had never seen this done before. Tara was beginning to wonder if what they were doing was related to witchcraft. It had to be a protective spell. There just wasn’t any other explanation for it.

They pulled out small bottles with corks on top to conceal the mysterious contents. Tara was curious about what was inside them. Immediately, she could hear someone approaching the bush she was hiding behind. Tara sat still and tried her best not to make a sound. Her heart was beating rapidly. She peeked through an opening in the bushes to see who it was. To her delight, it was Taylor all by himself. He started digging a hole in the ground in front of the bush to bury the bottle in.

As he was preoccupied, Tara knew it was her chance to make a move. She had to be quick about attacking and killing him to keep him from screaming out loud so that none of the others would know what was happening. Tara gathered her thoughts and then leaped out from the bushes with her wand still without Taylor knowing she was even there. However, Tara had no idea she was about to be a part of a deadly trap. Tara quickly raised her arm, holding up her wand. She would use magic as her weapon to kill Jesse Taylor. Just as she was about to cast a spell, something had come over her. She suddenly felt weaker, and her knees began to tremble. Despite her weakness, she still managed to jump out of the bush toward Taylor.

Just as Taylor was covering up the jar with dirt, he could hear a sound coming from the bushes that made him freeze with fright. Taylor was startled when he saw Tara jump out at him and tried to attack him. Taylor screamed, then jumped backward to narrowly escape her. She tried to cast a spell on him to prevent him from moving, but it was too late. Tara suddenly felt powerless. No matter what spell she used on him, the spell did not work. Tara was now in a dizzy spell. She tried to raise a knife high up in the air to stab him but instead collapsed to the ground. Taylor was stunned to find her lying on the ground unconscious.

Taylor then ran to Brianna to tell her about Tara trying to attack him and that there was something wrong with her. He also told her he needed to call 911 immediately. While he was doing that, Brianna didn’t hesitate to go see what had happened to her sister. She rushed over and saw Taylor checking Tara’s pulse with a startled look on his face.

“I swear I didn’t do anything to her!” Taylor cried out. “She just jumped out of the bushes as I was standing here, then she all of a sudden fell to the ground as if she was in pain, holding a knife in the air and charging towards me. I just held out my arms to protect myself.”

Brianna ran to Tara immediately with great urgency. Brianna screamed as she saw her sister lying on the dirt, powerless. Brianna reached out to her sister’s hand and noticed there was no pulse. She then put her ear up against Tara’s chest and could not hear her heart beating. Brianna cried when she saw her sister’s eyes roll back into her head. Her body was motionless. Brianna knew right away that she had lost her sister.

“Oh, my sister!” Brianna cried out. “She’s dead! She’s dead, and it’s all your fault! There was something in the bottles that caused her to do this!”

She quickly turned toward Dr. Hector O’Neill and looked deep into his eyes as if she were searching for answers in them.

“What the hell did you put in that jar?” she screamed out at him.

“It’s just a few herbs, hair, urine, and other nontoxic ingredients to normal human beings, but it makes witches weak, and they lose their powers from the potion,” he answered. “I also used a little magic to make it deadly to them.”

“But why my sister?” Brianna continued screaming. “There had to have been another way to stop her! Couldn’t you just cast a spell that would have frozen Tara in her place so she wouldn’t move?!”

“There wasn’t enough time, and besides, I couldn’t have done it even if I wanted to,” Dr. Hector O’Neill replied. “Once the bottle was in place, there was no stopping it from killing her. Plus, she was seconds away from killing your friend Jesse. Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

“Yes, it does!” Brianna cried out. “I would have chosen Jesse over my sister because I couldn’t let her kill the man that I love. I just can’t believe Tara would do a thing like this to me or Taylor. I mean, she just met him. What has he done to her? I don’t know what I did wrong as a sister or why she hated me so much. I wished I could have gotten her the help that she needed before she went out and done a thing like this. I feel like I failed as a sister.”

“I’m sorry that you feel that way,” Dr. O’Neill said. “Trust me, this was the right thing to do. Also, you just can’t change the way people feel. You did everything that a sister should do. She was misguided and had her own demons she was dealing with. You are not responsible for what had happened to her.”

“I know you are right,” Brianna said. "I just wish that I could see it that way.”

“Besides, she wasn’t to be trusted,” Dr. O’Neil said. “If we hadn’t killed her, she would have called upon the high priestess, and the high priestess would have come after all of us. We can’t let the Night Shadow Circle have power or else more murders will take place and evil will sweep across the entire city of Salem. Perhaps even the entire world. Trust me, we are doing the right thing.”

“I know,” Brianna said. “You did what you had to do. I just wished things wouldn’t have had to come down to this.”

“I am so sorry for your loss, Brianna,” Dr. Hector O’Neill told her sympathetically.

“Thank you,” she said.

Brianna sobbed as she lifted Tara partially off the ground and held her in her arms as she grieved. Officer Connor Valenzuela tried to comfort her by patting her back. Police Chief Huber called for an ambulance to come pick up the body of Tara Rush. After the commotion was over, they finished burying the remainder of the jars around Taylor’s home. By the end of the day, their backs were sore from digging and lifting heavy dirt throughout the day. They gave each other a high five for all the hard work they had done. Everyone once again offered their sympathy to Brianna for the loss of her sister before they departed ways.

Dr. Hector O’Neill assured Taylor that it would be safe for him to stay at his house now, but just to be safe, Taylor told him that he would stay at Brianna’s house instead. Dr. O’Neill told him that he may be right. The potion was not strong enough to keep the new high priestess, Sofia Laforeze, from entering his property. Dr. O’Neill then told Taylor the high priestess may seek revenge for killing Tara, and once she found out that he was the one who had killed her, she would murder him brutally.

“I am still working on a strategy on how we can kill the high priestess,” Dr. Hector O’Neill said. “We need to have a planned attack on her. We also need to make sure we dismember and burn her to be sure she is dead. I still can’t figure out how the previous high priestess died without being dismembered and burned. Someone out there must have stronger magical powers than me and have a potion that is strong enough to get rid of even the strongest witches. We must find this person and have them help us. It would save us a bloody mess.”

“How can we possibly find out who it is?” Brianna asked. “There are thousands of witches in Salem. It could take us several months or even years to find this person. I’m sorry for sounding like a skeptic, and I know that you know what you are doing, but I got so many questions whirling around in my head right now.”

“You are just going to have to trust me,” Dr. O’Neill said as he grew agitated by her repeatedly second-guessing him.

“Brianna, you have been running an herb and holistic store that several witches shop at,” Police Chief Lewis Huber blurted out. “Your sister also provided a list of members of the Night Shadow Circle. If I were to guess who it is, it must be someone with connections either through the Night Shadow Circle or even one of your customers.”

“I believe it is a member of the Night Shadow Circle who is pretending to be a loyal member,” O’Neill said. “She is a good witch who has experience killing off high priestesses and dismantling witch covens. She must be one of the newest members because she is not close to achieving her mission. I have heard of these kinds of witches. They move from one evil witch coven to another doing the same thing over and over.”

“So, do you have an idea on how we can find this mystery witch?” Taylor asked.

“Brianna, would you mind if I hang out at your store?” Dr. Hector O’Neill asked. “I think we can find the mystery witch by closely observing your customers, conversating with them and asking them questions, and finding out what type of products they purchase.”

“I don’t see why not,” Brianna replied. “I will be working there tomorrow from eight o’clock in the morning to closing. I can help you get acquainted with all the customers.”

“Great,” Dr. O’Neill said. “I’ll be there. Thank you for your help.”

“You’re welcome,” she responded. “It’s the least that I can do. I mean, after all, my sister was also behind all of this, so I should help clean up the mess she has started.”

Once it was settled, all of them parted ways. Taylor wrapped his arm around Brianna’s waist to show that he cared as they headed back to his vehicle. She rested her head on his shoulder. Taylor knew that Brianna was heartbroken over her sister’s death. He could see the pain in her eyes, and she seemed to be in her own little world lately. She was quieter than usual and kept to herself most of the time now. Taylor wanted to do everything that he could to help her with the grieving process. It was going to be very difficult for her to help fight off high priestess Sofia Laforeze. She was in a very vulnerable state right now. Brianna didn’t need any more trauma in her life.

He started off helping her get through this difficult time by volunteering to cook dinner and clean the dishes. Taylor would make sure she had everything that she needed, help around the house, and offer a shoulder for her to cry on. He would make sure to make everything easier for her so she wouldn’t have to worry about anything around the house. He wanted her to know that he would always be by her side during difficult times. He cared about her deeply.

Taylor hated seeing her cry throughout the night. She had just barely touched her dinner. He knew it was going to take her some time to get better. Taylor also knew she would never be the same person she was when he first met her. Death changes people. After losing both of his parents, he became a different person. It made him a stronger person, and he learned to accept that they would never, ever be back. Taylor always knew his parents were present in his mind and heart. If he ever needed them, he always knew they were there. There also was hope that their spirits were there with him as well. There were still times that he missed them, but he could handle it much better now. He could now cope with it.

Taylor was glad that Brianna had both of her parents that she could talk to as well. Brianna’s parents had made plans to fly in from Michigan to help her plan Tara’s funeral. Brianna would be happy to see them. They hadn’t seen each other for several months. They planned to have the funeral in a couple of weeks with just immediate family and close friends attending. Brianna did not tell her parents about Tara being a member of the witch coven and being involved in several murders. She knew that Tara would want it that way.

He nestled right beside her on the bed and stroked her hair. Brianna wept a little, then wiped the stream of tears away from her cheeks. He then kissed her forehead. They snuggled for a while before Brianna got up to go get a drink of water from the kitchen.

“Thank you for being here for me, Jesse,” she said. “I don’t think I could have done this on my own. You have been so supportive throughout all of this. No one has been more caring or understanding than what you have been, and it makes me love you even more.”

“Sure, you could have,” Taylor replied. “You’re a strong woman. I will always be here when you need me. Don’t hesitate to ask me for anything. I will do everything in my power to go get it. If you need me to do something for you, I will do it for you because I love you, too.”

“I love you, too,” Brianna said. “You are the best companion that I could have ever asked for. I also want to let you know that I appreciate everything that you are doing to help me get through this difficult time. You have been nothing but wonderful to me.”

“Thanks,” he said. “I am glad to hear you say that. It really means a lot to me. Now, try to get some sleep now. You have a big day tomorrow. I will use some of my grievance time to be at the store with you as much as I can tomorrow in case you have a hard time coping with customers or with Dr. Hector O’Neill. Afterwards, maybe we can head out of town for a little getaway. We could both use it.”

“That sounds nice,” she said. “I really need to get away so I can clear my thoughts. I’m tired of being cooped up inside. I need to go out and find some enjoyment in life. I can’t lay around here just feeling sorry for myself.”

She then cracked a little smile and fell slowly asleep, tear-free. Taylor then smiled because it was the first time Brianna had smiled since losing her sister.

Chapter 18

Taylor woke up without Brianna by his side in the middle of the night. He got out of bed to see if she was alright because she was normally a deep sleeper, so it was highly unusual for her to get up and be up for long periods during the late-night hours. He went downstairs to see where she was and was surprised to find her in the living room, quietly sniffling with tears rolling down her cheeks. Brianna was lying back in the recliner with the lamp on, staring off into space. He caught her attention as soon as she heard him step into the room. She then quickly wiped the tears away. Brianna hated him to see her that way. She didn’t want to worry him about her condition.

“Oh, hi!” she said. “I didn’t mean to wake you. I couldn’t stop dreaming about all the times my sister and I had spent together. Sometimes the dreams are so real that I believe she is alive and well. It makes me happy for a while, but then the realization that she is never going to come back sinks in all over again. It feels like I am losing her all over again. I keep hoping that I will wake up one morning and realize it was just all a bad dream.”

“I’m sorry, Brianna,” Taylor told her sympathetically. “I wish there was something that I could do for you to ease the pain. All I can do right now is just be there for you during times of need and offer you my sympathy and support. I know it will never bring your sister back, and I am truly sorry for that. Like I said, if there is something you want me to do or bring you, just let me know.”

“Thanks for understanding,” Brianna told him. “I really appreciate it. I just don’t want you to worry about me. I’m a grown woman, and I am fully capable of taking care of myself. I want you to continue living your life happily. I don’t want to be a burden.”

“You are not a burden to me,” Taylor said. “There is nothing wrong with someone wanting to take care of you. You should not feel guilty about it. Everyone needs someone in their lives that will help them during difficult times. Just remember I am always here for you.”

“I swear if you ever lose someone special in your life, I will be just as generous and caring as you are to me to you,” she said. “Then I can feel like I am returning the favor for everything that you had done for me. You have helped me more than you will ever know, and I cherish that.”

“Thank you,” he replied. “I would really appreciate it, but you don’t have to think about that now. I just want you to think about caring for yourself right now.”

“I really should get some sleep,” Brianna said. “I need to stop by the store tomorrow. The employees may need some help with running the store. I haven’t been there for a while, so they may be a little backed up.”

“If you don’t feel like going to work tomorrow, just let me know,” he said. “I will call the store and let the cashier know that you won’t be coming in. They will understand once I tell them what happened. I personally think it is too soon for you to go back, but if you are determined to go in, that is fine, too. Maybe it will take your mind off things.”

“But what about Dr. Hector O’Neill?” she asked. “Dr. O’Neill said he needed my help. I already told him that I would do it.”

