“Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seared with scars.”

—Kahlil Gibran
CHAPTER ONE

Toulouse, France
1595

Vivianne tipped her head back to welcome the rain. The sky’s gift revived her parched throat and washed away the days of caked blood and grime from her body, though it could not cleanse the stains from her soul. Water ran over her bruised shoulders and down her gouged arms, stinging where it met skin rubbed raw by rope bindings.

Thunder roiled, inciting a murmur of anticipation from the jostling crowd. Fat droplets spattered the brick platform, stirring a haze that distorted their eager, hateful faces.

She closed her eyes, longing for the peace that would soon come.

“Brûle-la!” someone shouted. Burn her.

Yes, she would burn. Fire was cleansing too. She had much to be cleansed of.

“Madame Vivianne Regina Spurrier, Comtesse de la Feronne du Guard,” the herald began. The crowd hushed. The air thickened with a thirst for carnage and their fear of what she symbolized.

Witchcraft.

She had committed heinous, malicious acts against members of the French court, attempted to wile influential men to her bed for personal gain, bargained with the devil, and forsaken their Lord God. She’d been branded heretic and whore and a diseased piece of flesh to be cut from the arm of society. As the oration of her sins rang out, loathing seeped from the crowd into the rain-bloated sky and made her stomach churn like the clouds above.

For certain, she was a witch, but she had done none of those things. Zyne were not supposed to get involved with mundane affairs. But when she’d foreseen the plague, she could not stand by and let hundreds, mayhap thousands, die needlessly. She’d used her powers to try and help them, yet they hated her. The Synod would not come to her aide. They were more concerned with her trespass against Zyne writ. She had thought they would intervene rather than let the rest of her coven suffer, but no. They would leave her to face the justice of her accusers. And she would carry the cost of all their lives into her next.

The herald continued. For her crimes against God and the crown of France, to which she had given full, documented confession...

She searched the dais for the man who had taken said confession. Father Dolores oversaw the proceedings with a look of cold detachment. Vivianne’s heart throbbed with fury as she stared into his eyes and glimpsed the shadow floating in their depths. She had tested her mettle against the darkness consuming him, while he had delighted in watching the breaking of her flesh and repeated violations of her body. Still, she had emerged the victor. Unclaimed. Unbroken. The strength of her bond to Lucas – the very thing that made her an outcast among her own people – had helped her to withstand the Dark One’s treachery and keep her family’s secret safe. She had broken many rules, but her vow to protect the Legacy still held fast.

For that, she would burn.

The executioner lumbered forward as the herald rolled his damp parchment and scurried away. Villagers she’d known half her life vied for position to cast stones and putrid fruit. She reached inside herself,
searching for the strength to forgive them.

They have only one turn on the Wheel.

Their journey was harder – a single lifetime spent un-awakened to the filaments of energy underlying the mundane world. Her tie to the Conduit had unraveled at some point in the long dark of the past days, along with her will to keep fighting. Her magic had drained, as if her soul had already released its hold on this body. She was ready to let go.

Her coven – all eight of them – dangled from the wall of the keep. Her daughter was safely out of reach of persecution, but her unborn child had been expelled from her womb by the abuses of her captors. Her lover...

Tears sprang forth at the thought of Lucas. Would he find her again? Even for an immortal, eternity was a long time to promise. Because of their union, the Synod would hunt him. She knew he would grieve, and fight. But he was also free to live. To forget. Perhaps even to find another. Their magical bond would never end, but would his love endure lifetimes of searching…alone?

The priest uttered the final prayer for Vivianne’s soul to be accepted into the Lord’s Kingdom. She let her head sink to her chest. Her soul would not be in the hands of their One True God for judgment or redemption. She had many lives yet to live. Endless lives.

However many it takes to find my way back to you…

The executioner tossed a bucket of tar at her feet.

She bit her lip and focused inward, forcing her body to relax. Cries of “Sorcière!” and “Putain!” chorused off the high walls. Raindrops fell harder.

“Brule la! Brule la!” the people chanted in senseless fury.

Father Dolores smirked, the Dark One slithering over his face like the shadow of a passing cloud.

You will pay.

His last words echoed in her heart. Yes, she would pay.

Vivianne let out a slow, deep breath. The flames of the torch danced and sputtered as it neared. She gazed into them. This was the Fate she had chosen – the fire only a doorway. The pain would mark her passage into the next revolution of her journey.

The torch lowered.

A cloud of heavy black smoke choked the air from her lungs before she felt the heat. Flames licked her ankles, but she had no breath to cry out with. The scent of roasting flesh filled her nostrils. Searing pain surged through her veins. Her skin blistered. Her blood boiled.

Let me pass.

And then she felt nothing. She was ready. Another turn of the Wheel. Another chance to do things better. To pay the cost of the choices she had made in this life. She struggled against her bonds, but her flesh melted and fell away. Somewhere, there was a hoarse voice screaming.

Her vision narrowed to a pinprick. The last cry to escape her charred lips was softer than a whispered prayer… Lucas.