“Don’t worry about him,” Taylor said. “I will deal with him. I can be at the store and help him find the person who is responsible for the death of the previous high priestess. You need to rest and take care of yourself. You are dealing with a lot right now. Now, go back to bed and don’t worry about it. I can handle this.”

“I know you will do fine without me,” Brianna responded. “I mean, you are an investigative reporter. You are used to asking people questions, observing the situation, and finding clues. In fact, I believe you are perfect for the job.”

“That you are right, my dear,” he replied. “I’ll let you have your privacy now. I need to get some rest so I can help solve the case. Goodnight, my love.”

“Good night,” she told him.

Brianna turned off the lamplight shortly afterward, then joined Taylor in bed. She kissed him on the cheek, then nestled up against him before falling asleep. They snuggled throughout the rest of the night and into the early morning hours. Brianna felt lucky that he had come into her life. He really was a good man.

Five hours later, Taylor woke up to Brianna resting her head up against his chest and her arms wrapped around him. He looked down at her and smiled, then ran his hand through her hair before kissing her forehead. Taylor slowly slid out from under her and whispered in her ear that he was getting up. She groaned, then let him get up. She half opened her eyes and lazily smiled at him.

“Good morning,” he whispered to her.

“Good morning,” she softly spoke out.

He called Utopia Galore first thing to let them know that Brianna wasn’t coming in today and explained the situation. The store clerk offered her sympathy and wanted Brianna to know that she was there for her if she needed her. Taylor also told her that he would be stopping by later for Brianna because they were working on a project together. The store clerk understood and told him she would be expecting him.

He had already called the newspaper office to tell his editor, Joel Robertson, at the *Salem News* that he was using up some grievance time today. Robertson was very understanding about it as well and let him take the day off to take care of Brianna. Taylor was glad that his editor was fine with him taking the day off. Reporters were only allowed so few days to take off during the year. There hadn’t been any breaking news the past few days, so he wasn’t missing out on much. He had been so stressed out lately that he really could use the day off.

After he ate his breakfast and got cleaned up, he kissed Brianna goodbye and went out the door. Taylor called Dr. Hector O’Neill to let him know that he would meet him at Utopia Galore at 10 in the morning. Dr. O’Neill was a little disappointed that Brianna would not be there since she was familiar with the customers, but he was also very understanding. Dr. O’Neill assured Taylor that they would find the mystery witch. He knew the reason why the high priestess was after Taylor was because she had a vision that he would destroy her. Dr. O’Neill had a feeling the high priestess knew something about them gathering and coming up with a plan to kill her and ruin the Night Shadow Circle’s chances of ever having complete power.

Taylor stopped by a drive-through coffee stand to pick him up a hot mocha latte. He made sure to bring his notebook and pen to jot down any fishy behavior, descriptions of customers, and odd purchases at the herb and holistic store. Taylor would try his best not to look suspicious amongst the customers and act casually. He would try to start up conversations and mention names of individuals involved in the Night Shadow Circle to see if any of the customers sparked up a conversation with him.

It took him about fifteen minutes to reach the store. Taylor drove up to it and could see the open sign lit up and a young gothic-looking woman step into the store. This was not part of his usual scene. He had a feeling he was going to be meeting some rather unusual people today. It wasn’t normal for him to talk with women who practice Wicca. In fact, the idea of it creeped him out.

Taylor parked across the street from the store, then walked across a busy intersection at a crosswalk. He said hi to a woman who was walking down the sidewalk in front of the store. She smiled and said “Hi” back. Afterward, he opened the door to the store and was greeted by the store clerk, whose name was Tilly Jacobson. She looked like she was old enough to be a college student. Tilly had jet-black hair with a few neon green streaks. She had a pierced lip and had multiple piercings on her ears. She wore dark makeup and was dressed in a black tutu with black tights underneath and a pink top displaying a black skull graphic on it.

“Hi! Welcome to Utopia Galore,” Tilly said. “Can I help you find anything?”

“No, that’s okay,” he replied. “I am Jesse Taylor and I spoke with you this morning about Brianna using some grievance time today. I also said that I am helping her out with a project at the store. Don’t mind me. I will just be hovering around and talking to some customers. I promise I will be out of your way.”

“I remember when you called,” she said. “It’s nice to finally have met you. Brianna has said a lot about you. Ever since she met you, she hasn’t stopped glowing. I can tell you right now that she is head over heels in love with you.”

“Is that so?” he said with a grin. “You know, I’m kind of fond of the gal myself.”

They both laughed for a moment.

“So, how is she?” Tilly asked. “I feel bad for her. I know her sister meant a lot to her. I wish she was here so I could give her a great big hug.”

“She has had a hard time coping with Tara’s death, but considering the circumstance, I would say she has been dealing with it well,” Taylor answered. “I can tell she is completely heartbroken, but at times she handles it like a champion. She’ll crack a smile here and there. Sometimes she will laugh at something funny. Other times, she cries uncontrollably.”

“I am glad that you can be there to help her get through it,” Tilly said. “I’m sure that means a lot to her.”

“Well, you know, I try to do whatever I can around the house and try to be there when she needs someone to talk to,” Taylor said. “I know it’s been hard on her.”

“Let me know if there is anything I can do to help,” Tilly said.

“Sure,” Taylor said. “It’s a pleasure meeting you, and I will let you know if I need anything.”

He started off his time at the store by exploring each of the shelves to see what kind of products Utopia Galore sells until a customer came into the store. Taylor began to browse through the shelf that contained herbs for defense and protection. There were several herbs, including mugwort, lavender, rosemary, and cedar. He continued exploring. He was surprised by how many herbs were used in witchcraft. After he finished browsing herbs for defense and protection, he worked his way into the other herbs for love, prosperity, and healing. The whole experience was both intriguing and scary. There was so much mystery behind it all.

Then, unexpectedly, he heard the bell on the door ring. A young, petite woman with blond hair had stepped into the store. She was pretty and dressed stylishly in a pink knit dress with straps and a square neckline. The woman did not resemble a witch. Taylor could hear the desk clerk greet her. He listened carefully to their conversation.

“Samantha, are you looking for some more protection herbs?” Tilly asked her.

“I need some Devil’s club root bark and stemona root,” Samantha said. “I also need some of that special blend you make that protects against evil and witchcraft. There’s been some strange occurrences in my neighborhood, and I believe it has to do with an evil witch coven parading around using the dark arts.”

“I think I know just what you mean,” Tilly replied. “I have everything you need over here. I went ahead and took the liberty of pulling them off the shelf and having them ready for you. I figured you would be back.”

“You know me all too well, Tilly,” the woman said. “Thanks for doing that for me. Many good witches are afraid of what may come out of this new coven. I am so glad your store is around to help us protect ourselves with all the protection herbs that you provide us.”

“No problem,” Tilly said. “Anything for one of my favorite customers.”

Tilly pulled out the bottles from behind the cashier’s desk, placed them in a bag, and handed them over to the customer. Both looked at each other as if they could read each other’s minds. Tilly rang her up at the register. The woman paid for the items with a credit card. They waved goodbye to each other before the woman stepped out of the store.

Taylor’s ears had perked up after hearing what the blond-haired woman had asked for. Could she be the one with the knowledge of killing high priestesses in the forest? He also wondered if it could be Tilly who makes the special blend that protects against evil and witchcraft. Taylor knew he had to find out by asking Tilly a few questions. He then suddenly jumped at the opportunity to ask Tilly questions as soon as she was free from talking to anyone.

“Tilly, do you happen to know what Samantha’s last name is?” Taylor asked.

“Her last name is Witherdale,” Tilly said. “She is one of our frequent customers. She is also one of my closest friends. We grew up together. We’re both from rather unconventional families, which make us both relatable to each other.”

“Is she from Salem?” he asked.

“Yes,” Tilly said. “I graduated with her from Salem High School. She was the one that got me interested in witchcraft. Back then it was considered the rebel thing to do. We were both sent to counseling by our parents because they were so concerned about us. We get a good laugh out of it.”

“Are you both part of a witch circle?” Taylor asked.

“No, we gave it up a long time ago because many of the witches were starting to be power-hungry and started messing around with the dark arts,” Tilly said. “That is why I came up with the secret blend to ward off evil witches. Samantha and I made a vow that we would never use our witchcraft for evil purposes.”

“Do you happen to know about the Night Shadow Circle?” Taylor asked.

“Oh, now that is one scary group of witches,” she said. “I never told Brianna this, but her sister Tara was a member of the Night Shadow Circle. I suspected for a long time that she and the members of the Night Shadow Circle were practicing the dark arts. Tara keeps a secret dark arts shopping department behind the store. Only members of the Night Shadow Circle were allowed to purchase already-made potions Tara herself made to use for evil purposes. This surprised me because she hadn’t been a witch for very long. I know she had been studying this peculiar book of spells for quite some time. I asked her where she got it from, but she refused to tell me. I have never been in the secret department because Tara keeps the door to the secret section locked. Only those who had been permitted to shop there had a secret key to unlock the door. They would bring up the products with the price tag so I can ring them up.”

“Have you ever tried breaking open the door?” he asked.

“No,” she answered. “I have thought about it, though. Unfortunately, I need this job, so I am not going to take any chances. However, with Brianna’s permission, I am sure she would let us in. She might know where the key to the door is or go to Tara’s apartment to search for it.”

“I will have to ask Brianna about it,” Taylor said. “Are you aware that members of the witch coven are being accused of murdering an officer during one of their midnight rituals?”

“No, but I am well aware of the satanic-like rituals that they practice,” Tilly said. “In fact, I know the woman who is now considered their high priestess. She comes here frequently. I will tell you she is not one you want to become enemies with. High priestesses appear normal during the daytime, but at night their demonic side takes over them. I have created a special potion to destroy evil high priestesses. You mustn’t tell anyone about it.”

“So, it was you that killed Minerva Yaga?” he said.

“It was me, but I also got some help from my friend Samantha, who was just in here,” she said. “It takes more than one person to fight a high priestess. Minerva was a new high priestess and had not acquired enough power to become immortal to have full strength. If she had stayed in power for another year, we could be facing a highly powerful witch that would have been very difficult to take down. In order to kill a high priestess, you must have one person perform a spell and another person to burn my secret potion in a fire. Once that takes place, the witch’s soul is released and taken back down into the pits of hell where she must spend the rest of eternity.”

“How do you know about all of this?” Taylor asked. “You and Samantha don’t seem to be the type of individuals that go around and kill high priestesses.”

“I come from a family of witches,” Tilly said. “Our tradition of witchcraft has been passed on for hundreds of years. We do not practice the dark arts. We use witchcraft for good causes only. I was told never to share our potions or spells with anyone outside of our family. I don’t even share our potions or magic spells with Samantha, and she is my best friend! Samantha dresses up like she is your typical college-age woman, wearing high heels and stylish clothing as a disguise to throw people off. She doesn’t want anyone to know that she is a witch.”

“That makes sense,” Taylor replied. “It’s not something you want to broadcast to the world. You and Samantha are very brave to fight off evil witch covens voluntarily. I’m surprised that both of you aren’t targets.”

“Oh, trust me,” Tilly replied. “Once they find out about Samantha and me, they do whatever they can to kill the both of us so we won’t get in the way of their big plans. Samantha and I are always on the guard. We are fully prepared for a surprise attack. That’s why it is important for us to cast protective spells for us and our loved ones.”

They became distracted when the bell on the store door rang. Their attention automatically turned toward the person who stepped into the store. It was none other than Dr. Hector O’Neill. Taylor was eager to introduce Tilly and Samantha to him. They would be a huge benefit to them. He was going to be shocked when he found out that Taylor had already found the people who knew how to kill a high priestess. He couldn’t have gotten luckier.

“Why, hello there, Jesse!” Dr. O’Neill said. “It’s a pleasure seeing you again.”

“Hi, Dr. Hector O’Neill!” Taylor replied. “I have someone very important that I would like you to meet. This is Tilly Jacobson.”

“It’s nice to meet you, young lady,” O’Neill said.

“It’s nice to meet you, too,” Tilly said.

“Dr. Hector O’Neill, Tilly has some vital information to share with us about what happened to High Priestess Minerva Yaga,” Taylor said. “I had just spoken with her about who had killed her, and she was kind enough to share that she was the one responsible for it. She also knows a thing or two about the dark arts.”

“Wait, I’m confused,” she said. “What’s happening here? Why are you telling this man that I know about the dark arts?”

“Don’t worry, Tilly,” Taylor said. “The reason why I am here is to get clues as to who was responsible for killing Minerva Yaga and to ask them to help us stop the new high priestess, Sophia Laforeze, from gaining full power. I was fortunate to find out it was you and Samantha. We are asking you for help. Will you help us, Tilly?”

“Does Brianna know all about this?” she asked.

“Yes, she does,” Taylor answered. “She would have come in today, but I felt like she needed to stay at home to grieve and to take care of herself. Her sister, Tara, had been helping Sophia Laforeze. She was planning to kill me. As she attacked me, Dr. O’Neill casted a spell that had killed her and placed witch bottles around my house. Tara and the Night Shadow Circle were involved in a midnight ritual that led to the death of an officer. It was Sophia who had attacked him. She had just become a high priestess at the ritual. The police believed it was Brianna at first, but after viewing some video footage at the hospital, it turned out that Tara had made herself invisible and snuck out of the hospital to go to the ritual. After Brianna was arrested, she led the police to believe Brianna was the one there.”

“I knew Tara was up to something,” Tilly said. “That attack on Tara from the Night Shadow Circle coven members was all part of their elaborate scheme. Tara pretended to play the innocent victim to fool everyone. She and the members of the Night Shadow Circle had been coming into the store much lately and hiding out in the secret room in the back of the store. They had been messing around with some powerful, dangerous potions that could kill a whole army. I believe the witch coven was experimenting with the potions. Luckily, they did not have much knowledge of how to use them. They were not the brightest witches, but they were still a threat. I will do what I can to help you stop them.”

“That’s a girl,” Dr. Hector O’Neill said. “I knew you had it in you. I am really impressed that you have this ability. I’ve studied the dark arts for nearly half of my life, and I have never witnessed anyone killing a high priestess. You must be a gifted witch. We will do everything we can to help you fight the high priestess. Just tell us what to do.”

“Everything that I teach you must not leave the room, and you cannot practice it outside of what we are about to do,” she said. “You must promise me that you won’t. These spells have been a part of my family history for hundreds of years and I would really appreciate it that they stay within the family and amongst close friends.”

They both promised her that they wouldn’t share her magical skills with anyone.

“Thanks again,” Taylor added. “We surely appreciate it.”

Chapter 19

Taylor was relieved that they didn’t have to search far to find the person who knew how to kill a high priestess. The answer was right under their noses. They couldn’t get much luckier than that. It could have taken them months or even years to figure it out. Brianna will be both happy and shocked when she finds out the store clerk was one of two witches who killed High Priestess Sophia Laforeze.

After he stepped out of Utopia Galore, Taylor pulled out his phone to text Brianna to see how she was doing and if she would like him to bring home something for dinner while he was out. He sent the text out and then ran across the street to get to his blue Jeep Wrangler. Just before he turned on the ignition, he received a notification on his cell phone. He saw that it was a text message from Brianna telling him that she was in the mood for soup and a deli sandwich for dinner at Polonus European Deli. She texted that she wanted a ham and cheese sandwich with tomato soup. He replied by texting her that he would make a stop and pick them up on the way home. Taylor also let her know that he had big news to share with her.

Brianna texted him back that she couldn’t wait to see him and that she had missed him, along with a heart emoji. He smiled because adding the heart emoji at the end of a text message was becoming her trademark. He responded with a kissy face emoji to liven things up. They were beginning to learn each other’s quirks and habits. It made Taylor feel all warm and tingly inside.

He tried to drive faster through traffic to get to the deli before it closed. It was fifteen minutes past 5 o’clock. The deli closed at 6 in the evening. Taylor hated getting there just a few minutes before they closed because the employees would be close to having everything cleaned and set up for tomorrow so they could leave earlier. Taylor didn’t want to be a bother, so he tried his best to get there faster. He was relieved when he finally reached it about ten minutes later. That would allow them enough time to fix the sandwiches so they could get out by closing time.

There were three people waiting in line ahead of them. A woman who appeared to be in her thirties with jet-black hair and large almond-shaped brown eyes watched him from afar. Taylor began to wonder if the mysterious woman had known him. She then turned toward a woman with blonde hair and blue eyes and whispered something into her ear. The blonde-haired woman then looked up at him. Taylor knew they were talking about him judging by the way they were whispering in each other’s ears, looking and smiling at him while they did so. They gave him menacing looks that sent chills down his spine after they were done chatting. He was beginning to have a bad feeling about them. Taylor was worried they were members of the Night Shadow Circle. Just as they picked up their order, it was Taylor’s turn to order his and Brianna’s food. He noticed them looking back at him before leaving the restaurant. He was then told his order number so that he would know when his food was done and ready to be picked up.

He texted Dr. Hector O’Neill about the women and asked if he should be worried. O’Neill replied by telling him that he would be safe if there was light out and plenty of people were around him. O’Neill also said he should go straight toward Brianna’s house and not go anywhere where he would be all alone. He then told Taylor to give him a text to let him know that he arrived at Brianna’s house safely. Taylor promised him that he would before hanging up the phone.

Taylor knew he had been frightening himself and that the two women may have been talking about something else, and he just happened to be where they were looking. He assured himself that it was all in his head. Taylor then heard his order number. He glided his way between the tables and walked around people to get his food while avoiding the women.

It was now 6, and there was still daylight out. He checked his rearview mirror to make sure no one was following him to Brianna’s house. Taylor sighed in relief when he noticed there was no trace of the two women glaring at him in the deli. Lately, he had found that he had been feeling paranoid more frequently when being out. Taylor was afraid there were eyes all around him watching him, or there was always someone waiting to strike at any moment. He had to shake those thoughts away because it would be unhealthy for him to live that way.

He was happy to be driving in Brianna’s neighborhood now. He could see Brianna’s car parked in front of her house about a block away. The lights in her home were on. After he pulled up into her driveway, he looked around his surroundings first before stepping out of the jeep. When he noticed that it was clear of danger, he grabbed the food and rushed up to the front door. As he was briskly walking up to the door, he noticed that Brianna was sitting on the porch swing, reading a book and soaking in all the sunshine while waiting for his arrival. She smiled, got up from the swing, and ran up to him to give him a hug and a kiss on the lips. Taylor could tell she had spent much of her time crying throughout the day because her eyes were puffy, and there was a glimpse of sadness in them.

“I am so happy to see you,” she said. “It has been extremely hard coping with my sister’s death on my own. I am glad that you can be here with me to offer me support, and I know you will do what you can to comfort me during this trying time. I really appreciate how good you have been to me lately, and I sincerely love you for it.”

“Oh, darling,” Taylor said, “I am so sorry I had to leave you alone today. I hope I can make it up to you this evening. We can do whatever you want to do tonight. The sky is the limit.”

“Just your presence here alone makes everything better,” Brianna said. “Now, what is this big news that you have to share with me about?”

“Well, it turns out your store clerk Tilly and her friend Samantha are responsible for killing Minerva Yaga,” Taylor said. “Tilly just happens to come from a family of witches. Samantha also surprisingly has a background in witchcraft, and she is the one that got Tilly really into it. Tilly’s family have been sharing their secret potions and magic with other family members from generation to generation for hundreds of years. They fight off evil witches. Tilly and Samantha are willing to share some of their secrets on how to defeat the high priestess.”

“That is quite the surprise,” she said. “I would have never expected my sister to hire a good witch that is out to destroy evil witches like herself. She must have known about my sister Tara and the Night Shadow Circle before she applied for her job at Utopia Galore so she and Samantha would have a connection to the witch coven and the high priestess. I wonder how she found out.”

“That, she never said,” he said. “Someone like Tilly must be a part of a much wider witch circle, one that has knowledge of several covens within the area. Something is telling me that they have had to face other evil witch covens and know just what to do with them. Tilly and Samantha will be training us with magical spells for defense against the dark arts. Tilly will not share her family’s potions because she promised to keep them a secret.”

“That is something,” Brianna replied. “Then for sure they should be able to help us. That is good news. It’s hard to believe that the answer was right underneath our noses this whole time. I can’t wait to end this once and for all. I am very hopeful now that we have people with enough knowledge and experience in fighting evil witch covens to help us.”

“Dr. Hector O’Neill and I will meet with Tilly tomorrow at Utopia Galore to discuss a strategy on how we can kill the high priestess and defeat the Night Shadow Circle by taking away their powers,” Taylor said. “If you are up for it, you are more than welcome to join us in this magical battle. It is optional, and we can fully understand why you would not want to participate after experiencing the loss of your sister.”

“I will have to think about it,” she said. “I am coping with a lot right now. If you need another person to help and can’t find anyone else, I will help. I want this all to end just like everyone else does. Besides, it would be nice to have something to keep the loss of my sister out of my mind and focus on something else for a change. I can’t stay cooped up in this house all alone for too long or else I might go insane.”

“Good,” he said. “I will let Dr. Hector O’Neill know. Who knows, these skills may come in handy later down the road. I’m sure he will really appreciate having another able body to join in on the fight.”

They spent the rest of the evening talking about how their day was. Brianna had a day full of ups and downs. There were moments when she was able to find peace of mind, but in other moments, she was grappling with the memories of her sister and remembering how she would never be able to see her again. It was a hard pill to swallow, but she had to find a way to be happy with just the time she had spent with her sister. Whenever Brianna felt lonely and wanted to see her sister, she could always revisit her sister in her memories.

Taylor gently held her throughout the night and offered every ounce of his body to comfort her. Brianna would wrap her arm around him and squeeze him like he was a giant stuffed teddy bear, which he didn’t mind at all. In fact, it made him feel warm and tingly inside. They fell asleep peacefully in each other’s arms. It felt so good having Brianna back home. She had a way of making him feel like things were going to be all right.

The following morning, they spent an hour working out and taking a shower together. Brianna cooked scrambled eggs, bacon, and toasted bagels for breakfast. Taylor enjoyed having someone cook him breakfast in the mornings. Brianna enjoyed having company, and she did not mind cooking at all. She normally just had a bowl of cereal or some oatmeal in the mornings, but seeing Taylor’s eyes light up made it all worth it. He had been cooking and taking care of her the past few days, so she wanted to show her appreciation for it.

Taylor asked her if she was coming with him to Utopia Galore. Brianna told him she may stop by later to see how things were going. He told her that he would support whatever decision she chose to make, which made her happy. Taylor then kissed Brianna goodbye and headed out the door. He could tell Brianna was seriously thinking about joining them by the look in her eye. She was a very strong and determined woman. It would not surprise him if she did.

As he was pulling out of the driveway, he looked in the rearview mirror and noticed Brianna was still standing on the front lawn, watching him drive away. She looked as if she was deep in thought about something. He drove carefully through the neighborhood because there were many kids in the area who rode their bikes or ran across the street. There also were a lot of joggers. It was a nice day to be outdoors, so he wouldn’t blame them for wanting to be out. If he could, he, too, would be taking part in outdoor activities. Despite driving carefully and taking his time, it was a short drive to Utopia Galore. He was surprised to find that Tilly and Dr. Hector O’Neill were already at the store waiting for him. Taylor also didn’t expect to find Tilly’s friend Samantha Witherdale there, too.

“Hi!” Dr. Hector O’Neill said. “Tilly thought it would be a good idea to have Samantha here with us. She said we would need an extra hand or two to distract the high priestess so a couple of us could cast the spell and spread a magic dust around her. Samantha will be super beneficial for us since she has experience with witchcraft and fighting off witches as well.”

“Now that we are all here,” Tilly said, “I must warn you that it is not going to be easy taking down the high priestess. All of you here are going to have to learn the magic spell that I am about to teach you. All must say it out loud while we toss the magic dust on her. We will be attacked by members of the Night Shadow Circle all around us. Each one of you will have to cast a blocking spell on yourself to prevent them from using magic on you. This will not stop them from physically attacking you. You must always be on your guard. Samantha and I will demonstrate fighting techniques.”

“This is so exciting,” Dr. O’Neill exclaimed. “I can’t wait to hear what the both of you have to say.”

“I like your enthusiasm, Dr. O’Neill,” Samantha said. “We need that to boost our spirits up while we are in training.”

“I think it will be a good idea for us to move to the back room so that customers will not be aware of what we are planning to do,” Tilly suggested. “All of us will have to keep our ears open to hear when a customer steps into the store. Plus, this information mustn’t leave this building and fall under the wrong hands.”

Tilly led the group into a small space where they supplied all the store products. Tilly and Samantha stood in the front and waited for Dr. Hector O’Neill and Taylor to sit down. Tilly held up a large bottle that contained a mysterious powdery substance so that the whole group could see.

“Each one of us will be carrying one of these,” Tilly said. “We must avoid contact with the magical dust. We must take the cork off the jar, then spread the dust all around the high priestess. We will then set the inside of the circle on fire while performing orbital obliteration magic. This will destroy her and keep her from ever resurrecting in some other form.”

Samantha then passed out copies of a chant to Dr. Hector O’Neill and Taylor. Taylor and O’Neill read through it quietly amongst themselves. Shortly after they had read the chant, the bell on the store’s door rang. Samantha dashed to the front of the store to help the customer. The group sat quietly until Samantha returned. Tilly told them she didn’t want to risk having anyone in the store hearing what they were talking about.

Minutes later, Samantha led Brianna to the back room. The whole group was stunned to find her there. Brianna quietly entered the room while smiling and waving at everyone. She then took a seat next to Taylor. Brianna sat straight up and turned her attention to Tilly, ready to learn.

“Well, I guess you can count me in,” Brianna told the group. “I’m ready to kick some evil witches’ ass. Thank you for including me.”

“Alright,” Tilly said. “I’m glad you were able to make it. The more people we have, the better the chances we must defeat the Night Shadow Circle. If you ever don’t feel up to it, Brianna, we all understand. I don’t want you doing anything that you don’t feel comfortable doing.”

“No, no,” Brianna replied. “I’ve got my mind made up. I’m ready to take a stand.”

“Good, that’s what I want to hear,” Tilly responded. “The more we have here, the better off we are. First, we need to build ourselves up as a team and learn what each other’s strengths are. We need to come together and form a strong unit.”

“Well said, Tilly,” Dr. O’Neill replied.

“I will start you off by showing you a spell that Samantha and I have been using for years to fight off witches with,” Tilly said. “Afterwards, Samantha and I will help you with casting the spell yourselves. Pay close attention.”

Brianna then quietly took a seat next to Taylor while Samantha and Tilly were about to demonstrate. Taylor took Brianna’s hand and held it affectionately as Tilly and Samantha showed what they must do to defeat the witch coven and the high priestess.