***

Sydney, Australia

Present Day

Briana shot awake and tossed off the covers. The sheets were drenched with sweat, and her nightgown clung to her skin, which had erupted in painful goose bumps. She ran her hands over her arms and legs, finding the skin smooth and unmarred. Her wrists tingled, but there were no marks on them.

Just a dream. It’s not real.

Her nightmares were usually just snapshots…blood, crying, pain. She hadn’t had a detailed one in years, and they were never so vivid. None of them had never clung so hard either, as if she’d brought a piece of it back to the waking world. She could still taste the smoke and singed flesh. Acid bathed her throat, and she
stumbled to the bathroom. Not wanting to wake Eric, she closed the door before flicking on the light. Stars burst in her vision. She squeezed her eyes shut and felt her way to the sink, trying to breathe past the burning itch in her chest. She half-expected to cough up a wad of tar as she gagged into the sink.

She fumbled through her drawer looking for her anxiety meds. She hadn’t needed them in weeks. Doctor Stevens had even dialed back her dosages. Valium still got her to sleep most nights, but she was actually starting to believe her nightmares were going away.

Her hands trembled as she tried to wrench the safety cap off the bottle. It popped open and exploded all over the counter. “Dammit!”

What had set her off? The extra wine at dinner? Or maybe the argument they had before bed? She’d been doing better since returning from her recital tour. With a handful of pills down the hatch, she gulped a glass of water and splashed her cheeks. Her reflection was harrowed, a wispy ghost of herself, with a halo of wild auburn curls. Like always, the sight brought another ghost to fore: her mother’s face locked in a silent scream. Hair drifting softly in dark water.

Briana shucked her nightgown and stepped into the shower. The sluice of hot needles grounded her in the present, but then it reminded her of the sensation of melting and peeling skin, so she turned it to full cold and tried to scrub the sting away.

It was just a dream.

She was in her apartment in Sydney. Eric was sleeping peacefully in the next room. Life was normal. They were leaving for New York in four days to sign on her album. Maybe that was it? She hated flying. Her to-do list was a mile long. Not to mention a pivotal moment in her career…and life. That had to be it. When she started to shiver, she stepped out and toweled off.

Briana…

She whipped around with a gasp. A faint outline filled the mirror beside her reflection, with curly hair gone silver. The soft brown eyes that used to be her safe harbor in any storm were staring right through her.

Her heart plummeted to her feet.

Briana, her grandmother’s voice was clear as a bell in her head. The floor tilted. She lurched, grabbing the vanity for balance.

You have to see.

“Oh, no.” Tears spilled from her eyes. “No. No. No.” This couldn’t be happening now. Not Ce-Ce. Not again. This was not supposed to happen. Never. Again. “Ce-Ce…no.”

You have to see. Her grandmother’s face was so frightened and sad, pleading with her.

Briana clutched the sides of her head, willing with all her might for the vision to stop. It felt as if reality was catapulting around her while she held still, huddled on the cold tile of her bathroom floor. The last time this had happened, she’d felt her lungs filling with icy water as her mother gulped her last breath. She’d woken the next morning to a world that was forever changed.

Briana, daughter of my blood, you have to see, the voice tolled again, stronger.

Somewhere in the distance, there was a loud pounding, a deeper voice yelling her name over and over. All she saw when she closed her eyes was a froth of white pouring over jagged rocks, spinning, spinning… Glass cracked against water, and the world imploded.

See…

“Ce-Ce! NO!” She screamed until she ran out of air, and blackness took her.

When she woke, the bright Australian sun was beating against her eyelids, which felt paper thin. Eric was posted on the bed beside her, his normally serene face lined with worry. He held out a glass of cool water. Her throat was shredded. She took a long sip before collapsing back to the pillows.

“You scared the hell out of me.”

“I’m sorry.” She closed her eyes to the steady throbbing in her temples. She couldn’t remember how many pills she’d taken in her panic last night. Enough to suffer a wicked hangover.

“Why didn’t you wake me?”
She cracked an eye open at his accusatory tone. He meant well, but Eric would never understand. No mundane ever could. The best doctors and therapists and serenity retreats money could buy would never heal her. Not even her own people could help her beyond what had already been done. She had accepted years ago that she was too broken to be fixed. So, she had perfected the art of taking the beating and hiding the cracks. “It was only a nightmare. I thought I was fine.”

“Well, you’re not fine. I’m going to cancel our trip. I called Doctor Stevens. He’s on his way.”

She sat up at that. “Our trip? It’s my record deal. You know how important this is to me. I have to go.”

“You’re in no state to travel. I just found you in hysterics and practically catatonic.” His hand, gentle, yet firm, pressed her back. He took a calming breath. “This is my fault. I’ve been too focused on work and not spending enough time with you. Forget New York for now. Let’s take a pleasure trip instead.” He stroked her hair, then her cheek. “Belize?”