Chapter 20

The next few days, Tilly and Samantha continued to get the trio prepared for the standoff with the Night Shadow Circle. They met each day for three hours, conjuring up spells, were taught about the dark arts, and given instruction on how to protect themselves in the middle of a magical battle with a witch. Brianna, Dr. Hector O’Neill, and Taylor were all handed a wand to use when casting spells. Each one either had no or very little experience with witchcraft. It was fun watching everyone make silly mistakes. It was nice how they could just laugh it all off and try again. They worked well as a team as they tried to build each other up and provide support for one another.

Tilly thought the lessons were going well. Everyone was having a good time and learning more about each other. They were really coming together well as a team. Both she and Samantha thought it was one of the more talented groups of people that they had trained. They still had much more to be taught, though.

“Nice job, Dr. Hector O’Neill, with your spell that creates mirages to throw off your enemy,” Tilly said. “Will you demonstrate it to the others?”

“I sure can,” Dr. O’Neill replied. “Now watch this! Prepare to be amazed.”

The others stood watching in awe as Dr. O’Neill made a mirage of himself waving at them next to a tree. The mirage was so real-looking that it would have even fooled them. They applauded after the mirage disappeared. Dr. O’Neill bowed to his audience proudly.

“Jesse, how is that telekinesis spell coming along?” Tilly asked.

“I think I am getting the hang of it,” Taylor said. “I can move small objects like rocks right now. It takes more work moving bigger objects because it requires much more concentration. I was hoping that you could help me with perfecting the spell.”

“I sure can,” Tilly replied. “I think you are close to having the ability to move just about anything with how fast you have been learning. I think you just might be a natural at this, Jesse.”

“Thanks,” Taylor said. “I really would like to move on to learning another magical skill soon.”

“Alright, good job everyone!” Tilly said. “Come circle around me. I have a few more spells that I would like to share with you.”

Tilly taught them the fundamentals of witchcraft and the only spells they would need to defend themselves and fight off the witches. She was proud of how much progress they had made since the first day they gathered at the store five days ago. Tilly and Samantha commended each other on their teaching skills. They were beginning to feel confident about their chances of defeating the high priestess and the Night Shadow Circle.

Taylor was getting the hang of it, and Brianna was a natural at casting spells. Dr. Hector O’Neill already had a few spells up his sleeve that he shared. He told the group that he hadn’t used magic in several years and that he was a little dusty. Tilly and Samantha were amazed that either one of them even knew magic. They were going to make a fine group of witches and sorcerers, both had thought. The high priestess and her witch coven were going to have her hands full when trying to take them down.

The next day, Tilly took them out into the woods and had them practice their magical skills on dummies. Each time they screwed up, Tilly or Samantha used a reverse spell to correct it. Everyone laughed when Taylor accidentally sent one of the dummies flying when he cast an air conjuration and it landed on Dr. Hector O’Neill’s head. It had stunned O’Neill so much that he instantly was mistaken they were already being attacked by the Night Shadow Circle. He swiftly turned around and turned his wand up to destroy whatever it was that hit him. The dummy was no match for O’Neill. It was annihilated when O’Neil zapped it with his magical wand. Cotton and fabric flew out everywhere. Everyone laughed, making Dr. O’Neill feel like a clown.

“Nice one, Hector!” Taylor laughed out. “I can always depend on you to liven things up. You have always been the clown of the group, always giving everyone a good laugh.”

“Speak for yourself,” Dr. Hector O’Neill chuckled. “I saw you the other day accidentally casting a spell that makes you stay still on yourself. Tilly here had to unfreeze yourself so you could move again. Now, that was hilarious!”

“Okay, you two, I let you have your fun,” Tilly said. “We all need to take this very seriously. Your lives are at stake here! Now, get back to work and no more funny business. We got a high priestess and an entire coven to take down.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Dr. O’Neill replied.

Tilly told him that it was good practice for him because anyone or anything could sneak up on him, and he needed to be prepared to attack instantly. She applauded Dr. O’Neill for his quick thinking.

Brianna learned a spell that would make her invisible. She had planned to use it for sneak attacks on witches. O’Neil taught everyone his wind possession spell that allowed them to channel the wind and send a powerful swoop of it at their opponents that would make them blow several feet away. At times, they found themselves having fun using their newfound magical skills and sharing their new tricks with everyone. They felt like a superhero group, with each one having their own special power.

Tilly warned them to never use their skills for evil purposes or be irresponsible with them, or else she would find them and punish them severely for it. She said it was only to be used for the good of humankind. Tilly made them form a pact that they would never use their magical skills for evil or abuse them. They gathered around and formed a circle. They then stuck their hands in the center and repeated everything that Tilly had said. They vowed they would never abuse their power and that they would only keep it within the group. They then raised their hands and cheered. She then allowed them to go home. All of them left feeling exhausted after a long day of practicing their magic.

“Thanks, Tilly, for a wonderful lesson today,” Brianna said to her as she and Taylor headed out the door. “I appreciate everything that you are doing, and when this is over, you and I will have to go out sometime for a drink together.”

“You’re welcome,” Tilly replied. “Brianna, I am really thrilled about how far along you have come. You have a talent for magic. It must run in the family. Your sister was also very gifted with magical skills. And by the way, I would love to go out and have a drink with you sometime.”

“Thank you,” Brianna said. “I will try my best not to let you down.”

“Oh, you won’t,” Tilly said. “You are a natural. Not many people possess the amount of power that you have. You have a gift. I think you would make a fine witch someday.”

It wouldn’t be long until they were able to fight off the evil witch coven and kill the high priestess. Tilly and Samantha had plans to create a conjuration that would take away all their magical skills so they could be arrested and thrown in jail. This would also enable them to fight back.

Having Brianna involved in the magical training to defeat the Night Shadow Circle was helping her take her mind off her sister’s death. Brianna knew what her sister did was wrong, but she refused to hold it against her. Brianna knew that Tara had somehow lost her way and got mixed up with the wrong crowd. The coven somehow made her feel part of a family and promised her powers that were beyond her imagination. It was an offer that was hard for her to resist.

It was now up to Brianna to avenge her sister’s death and make sure no one else fell for what the coven stood for. Brianna knew there were others like her sister who felt lost and needed a group that made them feel like they belonged. Those were the kind of people that the Night Shadow Circle was looking for. She felt as if she had a purpose in life now. Taylor was beginning to see traces of her old self again. He knew that she would never be the same, but she would have enough strength in her to move on with life again.

Brianna told him repeatedly that she was sorry that it was taking her much longer than she had hoped to return to her once happy-go-lucky self again. Taylor assured her that it was going to take some time and there was no need for her to feel worried about him. He told her that he loved her just the way she was and that nothing was going to change that. Just saying that to Brianna was enough to put a smile on her face.

Since they were doing so well, Tilly decided to give the group the weekend off from training. They were excited about having some extra time for themselves. Taylor and Brianna decided they would use their time to go to the Coast Guard Beach in Eastham. The weather was going to be perfect while they were down there. It was an ideal location to let loose.

Taylor rented out a beach home for them to stay in. They would stop at a grocery store on the way to the beach home to pick up food, drinks, and supplies. Brianna wasted no time in packing up her bathing suit, beach towel, book, toiletries, brush, makeup, and two sets of clothing. She couldn’t wait to feel the cool breeze, the sand between her toes, and the ocean water spraying her as she walked along the beach. It would be a great way for her to escape from everything that was troubling her. The sounds and sights of the beach would help calm her.

Brianna had just finished with the funeral arrangements and had been keeping her parents posted on all the planning. Her parents would be flying into Salem for four days to attend the funeral. Brianna did everything in her power to provide a beautiful funeral service for her sister despite everything her sister had done. Even she deserved a well-planned funeral service and a respectable coffin to bury her in. Taylor was very supportive and helped her with the arrangements.

She took her luggage out to Taylor’s jeep. Taylor was already outside loading up the trunk. Brianna knew he was just as excited as her about getting away. As soon as the jeep was loaded up, Taylor cranked up his stereo to some classic rock tunes to lift their spirits. He spun out of the driveway so fast that the tires on the jeep squealed. They cheered as they gleefully drove away from Brianna’s home.

They purchased wine, cheese, crackers, pasta, ingredients to make a sauce, a baguette, some meat, vegetables, bagels, cream cheese, and potatoes at a small grocery store along the way to take back to the beach house.

Taylor drove the jeep with the windows down. The wind blew through their hair, and it felt so cool and crisp. They felt so alive and free, like a couple of teenagers. They were so close to the beach now that they could smell the salty air. Just before they got to the beach, Taylor pulled off the road at a gas station to purchase a couple of drinks, some ice, and charcoal for the grill.

They arrived at the beach house about twenty minutes later. The white beach house was two stories high and had a large window in the front to allow visitors a breathtaking view of the ocean from inside the home. It had a porch swing on the front porch and a patio on the side with a grill, firepit, and cozy seats. It was a charming little house, and it was cozy inside. During cold nights, there was a fireplace to warm up the home in the living room.

They quickly unloaded the jeep so they could get everything set up inside for a fun, romantic, and adventurous weekend. Taylor made plans to grill steaks and shish kebobs for lunch. Brianna said she would make her homestyle potato salad. They would eat at the patio while enjoying the sights and sounds of the beach. The air was cool and crisp, and waves gently rolled in from the beach. They could hear the relaxing sounds of seagulls squawking, waves gently crashing up against the rocks, wind gushing in the air.

In the meantime, they laid back on the porch swing, nestled up in each other’s arms. They watched a family of five make a spot on the sand. The tree children ran into water that was rolling up into the sand, leaving trails of small footprints behind them. The parents held hands as they watched them. The children giggled and kicked the water up with their feet to splash at each other.

“Do you want to have children someday?” Brianna asked Taylor.

“Of course I do,” he responded. “I absolutely adore children.”

“That’s good to know,” she said. “I was just asking because there seems to be more people these days that are choosing not to have children.”

“Oh, I see,” Taylor said. “How about you?”

“Yes, definitely,” Brianna answered. “I would love to have two or three children.”

“I would love to see you as a mother,” he said. “I think you would be one of those cute pregnant women with a big baby bump and a glowing complexion. I also can see you being a gentle and caring mom.”

“Thank you,” Brianna said. “I, too, think you are going to make a great parent.”

She knew it was a personal subject to bring up, but she wanted to get to know Taylor more on a personal level. They grew quiet. It wasn’t an awkward silence. It was more like a peaceful silence that made her feel comfortable. No matter what they did, they both seemed to get each other.

Chapter 21

After spending two lazy days on the beach, it was time for Brianna and Taylor to face reality. They had to meet with Brianna’s parents tomorrow. Tara’s funeral was scheduled for the following day. It was going to be very difficult for everyone attending to get through the funeral without shedding a tear, especially Brianna, who would be one of the few attending to know the truth about Tara and how she died. It was a senseless way of dying, and she wished her sister would have had enough sense to stay clear of the Night Shadow Circle.

She would speak highly of her sister and not tell anyone about Tara’s involvement with the Night Shadow Circle Coven or what wrongdoings she had committed. Brianna made plans to pick up her parents from the airport at 1 in the afternoon that day. They would be flying in from the Detroit Metropolitan Airport. She was going to be very happy to see them again. Brianna couldn’t wait to introduce them to Taylor. She could tell that he was nervous about meeting them and making a good impression on them. Brianna told him just to relax and be himself. She assured him that they were going to love him and that he had nothing to worry about.

She spent the morning cleaning up the house. Brianna had planned for her parents to stay at Hawthorne Hotel. She knew her parents would want to go straight to the hotel from the airport to rest. Brianna also made a dinner reservation at Rockafellas.

Brianna’s mother, Elsie Rush, was a first-grade teacher, and her father, Roman Rush, was an engineer. They lived in Huntington Woods, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit. Her mother, at times, could be rather fussy and high-maintenance. Her father was easygoing and had a great sense of humor. She knew they would love Jesse Taylor because he was charming and was an all-around good guy. Brianna had told them nothing but good things about Taylor and to try to be on their best behavior around him despite the current circumstances. Taylor told Brianna not to worry about her parents and him meeting for the first time and that everything was going to work out just fine.

Taylor was still working at the newspaper office. He had just called Brianna to let her know that he had to work late tonight. He had to cover the Salem school board meeting. She knew he would have to wait around after the meeting to ask some of the school board members questions before he left. Brianna knew that Taylor didn’t like to cover school board meetings because they were long and boring. She expected him to complain about it first thing when he arrived home.

Brianna was in the kitchen cooking steak, ranch potatoes, and some asparagus for dinner. She was sure that Taylor would be famished after a long day of working. As she was cooking, she was watching the news on the television in her kitchen. Just when she thought everything had calmed down on the streets of Salem, the police had found another dead body in the woods. The victim had died under mysterious circumstances. Brianna quickly turned off the television because she didn’t want to hear about any more deaths in the woods. She had to attend her sister’s funeral tomorrow, and the last thing she wanted to think about was witch covens and human sacrifices. Brianna should have known not to watch the news, but she couldn’t help it.

She then heard a click as the doorknob turned on the front door of her house. Afterward, Brianna heard the door close and footsteps. Brianna knew it was Taylor. She walked into the living room to see if Taylor was in there. A smile broke out on her face when she saw him standing and smiling at her. He held out his arms to show he wanted her to come over and give him a kiss. She ran into his arms and softly kissed his lips.

“I am so happy to see you,” Brianna told him. “I was beginning to feel lonely around here. I’ve been kind of lost in my thoughts today about everything that has happened so far. I really needed someone to talk to.”

“And I as well,” Taylor replied. “Just remember I am always by your side and am willing to lend an ear whenever you need to talk about something that has been on your mind.”

“Thanks, Jesse,” she replied.

“By the way, what is that sensational smell coming from the kitchen?” Taylor asked. “It is making my mouth water.”

“I figured you would come home with a hefty appetite, so I made steak, ranch potatoes, and asparagus for dinner tonight,” she answered. “It’s all done, so you can eat whenever you are ready.”

“Oh, how thoughtful of you,” Taylor said. “I’m going to change clothes quickly, then I can join you for dinner.”

“I’ll go ahead and set up the table while you do that,” Brianna said.

Fifteen minutes later, they were sitting at the table and devouring a homecooked meal, along with a glass of red wine. They started off having a typical conversation about how the day had gone, but then the conversation livened up when she mentioned the discovery of a new dead body found in the woods.

“I saw it on the news about two hours ago,” Brianna said. “The reporter said it appeared they, too, had died from mysterious circumstances. Do you think the Night Shadow coven is behind this?”

“I wouldn’t put it past them,” Taylor said. “The body had probably been lying there for several weeks. Soon, we will be putting a stop to all of this. I guarantee you. We have been training hard to fight these bastards. Besides, we need not think about this now. Your sister’s funeral is tomorrow, and I am about to meet your parents for the first time.”

“You’re right, let’s not talk about that,” she said. “We have more pressing matters to talk about.”

“Have you had a chance today to talk to your parents about the plans tomorrow?" Taylor asked her.

“Yes,” Brianna said. “They are taking this hard. They also couldn’t figure out how Tara just suddenly dropped dead without any plausible reason. I told them she must have had a stroke or something, but they knew full well that Tara was healthy and in shape. I just don’t know what to tell them. I don’t have the heart to tell them the truth about her. It would break their hearts. My parents aren’t exactly young, so them finding out that she was a witch and helping a coven murder people would give them a great deal of shock. I don’t want them to suffer a heart attack and die too.”

“You are just going to have to make something up,” Taylor told her. “Anyway, I am very much looking forward to meeting them.”

“I’m sure they are looking forward to seeing you,” she said. “They didn’t mention it during the phone call because they are still grief-stricken from the loss of their daughter, but I know deep down they are.”

“That’s understandable,” he said. “I am sorry that I will be working tomorrow, and I won’t be there when you pick them up. I feel horrible about it.”

“Don’t worry about it,” she said. “They will understand. I’ll tell them how you had already taken a few days of grievance time off to help me after the loss of my sister, and they will respect you for doing that for me.”

“Thank you,” Taylor responded. “That makes me feel better about it.”

The following day, Brianna found herself dreading the moment that she would be attending her sister’s funeral. She couldn’t believe Tara had died at such a young age. If Tara would have believed in herself, she would have made it far. Brianna couldn’t understand why Tara always felt like she was in her shadow. Brianna thought Tara had great potential, but she never saw it that way.

Brianna sat in the airport, waiting for her parents’ plane to arrive. She watched a family reunite happily. They were hugging and kissing each other near the baggage claim area. Brianna couldn’t help but smile at them. She checked their arrival time and saw that the plane was right on schedule. They should be arriving in fifteen minutes. Brianna returned to her seat. She skimmed through her Facebook page as she waited. She looked up and then noticed several people heading toward the baggage claim that was part of the same flight that her parents were on. She skimmed through the crowds, then suddenly noticed her parents walking. Brianna waved at them to get their attention. They looked up at her and smiled. When they went over, each one gave her a hug.

“Oh, Mom and Dad,” she said. “It’s so good to see you again!”

“We were missing you, darling,” her mom, Elsie, said. “We were beginning to wonder if we were ever going to see you again.”

“Well, you know,” Brianna replied. “I’ve been busy. There has been so much going on in my life right now. I would have visited you two months ago, but I was helping Tara start her business, I had just moved to Salem, and there is a new man in my life.”

“We understand,” her father, Roman, said. “Sometimes, life just gets in the way. Anyway, we are here now, and we can once again spend some time together. If only Tara could be here.”

“So, where is this new man in your life?” Elsie said. “I am just dying to meet him.”

“He had to work, Mom,” Brianna answered. “He feels bad that he couldn’t be here to welcome you upon your arrival. Jesse is very much eager to meet the both of you. He has already taken much grievance time off to help me get through the loss of Tara and to help me with funeral arrangements. I will be able to introduce him to you tonight during dinner.”

“Oh, good,” Elsie replied. “I guess we should go get our luggage now.”

“I’ll help you wheel the luggage out to the car,” Brianna said. “There’s plenty of room in the trunk.”

“Thank you, dear,” her mother said. “Your father and I are awfully tired right now. Could you take us to our hotel?”

“I knew you would say that, so I already made plans to drive you straight to the hotel,” Brianna said. “I figured you would want to rest up, take a shower, and take your luggage up to your room.”

Brianna wasted no time driving her parents to the hotel. The drive there took less than an hour. Brianna would pick up her parents at about 5 o’clock from the hotel and take them to her place, where they could meet Taylor, and then they could all go out for dinner later from there. She knew that Taylor would come home shortly after that time.

“I’ll see you later,” Brianna told them. “Now, get plenty of rest. I want you both to be bright-eyed and bushy-tailed tonight so you can make a good impression on Jesse.”

“We will do our best, sweetheart,” her dad said. “We are so excited to finally meet this young man that you have talked about so much.”

“And he, too, is excited as well,” she replied.

Chapter 22

Taylor drove through traffic nervously as he headed over to Brianna’s house. He knew that her parents would be there. It would mean so much to him for them to hit it off right away. He stopped at a local grocery store to pick up some flowers for Brianna’s mom, Elsie. Taylor remembered Brianna saying that her mother could be difficult sometimes, so he figured the flowers would lighten her mood up some. Also, it would help score him some points with her parents.

When he arrived at the house, Taylor straightened up his tie and fixed his hair first. He then headed up the steps to the front porch. Taylor turned the knob to the door and gradually opened the door so that he wouldn’t startle anyone. He looked up and smiled as soon as he saw Brianna’s parents, Elsie and Roman, sitting next to her on the couch. They all looked up at Taylor as he walked toward them.

“Mom and Dad, I would like you to meet my boyfriend, Jesse Taylor,” Brianna said.

“It’s a pleasure to have finally met you,” Elsie said.

“We have heard nothing but good things about you, young man,” Roman said.

Both parents stood up from the couch and walked over to Taylor to shake his hand.

“Mr. and Mrs. Rush, I am so happy to meet you,” Taylor replied. “I am sorry that I am still dressed in my work clothes. Oh, Mrs. Rush, I stopped along the way and bought you these.”

He smiled at Elsie before handing her the bouquet of flowers. Her eyes lit up as she graciously took them from his hand.

“Oh, they are so lovely,” she said. “Thank you so much. That was sweet of you. You really shouldn’t have.”

“It was my pleasure,” Taylor said.

“He is a smooth one,” Roman said. “You might want to keep an eye out for him, Brianna.”

“You have no idea,” Brianna replied. “Obviously, it clearly worked on me. As you can see, Jesse, my father tries to be the comedian in the family. You’ll have to excuse all his attempts at being funny.”

Brianna then smiled and laughed before kissing Taylor on the cheek.

“Nah, that’s cool,” Taylor responded. “I am quite the goofball myself. I hate to leave you all, but I am going up to clean up and put on some nicer attire for dinner tonight. I look forward to our time together tonight. I’m sure you and Brianna have a lot to catch up on with each other.”

“That’s all right,” Elsie said. “We, too, can’t wait to spend some time with you and to finally get acquainted.”

He rushed up the steps to take a quick shower. He could hear Brianna and her parents chatting with each other. With all things considered, Taylor thought he had made a good impression on them. He knew they were trying to make a sad situation into a happy one, but deep down, the death of their daughter was still eating them up inside. He understood all too well. Funerals weren’t the happiest occasions, but seeing the family gather was a good time to reminisce, get acquainted, and share many more memories.

He quickly took his shower and chose a nice pair of clothes for the evening. He picked out a pair of gray slacks and a light blue long-sleeved button-down shirt, along with a dark blue satin tie. Taylor would splash some cologne on himself and slick back his hair.

About an hour later, everyone was set to go out for dinner. Brianna was wearing her long lavender slip dress for dinner. The color of her dress complemented his light blue shirt. Taylor would be a gentleman for tonight by holding open the door for the ladies. It was a warm evening with a slight cool breeze in the air. A blanket of stars was clearly visible, and the moon beamed brightly. The atmosphere was ideal for a night out.

When they arrived at the restaurant, the host escorted them to their seats and handed each of them menus. They quietly skimmed through the menu. The restaurant’s special for the day was lobster and steak with a side and a salad. The soup of the day was clam chowder. All four of them chose to order the lobster and steak. Taylor ordered a bottle of cabernet sauvignon. He poured wine into each of their glasses so they could make a toast.

“This is such a lovely evening,” Elsie remarked. “If only Tara was here to enjoy it with us. I miss her dearly. I miss her adventurous spirit and her spunk. She was the rebellious one of the family for sure.”

“That she was,” Brianna said. “She left us too soon, but she will always be with us in spirit and in our hearts.”

“I never dreamed that I would be attending my little girl’s funeral,” Roman said. “This has happened all too soon. Jesse, did you ever get the chance to meet Tara?”

“Yes, I did,” Taylor answered. “I know she meant so much to Brianna, and I hate to see her go at such a young age. I never really got a chance to get to know her. Judging by how Brianna described her, she must have been a special person.”

“She was,” Elsie said. “She lost her way through recent years, but she will always be my little girl with a happy-go-lucky spirit and an infectious smile. Tomorrow is going to be a very hard day for all of us. Nothing can describe the amount of pain that I am going through. My heart aches so badly.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Taylor said sympathetically. “I can’t fathom the pain that either one of you are going through.”

“Thank you for your kindness,” Roman said. “I wished we could have met under more happier circumstances. We are happy that Brianna has found you. She really needed someone in her life. Brianna has had a few boyfriends, but they were either awful to her or they didn’t make a suitable match. I can already tell that you and my daughter get along very well. I haven’t seen her this happy in a long time.”

“You have been a blessing in Brianna’s life,” Elsie added. “I’m so glad you are here helping her get through this difficult period. She is very fortunate. I would hate to see her suffering all by herself out here.”

“I feel lucky to have her in my life,” Taylor said. “She has filled a huge void in my life. No one else makes me feel like the way she does. Brianna is a very special person to me, and I love her very much.”

Brianna smiled. She felt warm and tingly inside as she caught Taylor’s gaze over candlelight. Brianna thought that her parents and Taylor were getting along well. She had never seen her parents give this much approval to a man in her life before. It made Brianna feel like she had found *the one.*

The following morning, Brianna woke up nestled in Taylor’s arms. He slept by her side throughout the night to offer her comfort because he knew that she had been dreading the day. Brianna felt like she was reliving a nightmare. For a while, she was able to block out the feelings of sadness and loss. Now that it was the day of Tara’s funeral, those feelings all came back, and the memories of the day she had died were back, too. Brianna remembered seeing her sister drop dead and the blank expression on her face. She could still feel her sister’s stiff body as she held her in her arms. Brianna then broke out into tears. Taylor woke up and kissed her forehead. He ran his hands through her hair and told her that it was good for her to cry it out. Taylor said it was all part of the grieving process.

Taylor then got up and fixed her some breakfast. About thirty minutes later, he brought in a tray with a plate of pancakes, a bowl of fresh fruit, a cup of coffee, and two pieces of toast. She was delighted to see the food and the effort that Taylor was putting in to make her feel better.

“Is there anything else that I can do for you, my lady?” he asked.

“No, thank you,” Brianna replied. “All of this looks delicious. What a lovely surprise!”

Taylor went back downstairs to the kitchen to bring up a tray of breakfast food for himself so they could both eat breakfast together from bed. After they ate their breakfast, they took a shower together and dressed up in the black attire they had set aside for Tara’s funeral. In an hour, they would have to pick up Brianna’s parents along the way to the funeral. Many of Tara’s friends and family members would be attending the funeral service.

It was a gray and gloomy kind of day. The weather forecaster predicted scattered rain and thunderstorms throughout the day. The dark sky and lightning created a dark setting and really matched the mood that everyone was feeling.

Everyone arriving at the funeral was walking quickly toward the church with umbrellas, trying not to get too wet. The rain and mud were really becoming quite the nuisance, but it couldn’t match the insufferable pain that everyone was feeling over the loss of their loved one. Brianna, her parents, and Taylor all sat in the front row. Brianna and her parents were weeping and sniffling softly amongst themselves throughout the service. Taylor wrapped his arm around Brianna and offered her a Kleenex. The funeral service consisted of music, a hymn, a poem reading, words from the reverend, and a family processional. It was a moving service, one that Tara could fully appreciate.

At the end of the service, Brianna and her parents thanked their guests for coming to the funeral. They offered their condolences as they stepped out of the church. From there, they drove to the cemetery for a graveside service. The rain had stopped just in time for it. Afterward, there was a potluck at the Salem Community Life Center. Even though the weather wasn’t ideal for the occasion, the overall funeral went well, and everyone gained a sense of comfort from one another while visiting loved ones throughout the sadness.

When it was all over, Brianna had regained a sense of purpose. She needed to fight the Night Shadow and the high priestess. Brianna refused to see them continue to gain power and recruit young souls such as her sister. This was the end of the line for the witch coven.

Chapter 23

Brianna and Taylor were sad to see Brianna’s parents leave at the airport. They promised to fly to Michigan to visit them during Christmas and New Year’s. They hugged and kissed each other goodbye. Taylor was so glad that he had the opportunity to meet Brianna’s friends and family members.

“Well, with all things considered, I would say everything worked out well,” Taylor said. “I really enjoyed spending time with your parents. Your mom and dad are a likable pair. I hope when we are older, we can be just as happy as they are together.”

“My parents really liked you,” Brianna said. “I can tell. I mean, what’s there not to like about you? You are charming and witty.”

“Now, that I can agree upon,” Taylor replied. “Do you think you will be ready for more training tomorrow?"

“I’ve never been more ready in my whole life,” Brianna said.

The next day, during the first training session after going to the beach and the funeral, it was back to business as usual. Tilly planned on making them work extra hard that day since she had given them a few days off. Neither one was prepared for what she had in store for them.

She challenged them to a game of wits. Tilly cast spells at them unexpectedly to see how they reacted. Taylor was thrown out in midair and landed in a pile of dirt. Dr. Hector O’Neill’s feet were stuck to the ground. However, Brianna was not caught off guard by a bear that was charging at her. She cast a spell that would stop the bear in its track and made it friendly toward her. Tilly and Samantha were impressed.

“Way to react quickly and stay alert, Brianna,” Tilly told her. “The rest of you really need to work on that. If we fought the witches today, some of you could have been killed by your slow thinking. Brianna and Dr. O’Neill are excellent examples of being quick and alert, so you should try to follow their lead. Always be aware of your surroundings and keep a close eye out for the unexpected. We are going to run through a drill that will help you with this.”

Samantha had each of them split up into the woods. Their task was to run and hide from one another, then be sneaky about casting a spell at one another so they could practice defending themselves on a whim without getting attacked. They practiced this drill throughout the week until Tilly was satisfied with the results. Brianna continued to impress others with both her magical and fighting skills. She felt empowered with her new skills. Taylor told her that he was so proud of her and that she had come a long way, both emotionally and mentally, since her sister’s death. He hadn’t seen her this happy for a long time.

Tilly told the group to practice on their own time whenever they could as long as no one else could see them do it. It was important that they keep their magical powers a secret from anyone outside the group. Taylor and Brianna practiced with each other sometimes during lunch or later in the evening in a secluded part of the woods while there was still daylight out. They felt like it helped them grow closer to each other, and they grew stronger together as a team. Afterward, they would have a more traditional date, such as going to see a movie or going out to dinner.

After two more weeks of training, Tilly told Brianna, Taylor, and Dr. Hector O’Neill that they were ready. Samantha agreed with her. Tilly then told them that the standoff between them and the Night Shadow Circle would be on Saturday at midnight, which was two days away. The witch coven would come together in the woods to perform their nightly ritual that night. The three of them looked nervously at each other. They were proud of their accomplishments and felt like a strong team.

“I have every confidence in you,” Tilly said. “You have come a long way and I have watched you grow together as a team. You have made tremendous strides, and some of you have even taught me a thing or two. I am positive that you will complete this mission successfully. I hope that all of you will continue using your skills to help make this world a much safer place.”

“I am very proud of all of you,” Samantha added. “It has been a pleasure working with all of you, and I wish you the best of luck. I hope we can remain friends and keep in contact with each other after this whole ordeal is over.”

“Yes, that would be nice,” Brianna blurted out. “I have enjoyed spending time with all of you a great deal. When I came to Salem, I knew only my sister. But now, I have a whole group of friends that I can count on. I no longer feel lonely, now. We make a great team.”

“Let’s go kick some witches’ ass!” Dr. Hector O’Neill shouted.

Everyone began to clap. Samantha brought out a bottle of champagne and then poured some into each of their champagne glasses. They raised their glasses and made a toast that they would successfully defeat the high priestess and her witch coven. They took a sip of the champagne and cheered loudly.

Brianna and Taylor waved goodbye to everyone after finishing their glasses of champagne. They smiled at each other as they headed out the front doors of Utopia Galore. Taylor held Brianna’s hand as they crossed the street. He noticed a gleam in her eye as she glanced over at him. It made his heart beat wildly.

“You know I’ll take care of you?” Taylor said.

“Yes, I believe I do,” Brianna replied.

“Good,” he said. “It means a lot to me knowing that you trust me. You know, you don’t have to fight those witches tomorrow. My primary purpose in doing this is to protect you. This is completely opposite to what I wanted, but I can understand why you want to take part in it. I’m just saying that it is something you don’t have to do. You don’t have to prove anything to anyone.”

“Thank you for understanding,” she said. “I also appreciate that you care so much for me and that you will do anything to protect me, but this is something I must do. I can’t explain why. I just feel so strongly about it. I don’t want to see anyone else get hurt, including you. If it wasn’t for them, my sister would still be alive.”

“You are such a strong woman, Brianna,” Taylor said. “I don’t know how I got so lucky in finding you. A woman like you is one in a million.”

“Aww, that is a sweet thing to say,” she said. “Possibly, the sweetest thing that anyone has ever said to me.”

During the next two days, before the group had to come face-to-face with the evil coven of witches, they spent time preparing for the battle by practicing their witchcraft and strategizing how they would handle certain challenges when combating the witches. All of them made sure they had plenty of rest and nourishment. They had to make sure they were both mentally and physically strong.

Tara and Samantha offered as much support and encouragement as they could possibly give so that no one was second-guessing their strengths. They needed to go into battle with confidence. Any second-guessing or doubts could mess with their minds, and they would back out of the plan that they had worked so hard to prepare.

Those two days flew by quickly, and now they found themselves on the brink of battle. Tara made sure to send everyone a text to meet at eleven o’clock that night so they could haul out everything that they needed, be organized, and be in position. They were now just hours away from the face-off.

They didn’t know what the outcome would be, but they knew either one of them could die. There was also the possibility that their plan could fail, and the witch coven would have power over Salem or, at worst, the world. The time was ticking, and soon they would find out.

Chapter 24

As soon as word got out about Tara Rush’s death, high priestess Sophia Laforeze screamed out to the members of the Night Shadow Circle, asking them what had happened and who was responsible for her death.

“We don’t know,” one of the members said. “She went out on her own to kill Jesse Taylor. She didn’t even ask any of the coven members to go with her. I told her it was risky doing it on her own with not having enough training in the dark arts, but she didn’t listen.”

“From now on, I don’t want anyone to take on their responsibilities alone,” Sophia scorned them. “Your magical powers are not strong enough. Combining your powers with others in the coven will make you a stronger force to be reckoned with. I also want you to find out who is behind Tara’s death. They have powers that exceed your own. They would be a great addition to the Night Shadow Circle. Violet Swoop and Madelyn Diehl, I will leave the both of you in charge of that. Don’t hesitate to ask for more help. We don’t know what we are dealing with here.”

“Yes, Your High Priestess,” Violet said. “We won’t let you down. Madelyn and I have spent a great deal of time practicing our magical skills. Between the two of us, we should be unstoppable.”

“Good, because if you let me down, you are as good as dead,” the high priestess responded. “You must head out tonight. We mustn’t waste any time. There’s no telling what they got planned next. We can’t take any more chances.”

“Come on, Madelyn,” Violet said. “We got a job to do.”

“Hold on a second!” Madelyn told her. “I have to go get my wand and backpack before we head out.”

“Fine,” Violet said, feeling slightly annoyed. “Hurry up! We don’t have much time. You should always have your wand on you. I have a special pocket on my pants that I can carry mine in. I can sew you a pocket in your pants to store yours, too.”

“That would be nice of you, and I am sure it will come in handy,” Madelyn said. “I’ll be back in a minute or two.”

“Alright, alright,” Violet said. “Just go.”

Violet waited impatiently as Madelyn ran to her suburban to get her stuff. They decided to take Violet’s car into Salem in search of the mysterious person who killed Tara Rush because it was black and had tinted windows. It would be hard for someone to see them parked somewhere in the middle of the night, so they could be easily hidden when spying or following someone.

“Alright, I’m ready to go!” Madelyn said as she walked up to Violet, who was already standing next to her black Saturn Aura with her keys in her hand. Violet then opened her trunk so that she could load it with her and Madelyn’s stuff. Madelyn then placed her backpack and wand into the trunk.

On the way to Salem, they worked on a list of places where someone who was powerful enough to kill a witch would go. There were several sites where one might find a powerful witch, such as a graveyard, a satanic temple, deep in the woods, and even an herb and holistic store. They would start off by searching in ritual locations in the woods that are widely known by other Salem witch covens, then head off to the satanic temple in Salem. The last place that came to mind was Utopia Galore. They knew it was a popular supply store for witches in the area, and it was a hot spot for gossip in the witch community. Someone must know something about a powerful witch capable of killing high priestesses who go there to shop for herbs and potions.

They did stop at a couple of sites known for rituals in the woods, but there were no witches in sight. They had little hope of finding someone in the woods because it was not normal for witches to be in the woods in broad daylight, where people could discover them and find out what they were up to. Afterward, they stopped at the satanic temple, where they ran into a few satanic cult members who said they had never heard of anyone in the area killing off witches, but if they ever found out, they would give them a call to let them know who they were. The witches walked away disappointed about not finding out anything before heading off to Utopia Galore.

Tilly Jacobson was standing behind the cash register when Madelyn and Violet stepped into the store. She could tell right away that they were witches by their necklaces, which had a witch marking on them. Tilly thought it was rather peculiar that she had never seen them in the store before, and she knew of many witches in the area.

“Hi, can I help you find something?” Tilly asked the two witches with a warm and friendly tone.

“We were hoping you could help us find someone,” Madelyn said. “We are looking for someone who can kill evil witches. We heard it through the grapevine that someone possessed this special power, and we believe that they might shop here. I’m sure with the number of customers that you have, you have heard of such a person.”

Tilly knew there was something peculiar about her mannerisms and the way she talked. There was something about the witches that made her not trust them. She then looked up into Madelyn’s eyes and answered her question calmly.

“Unfortunately, I do not know someone with the capability to kill a witch,” Tilly said. “This is Salem, after all; it is practically the capital of witchcraft. There are several witch circles in the area. Surely, it won’t be too hard to find someone who is a member of either of them with that kind of knowledge.”

“It’s funny that someone who works at Utopia Galore all day selling herbs and supplies to witches is unable to give me one name of a powerful witch or sorcerer who has the ability to kill off other witches,” Violet said in a snarky manner. “It seems to me you know more than what you say. I believe you are hiding something from us, maybe even protecting a witch with this magical power.”

“I can assure you that I do not,” Tilly replied. “And even if I did, I sure the heck won’t tell either one of you about it.”

“If we find out you are lying to us, you will regret it,” Madelyn said. “You will face someone far more superior than us with magical powers you cannot imagine. If I was you, I wouldn’t want to play with fire.”

“Oh, I have nothing to be fearful about,” Tilly said. “It’s you that should be afraid. I suggest you get out of my store or else.”

“Or else what?” Violet said in a snarky manner. “I believe she is threatening us, Madelyn.”

Tilly then pulled out her wand and placed it in front of her on the counter. Madelyn and Violet quickly pulled out their wands from their large handbags.

“So, you want to play dirty?” Madelyn said. “See if you can handle this!”

Madelyn swung her wand directly at Tilly while shouting out an incantation. Tilly quickly ducked and grabbed her wand. Tilly narrowly missed Madelyn’s spell that would have thrown her up into the air and pinned her up against the wall so that Madelyn could torture her into giving her answers about the mysterious witch that had the power to kill a high priestess, which didn’t seem to fool Tilly one bit. It was then that Madelyn and Violet realized that Tilly was going to be a tough one to beat.

Tilly quickly put a spell on Madelyn. Madelyn tried to get away but was put on a standstill.

“Who sent you?” Tilly shouted out as she pointed her wand at her. “You better tell me now or else you will face something far worse than what you have ever dreamed of.”

“Hey!” Violet shouted. “You better let her go or else you are going to have to go through me.”

“Like you could ever scare me!” Tilly shouted back as she quickly cast a spell that caused Violet to lose her voice, so she couldn’t talk anymore. “I don’t want to hear another word from you!”

Violet lifted her wand. Then suddenly, Tilly was able to magically release the wand from Violet’s hand and have it float quickly across the room and into her own hand.

“Now, I want you to stand there and pay close attention while I ask your friend some questions!” Tilly shouted out. “Don’t you dare try to pull any tricks on me!”

Violet nodded quickly. She knew Tilly’s power exceeded her own, so she was no match for her.

“I’m going to ask you one more time,” Tilly told Madelyn. “Who sent you?”

“High Priestess Sophia Laforeze wanted us to find the person responsible for killing the previous high priestess of the Night Shadow Circle,” Madelyn said.

“Oh, so you’re members of the Night Shadow Circle,” Tilly said. “If you know what is good for you, you will leave this store and never come back. You don’t even want to know what I do to evil witches like yourselves. The next time I catch you around the premises, I will make sure you won’t leave here alive. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Madelyn pleaded. “Just let us go. Are you the one who killed the previous high priestess?”

“Do you want to stick around and find out?” Tilly responded. “I don’t think that is a risk you want to take.”

“No, no,” Madelyn pleaded. “We will leave, and we promise not to tell our high priestess.”

“Do I have your word?” Tilly asked.

“We promise,” she said.

“Good,” Tilly said. “You made a wise decision. I will now see the both of you out the door. I don’t want either of you to step foot into this store ever again. Do you hear me?”

They both nodded. Before she let them go, she reversed the spells she had cast on the two witches. They rushed out of the store quickly in fear Tilly would cast another spell on them.

Just as Madelyn and Violet set foot out the door, they looked at each other in utter shock. Now, they had to go back to High Priestess Sophia Laforeze to tell her they thought they knew who killed the previous high priestess. However, they were afraid of the reaction that they might get from her for letting the store clerk get the best of them. They begrudgingly headed back to report what the store clerk had said to them and what she did to them.

“I can’t believe you let her do that to you!” Violet screamed out at Madelyn. “We’ve been practicing for weeks to defend ourselves from spells like these that she casted out on us. She made us look weak!”

“Well, if you are such the expert, why did you allow her to take your wand right out of your hand?” Madelyn screamed. “You sure the hell did nothing when the desk clerk had me frozen like that. All you did was sit back and watch. You were a frightened little mouse.”

“I wasn’t afraid,” Violet said. “I was about to cast a spell, but she was too quick and took my wand away from me before I could even start. She had to have been the one to have killed Tara with powers like that.”

“You, think?” Madelyn said sarcastically. “I have had enough of your mouth for one day. I just want to get to the high priestess before we end up destroying each other!”

“I can already tell this is going to be a long drive over there,” Violet said.

“Shut up!” Madelyn exclaimed.

When they arrived at High Priestess Sofia Laforeze’s hiding spot in the woods, she was working on a potion that she was boiling in a pot. Madelyn and Violet hesitatingly looked at her and stood nervously as they told her about Tilly Jacobson. After hearing word, the high priestess stormed across the floor before turning toward Madelyn and Violet with her red, fiery eyes and immediately cast a spell on them. The two witches were turned into mice. They squealed and scampered across the floor.

“I guess I shall take matters into my own hands!” Sofia screamed out. “Never trust a couple of babbling fools. I will find this person and kill them myself!”

Chapter 25

Tilly Jacobson couldn’t believe the nerve of the witches that came into Utopia Galore and dared to ask her who killed the former high priestess, Minerva Yaga. Little did they know who they were messing with. She could tell as soon as they stepped into the store that they were trouble. There was something off about them that she didn’t like.

Tilly knew the witches would not keep their word and that they were most likely already reporting her to their high priestess. She knew that they would tell the high priestess everything that she had done to them and that she was most likely the one behind Yaga’s death, which didn’t concern her one bit. Tilly wasn’t afraid to confront and kill another high priestess. She, Samantha, and the rest of the group would be ready for her.

She then called her friend Samantha to inform her of what had just happened with the Night Shadow Circle witches in the store. Samantha told Tilly that she should not have let the two witches go, but Tilly stood firm by her decision. Tilly argued that the witches could bring the high priestess directly to them so they wouldn’t have to go find her. Samantha agreed that the strategy could help them in the long run.

“However, we could have reported them to the police department, where they could have gotten more information on the whereabouts of the high priestess and what the witch coven was plotting,” Samantha scolded Tilly.

“I hear what you are saying, Samantha, but what good would the police do since they don’t know how to defend themselves with magic?” Tilly responded. “We could be putting more police officers’ lives at risk. We’ve got a group of trained individuals in the magical arts who are more equipped for battle. We mustn’t let two silly witches and the high priestess worry us. We are fully equipped and prepared.”

“How do we know the high priestess isn’t already after you?” Samantha asked. “Aren’t you afraid that she will find you and attack you tonight without anyone there to protect you?”

“That is why I am having you come over and stay the night at my house tonight,” Tilly said. “With the two of us together, we are unstoppable. She will be a fool to come up against us. Besides, she doesn’t have enough time to figure out where I am before we set up our attack on her and the Night Shadow Circle tomorrow during their nightly ritual.”

“I hope you are right,” Samantha said. “You sure do love living on the edge. I just think this might be more of a riskier approach to attacking her, with several witches surrounding her. They may come well-prepared after finding out what you are fully capable of.”

“That I do, my friend, and I love being on the edge,” Tilly said. “It’s exhilarating.”

“Now, what time should I come over?” Samantha asked.

“Anytime you want,” Tilly said. “Be sure to bring your wand over. Who knows what might conspire tonight? I will leave my porch light on for you. I’ll order a pizza and we can watch movies all night.”

“Now, that sounds like a plan,” Samantha said. “I love pizza! Make sure to order a cheese pizza. That is my favorite. I also would like wings and breadsticks.”

“All right,” Tilly said. “Anything for you. You are my best friend, and I love you dearly, after all.”

The night remained calm. It turned out Samantha was right about the Night Shadow Circle coming together and getting organized. High Priestess Sofia Laforeze had not found her, but it wasn’t long until Sofia started to foil a plot on how she would find Tilly and kill her. The high priestess gathered the members of the Night Shadow Circle and told them to go to Utopia Galore and find the cashier who was believed to be responsible for the death of High Priestess Minerva Yaga first thing tomorrow morning. She gave a description of what Tilly Jacobson looked like, according to Madelyn and Violet, to the witch clan. Utopia Galore opened at 11 in the morning, so they would plan a surprise attack on her for then. All the witches discussed what spells they would be casting and devised a plan on how they could divert her attention so they could easily attack her.

“After we kill her, we can celebrate during tomorrow night’s ritual,” Laforeze said. “It will be a huge celebration. One that we will never forget.”

All of them began to clap for the high priestess. Each one of them expected to come out of Utopia Galore victoriously in the morning and take Tilly’s dead body as a trophy to the ritual tomorrow night. They would burn it at the stake and dance around it joyfully.

But what they didn’t know was that Utopia Galore would be closed the next day. Tilly wanted to make sure that everything was set for the attack on the Night Shadow Circle and the high priestess, and in order to do that, she needed to close the store to allow her extra time to prepare. She also wanted to make sure the group was mentally ready for the battle. There mustn’t be any loose ends in the plan.

Taylor and Brianna spent a quiet evening sitting outside on the front porch, looking up at the stars and sipping on iced tea. It was peaceful outside and there was a light breeze. They held hands as they snuggled on the swing chair. They listened carefully to an owl that was hooting nearby. Both were mesmerized by the sight of lightning bugs fluttering in the air.

“Are you afraid of what we will face tomorrow evening?” Brianna asked.

“A little bit,” Taylor said. “Tilly and Samantha have trained us well. They have fought and killed witches in the past, so they are aware of what we are up against. Tilly has every faith in us that we will conquer and succeed. That leads me to believe that we will, and we have little to fear.”

“I wish that I could have the confidence that you have,” Brianna responded. “I admire your bravery. I used to feel small and powerless in these types of situations, but now that I have a few magical spells up my sleeves, I feel slightly more confident. I also know that if I screw up, I have a talented group of witches and sorcerers to back me up.”

“Trust me,” Taylor said. “We will do fine. There’s nothing to worry about. Tilly will do everything in her power to see us come out alive. She knows exactly what needs to be done. We have done everything that we can possibly do to be ready for this.”

“You are right,” Brianna said. “I don’t see why I am so worried about it. I’m going to be as upbeat and positive as I can possibly be tomorrow night. I will have faith in my teammates as well when we face the Night Shadow. We’ve got nothing to lose. It’s them that should be worried.”

“That’s the positive thinking we need to fight them,” he said. “You mustn’t let them play mind games with you, Brianna. They are going to try to beat you when you are at your weakest. You must stay strong and not let them in your head.”

“Got it,” Brianna said. “Thank you for helping me mentally get ready for it. I already feel much better about it. This little talk should help me sleep better throughout the night.”

They then smiled at each other. Taylor lightly kissed Brianna’s forehead and pulled her toward him so he could hold her closer to him. Brianna felt safe and warm in his arms.

“Well, now that I am feeling more confident about our chances, I think I shall go to bed early so that I can be both mentally and physically ready to go up against the Night Shadow coven,” Brianna said. “Good night, darling!”

“Goodnight, sweetheart!” he replied. “I’ll join you shortly. I just need to get a little bit more fresh air.”

Chapter 26

“How dare they close this place today?” High Priestess Sofia Laforeze squealed out in front of the store Utopia Galore. “She must have known we were planning a surprise attack on her today.”

“I’m sorry, High Priestess,” Madelyn said. “The hours of operation on the door even says it opens at 9 in the morning and closes at 6 in the evening. Maybe we can try again tomorrow?”

“Well, she isn’t going to get out of this,” Sofia said angrily. “I will find this Tilly Jacobson one way or another. Madelyn and Violet, I want you to find out where she lives!”

“We will do what you say, High Priestess,” Violet said.

While the angry Night Shadow Circle departed ways, Dr. O’Neill, Taylor, Brianna, Samantha, and Tilly were all getting ready to meet up later in the day at Utopia Galore to make plans for their attack on the Night Shadow Circle.

They met up at the store at 4 in the evening with their wands, protective gear, and other items they would be using during the surprise attack. There was an air of anticipation.

It was now just a couple hours away until their plans would go into effect. They had just finished setting up and were now ready for battle. They tried to remain optimistic about their chances. They lifted each other’s moods by giving each other words of encouragement while playing a game of rummy and eating picnic food until it was time to head out. They joked, laughed, and smiled. It was like they were just hanging out with each other like a group of old friends.

When it was time, they loaded up Tilly’s van with supplies and weaponry before heading out of the parking lot behind Utopia Galore. It was about a forty-minute drive to the new ritual site. Their spirits were lifted while listening to eighties rock music. Tilly told the group she had been eavesdropping on a couple of Night Shadow Circle members a few days ago and heard about them meeting at a new location for their rituals. She said this was one of the many benefits of working at a store that sold supplies to witches.

Once they arrived, they unloaded the van quickly and carried everything up to the spot where they would be hiding. They chatted for a while, ate snacks, and drank cans of soda after they positioned themselves up on a hilltop that oversaw the Night Shadow Circle rituals. They could see some movement in the meeting location of the witch coven. Several witches were carrying flashlights, which made it easier for them to spot the witch coven. A few witches were building a bonfire while the other witches were lighting up torches and handing them out. Some witches were standing around talking quietly amongst each other while keeping an eye out for intruders. Dr. Hector O’Neill, Taylor, Brianna, Samantha, and Tilly tried to stand or sit as still as they could and keep quiet as much as they could possibly so the witches wouldn’t know they were there spying on them.

Tilly told the group to wait until she gave the signal to attack while the witch coven was in the middle of their ritual. Their attention turned to the sounds of chanting and the beat of a drum, eyes widening as they watched the witches circle around the bonfire with torches in their hands. They were suddenly mesmerized by the rising flames of the bonfire. Now that there was a glow, they could get a clear image of the witches in their black-hooded robes. They stood patiently and kept an eye on Tilly so they wouldn’t miss the signal. They were feeling a mixture of excitement and fear.

Taylor quickly checked his cell phone to see what time it was. It was five minutes until midnight. Any minute now, they would be risking their lives in a magical battle of wits. As the time grew closer, he felt his nerves were now getting the best of him. Brianna could see the worried look on his face and his hands shaking. She put her arm around him to comfort him. She smiled at him and told him that it was going to be okay. Taylor couldn’t believe how well she was handling the situation. She has been a real trooper throughout the entire situation.

Those five minutes seemed more like seconds. Taylor immediately told the group it was now midnight. All their eyes were glued on Tilly Jacobson, eagerly waiting for her instruction. They held their wands high and stood in a ready position. The witches took off their robes and began their dance ritual around the bonfire. Tilly suddenly gave them the signal as she began casting a protective spell. Just as the witches became so involved in the dance that they weren’t even aware of the attack, Tilly excitedly joined the others in the fight. Their wands were aglow. As they cast spells, the wands blasted out bright beams of light as they targeted their opponents. The witches were so bewildered and were caught off guard by the attack that they had little time to react. They didn’t even have enough time to pull their wands out of their robe pockets. They ran frantically, screaming, trying to take cover. When they found a safe spot to counterattack, the witches started zapping at them with their wands in full force, casting any spell they could muster. The witch coven was now gaining ground on them. They had to think quickly. In order to defeat the coven, they were going to have to bring on their A-game. Suddenly, Samantha and Tilly began to perform their new conjuration that would take their powers away. It was a genius move on her part. They managed to zap three of the witches that were near them. They were stunned when they discovered they could no longer use their magic. They then ran off.

“Oh, no you don’t,” Brianna said as she cast a spell that would freeze them in their tracks. Taylor gave her a quick high five.

“Way to go, babe!” he told her. “I knew you had it in you!”

“Taylor, watch out!” she told him. “There’s some witches headed in your direction!”

As soon as Taylor spotted the witches charging toward him, he quickly harnessed the wind and blew a few of them off into the distance. When he turned his attention to the other witches, a few began to run away. One of the witches lifted her wand to cast a spell on Taylor, but Taylor zapped the wand right out of her hand. He then flung her up against a tree. She dropped to the ground in agony. Taylor ran up to her wand and snatched it. Dr. Hector O’Neill managed to entrap five witches in a ring of fire. Samantha and Tilly continued to take away more of the witches’ power. Taylor suddenly felt a sharp pain running through his body. It felt like he was being zapped by a bolt of electricity. Brianna then conjured a counterspell that reversed it. The witch started to scream. Samantha took the screaming witch’s power away as she stood in pain. Taylor was then able to regain control of his body.

The high priestess was losing faith in her witch coven and felt like she would have to step in and do the job herself. As the anger within her rose, she flew up into the air.

“You incompetent fools!” the high priestess screamed. “I will now have to take matters into my own hands. I should have known you wouldn’t get the job done. That’s what I get for putting my faith in you!”

“I’m sorry we have let you down, High Priestess,” one of the Night Shadow witch coven members cried out.

“Shut up!” the high priestess snapped back.

She flung out her wand, and a huge fireball shot out from it and struck the apologetic witch. The witch ran screaming as flames burst out from her body.

“Anybody else has something to say?” the high priestess screamed out.

Just as things were calming down, High Priestess Sophia Laforeze landed with full force in front of Taylor, Brianna, Tilly, Samanta, and Dr. Hector O’Neill. She began to charge at them with her razor-sharp claws, fangs, and red beaming eyes. It was their biggest fear. They had to stick with the plan and think fast. If they didn’t, all of them would end up dead.

As she jumped up, Brianna tried to freeze the high priestess, but it had no effect on her. Once Sophia landed on her feet, Dr. Hector O’Neill entrapped her in a high-rising fire ring. Each of them started to toss the mysterious magical dust on the high priestess. She screamed and squealed in agony. Just as they stood around the ring of fire in awe and performed the orbital obliteration magic, a witch surprised them by leaping out at Dr. Hector O’Neill. She struck him with her athame on his back. Blood began to gush out of his chest. He slowly fell to the ground. The witch then pulled it out of his back and ran toward Brianna with full force. Brianna lifted her wand and conjured up a huge fireball that blasted her. The witch was now set ablaze. She screamed. Within minutes, she was on the ground, rolling around, trying to put out the fire.

The group continued to perform orbital obliteration magic as the high priestess continued to squeal in agony. Suddenly, there was a poof of smoke and a luminous red color beaming down from the sky. Her spirit set aglow, rose from her body, and slowly drifted up into the dark star-filled sky. A demonic figure appeared and sucked the soul of the high priestess right out of her body and sent it into its demonic body before going into the ground. The high priestess screamed in agony before collapsing and obliterating into nothing. It was a frightening scene. Brianna had to cover her eyes. Then, just like that, the high priestess was no more. The remaining Night Shadow coven members ran into the dark woods to escape.

The heroic group jumped and cheered after victoriously defeating the high priestess. Taylor called Police Chief Lewis Huber right away to tell him to send the police over to the ritual site immediately while Brianna and Tilly rushed over to Dr. O’Neill as he lay there motionless to see if there was any sign of life left in him. Huber quickly sent over a police squad. Within minutes, they could hear police cars rapidly approaching the area. Flashing red and blue lights invaded the area, and the sound of sirens filled the air.

Brianna burst into tears as she knelt to check if Dr. Hector O’Neill had a pulse. She shuddered as she held his hand and placed two fingers on his wrist. She looked up and told the group that he had none and that he was not breathing as he lay there stiff. Their feeling of triumph suddenly turned into grief. If only he could have been there to join in the celebration, they thought. Taylor walked up to Brianna and gave her a hug and whispered into her ear that everything was going to be all right. Others walked over and gave her a hug as well.

“I can’t believe he is gone,” Brianna sobbed. “It was just a moment ago when he was happy and telling us stories about his experiences with fighting witches. It all happened so suddenly. Just like the way my sister died.”

“I am so sorry, my love,” Taylor said in a soft, soothing voice. “I wished you wouldn’t have had to see any of this. I promise that everything will return to normal soon and we can put this whole nightmare behind us.”

“That will be nice,” she said. “There’s nothing more that I want than that. In fact, we can both use that.”

The ambulance arrived, then suddenly, Emergency Medical Services employees rushed over to O’Neill’s slumped body. They tried to revive him, but nothing worked. They hauled him to the ambulance on a gurney and rushed his body off to the hospital to be put in the morgue. They were saddened by the loss of a friend. All of them were still stunned by it because less than two hours ago, he was smiling and joking with them. It was taking their minds a while to register that Dr. Oneill’s death and everything that had happened that night were real.

Police Chief Lewis Huber questioned them about what had happened. Still in a state of shock, they tried to think clearly enough to give the police chief thorough answers. Tilly jumped in and told the police that Tara had tried to kill Taylor and that they knew the Night Shadow Circle was responsible for many of the recent disappearances in Salem. She also told the police the only way to stop the high priestess and the Night Shadow Circle was to stand up to them and fight them with magical powers. Taylor explained that they had formed a group to learn magical spells in order to defend themselves, destroy the high priestess, and take away the witches’ powers by using a magical potion that Tilly’s family had created. Huber was astonished by what he had heard, but he really shouldn’t be all that surprised because of all the unbelievable events that had transpired recently. He himself had witnessed some of the magic during the ritual.

“I know this all sounds surreal and that it will be hard to explain at the police headquarters and to the courthouse, but you are just going to have to believe me,” Tilly told the police chief. “I can offer proof because we had a few video cameras set up in the location where the fighting took place. You will find footage of the witches performing their ritual before the high priestess turns into this demonic figure with red eyes aglow. I also believe a crew of police officers had witnessed some strange activity involving Brianna’s sister at the hospital. I will send the footage to the police station first thing in the morning.”

“That will be greatly appreciated, Miss Jacobson,” the police chief said with a stern look on his face. “We will continue investigating the situation. If anything arises, let us know. That goes for all the rest of you.”

Police Chief Lewis Huber then pointed at all of them as if he was signaling to them that this wasn’t the last time they would hear from him. They either nodded or gave the police chief a look that showed him they understood what he was saying.

Once the questioning was over, they were all free to go home. Taylor was ready to get both he and Brianna home because both had had to endure so much and were extremely exhausted. They were anxious to return to a normal life, but for now they were in much need of rest. He was hoping they could put their experience with the Night Shadow Circle in the past. From there on, they would never speak of it again.

It was now 3 in the morning and they were exhausted. They stopped at a convenience store on the way home to pick up caffeinated drinks, stretch their legs, and fill up the tank of Taylor’s jeep with gas. When they arrived home, Brianna treated Taylor’s wounds. They both felt dirty, so they took showers and then went straight up to bed. They didn’t even say a word to each other. They fell into a deep sleep instantly. They were so tired that they didn’t get up the next day until early in the afternoon. Last night, Brianna gave Tilly permission to have Utopia Galore closed today after they had successfully fought off the Night Shadow Circle coven. She also told Tilly it would be a paid day off for her because she earned it. Tilly was relieved because she didn’t think she had enough strength to go back to work in a few hours.

Brianna and Taylor both took advantage of their day off from work. They started off the day with brunch and mimosas, followed by a stroll in the neighborhood, and ended with carryout pizza and binging on their favorite television shows. It was the first day that both could feel truly free from all fear while together. They could relax and have normal conversation without any interruptions.

Taylor spent one more night at Brianna’s house before moving back into his own. The couple felt like it was for the best. They didn’t want things in their relationship to move too fast. Taylor told Brianna he wanted to take her out on a real date this time, one that didn’t involve conversations about the Night Shadow and feeling fearful over what was going to happen next. Brianna told him that she couldn’t wait to start a new life with him.

They decided to take a week off from work during the following month to spend some alone time together in St. Lucia. They wanted to have a romantic getaway. They drank tropical alcoholic drinks and enjoyed the warm breeze and the crystal water. They felt like a couple of college kids dancing all night under the stars without a care in the world. They ran barefoot across the white sand, holding hands and laughing and talking like two kindred spirits.

While they were enjoying their getaway, law enforcement was gathering clues, looking through surveillance footage, and questioning their last few witnesses about what had happened during the latest incidents involving the Night Shadow coven. After further investigation, the police found enough evidence that linked the missing individuals in Salem to the Night Shadow Circle. The members of the witch coven were taken into custody and tried in the court of law. Several months later, all the members were proven guilty and were sentenced to prison. The coverage of the trial made national news and people in Salem couldn’t stop talking about it. Reporters flocked to Jesse Taylor and Brianna Rush, wanting to interview them and get more details on what happened during the night they took down the witch coven. Taylor and Brianna declined to talk to them. It was Tilly Jacobson and Samantha Witherdale who were in the spotlight. They openly talked about their experience fighting evil witches and about how they grew up together in Salem. Tilly told the public that if they ever experienced strange occurrences that they believed were witch-related, to contact her and Samantha at Utopia Galore and they would be happy to help them get rid of the witches, along with the help of the law enforcement. They also talked about the night that they fought the Night Shadow Circle and Dr. Hector O’Neill.

The attention that Tilly and Samantha were getting from the media made Brianna roll her eyes and shake her head as if she couldn’t believe what she was hearing, but it helped boost sales at Utopia Galore. The business was now flourishing. Brianna figured with the amount of money she was making from her business, she would soon have enough to retire.

Taylor was promoted to chief editor at the *Salem News*. He was making nearly twice as much money as he had been. Because both Taylor and Brianna were doing so well financially and professionally, he started to think about settling down with Brianna and raising a family with her. Taylor would wait a few more months to see how their relationship was going before deciding to make Brianna his wife. They hadn’t lived together for three months now, but they had been spending a considerable amount of time together. It was like they were practically living together anyway.

Brianna and Taylor felt like they were turning over a new leaf. They now felt safe enough to go for a jog out in the open at any time of the day. They decided to go for a run today because they wanted to get some fresh air, plus Taylor had been stressed out with meeting a lot of deadlines that week at the newspaper office. Afterward, they took a shower and enjoyed an afternoon sipping on tea out on the patio while Taylor grilled some chicken legs, steak, and shrimp. They invited Tilly and Samantha to a cookout. They accepted the invitation and said they would come over in two hours. They both would bring a dessert to the cookout. Tilly and Samantha were now close friends whom they regularly kept in contact with. Despite not liking the way Tilly and Samantha were always in the spotlight talking about what happened with the Night Shadow Circle and the high priestess, they were always welcome to their home. The traumatic experience they faced together brought them closer. They were now like family.

It was warm outside and there was a cool breeze. Brianna started making a garden salad, a side of potato salad, and some baked beans. Taylor grilled some corn on the cob. Having a cookout was their way of saying thanks for helping them escape the terror they were experiencing from being attacked by the Night Shadow Circle. It was the least they could do.

The reunion turned out to be a harmonious one. It allowed them the opportunity to truly get to know each other without the talk of witches and the fear of being attacked by one. Brianna and Taylor were surprised that Tilly had quite a sense of humor. She always appeared to have a mysterious, dark side because of the sinister gothic clothing and dark makeup she always wore. Samantha was the quiet, serious type who dressed very modestly and looked like the teacher’s pet because of the plaid skirt and button-down shirt she wore. Samantha’s glasses gave her the quintessential nerd look. She and Tilly appeared to be opposites, but they really had much in common. Despite the differences between the four of them, they all got along well.

The occasion turned sad and solemn when they started discussing the passing of Dr. Hector O’Neill. They thought his family put on a beautiful funeral. Many people attended and spoke highly of the late Dr. Hector O’Neill. It would not be the same without seeing his smile and hearing him crack a joke. They talked about all their memories of him and how much fun it was to train beside him. All of them agreed that he had a good run hunting down witches. If he knew he was going to die, dying in the middle of fighting witches would be the way he would want to go. They raised their glasses of lemonade and gave a toast in honor of their friend, Dr. Hector O’Neill. They felt his spirit nearby, and they imagined he was smiling at them right now and telling them, “Way to go!”

Brianna decided to close Utopia Galore in a few months because of everything that involved witchcraft; she wanted to put it in the past. She decided to go back to college and pursue a degree in education. Brianna always wanted to teach elementary classes. Because of the rising popularity of Utopia Galore, she had made enough money to pay for her college fees and books.

She didn’t want to go back to being a librarian. Brianna wanted to venture off into a different field of work. Taylor fully supported it. He would continue working at the *Salem News* and would help support her financially as she followed her dream. Taylor was hopeful that he would eventually get a job at a bigger newspaper, maybe even the *Boston Globe*. He would wait until after Brianna received her degree in education before leaving his job. If he got a job in Boston, he wanted to make sure to bring Brianna along with him. They could get married and raise a family there.

Tilly and Samantha decided that they would open their own herbs and holistic business where they could sell their secret potions to the good witches of Salem. Brianna told them she would share everything they needed to know about opening a business and how to run one. She even would give them a discount on all the products that weren’t sold at Utopia Galore to buy and sell at their business.

They made a pact that all four of them would remain friends, and if there came a moment when another group of evil witches tried to take over Salem, they would join forces again and fight them off.

“Yeah, that will be the day,” Brianna replied. “My witch-hunting days are over. I don’t want to hear of a witch or see a witch ever again. But if they ever threaten any of my friends, boyfriend, or family members, that would be a different story. I would fight to the death for them.”

“Me, too,” Taylor said. “I would do everything I can to protect my loved ones, including all of you.”

“That is nice of you to say,” Tilly said. “If you ever want to join forces, just call me. Every one of you have my phone number.”

“You bet I will,” Taylor said while trying to swat a fly. He then accidentally knocked over his glass of lemonade, which splattered everywhere. Tilly found herself wiping away lemonade running down her face and dripping from her hair. The fly was now buzzing around her. It landed right on Tilly’s cheek. She tried to swat it but ended up slapping herself in the face.

They all laughed simultaneously.