“Eric—” she started, bracing for another performance where she convinced him she was fine and life should go along as usual. Her phone buzzed on the bedside table, making the words catch in her throat. She let out an aggravated sigh and reached for it, but he snatched it up first.

“Hello? Yes, this is her number.”

Briana glared at him as she sat up. Then she noticed she was in a clean nightgown and tucked into fresh sheets. A tray of food sat at the foot of the bed. A vase of lilacs perched on the nightstand, permeating the room with their calming perfume. All of her frustration evaporated. He was only trying to take care of her. Maybe he also had a point. A week on the beach soaking up the sun and drinking mai-tais couldn’t hurt. Put everything on pause. Take a deep breath. Get her feet under her before embarking on this new path in her career.

“Who is this?”

She gave him a meek smile and held out her hand for the phone.

Eric’s expression locked-down into that unreadable politico mask as he handed it over. “Astrid?”

Her entire body went stiff, the smile withering. The fine hairs up her arms stood on end. Her hand felt leaden, moving in slow motion as she lifted the phone to her ear. Astrid was the best friend she’d ever had, but they only spoke a few times a year now, unless… Her lip trembled, but she steeled herself. “Hello?”

“Bri.” Astrid’s voice was small. She sounded as if she’d been crying. “It’s Ce-Ce and Tara.”

No… it wasn’t real! It couldn’t be. Not Tara too!

“There was an accident.”

Briana closed her eyes. That spinning feeling took hold again. She rubbed her breastbone as her body recalled the feeling of her insides being crushed with the pressure of tons of water. Ce-Ce’s words echoed in her bones. Her throat felt like it was full of gravel as she answered, “I’ll be on the next flight.”
CHAPTER TWO

San Juan Islands, Washington

Through eight human centuries and countless hosts he’d hunted the relic. With Cecelia dead and the line of Spurrier witches finally ground to dust, only one hurdle remained. The key to the vault had to be hidden somewhere in the old crone’s house. He began his search in the downstairs study.

He’d thought the wily Oracle had foreseen his endgame and magically cached it away before he could reach her, but his tracking spell had pinpointed it to within a few hundred feet of where he was standing. She hadn’t had time to hide it.

A thrill shook his muscles as he tore books from their shelves with a flick of his wrist.

The study turned up nothing but useless Zyne trinkets.

He climbed the stairs to the attic and tossed through every box, even checked for loose boards and secret nooks. On his way to Cecelia’s bedroom, he contemplated razing the whole thing to the ground and sifting through the ashes.

As if in answer, the house’s blood wards flickered to life.

Cold lightning stampeded up his spine. His guts curdled. He doubled over and faded to the porch. Raw power rose from the earth, singeing his tongue as the wards strengthened to a steady hum, locking him out.

“Damn the old magics.” With a sneer, he called up an invisibility shield and faded to the woods at the edge of the property.

Active blood wards on the Spurrier estate could mean only one thing.

Briana had come home.
Thirty hours and several tense conversations later, Briana was on a ferry chugging through Washington’s steely blue waters towards North Wake Island. Eric had insisted on coming with her at first, but luckily he’d had business to take care of that bought her an excuse to meet him in New York instead. She’d convinced him it was for her own protection, that she didn’t want the media peering in on her private family life and making a spectacle of her grief. That white lie had bought her three days. More than enough time to meet with Ce-Ce’s lawyer, collect the mementos she wanted to keep, and make arrangements for the rest. The bodies had already been cremated in a formal Zyne ritual she wasn’t sorry to miss. She never wanted to stand in front of a pyre again.

She’d made the first part of the journey on auto-pilot, but now that she was here, she couldn’t wait to get back to the steady routine she’d worked so hard to maintain in Sydney. Without that framework, she relied more on drugs to keep her nightmares and resulting insomnia in check. Then it would take weeks to get back on track. She loved Ce-Ce and Tara and had always missed them terribly, but if she was totally honest, she’d never intended to come back home.

Home…

She gripped the frigid metal rail until her hands ached. Could she even call this place home anymore? The only thing left here was heartache. It seemed like she’d spent her whole life picking up pieces. Here she was, doing it again. Only… there weren’t enough pieces to pick up anymore. All she could do was sweep the ashes under the rug and move on.

The sun was sinking into the western horizon, saturating the dull grey clouds with orange and pink watercolors. Wild, jagged islands climbed out of the choppy waves. Her teeth began to chatter. Forty-two degrees felt colder than she remembered. The thin cashmere sweater she was wearing was the warmest thing she’d packed, further proof her brain had gone numb after Astrid’s phone call. It was one of those moments that was etched into her history now as a before and after, a reality shift.

She’d run to the farthest corner of the globe to escape anything reminiscent of her Zyne heritage and her family’s tragic history. She’d thrown herself at her studies, and then her music. Then she’d met Eric – with his decadent lifestyle and his carefree charm, and a work ethic that actually rivaled hers. She found she fit into his world quite well. Smile for all the cameras. Put on a brave face. Fake it till you make it. She was a master at that. She projected the image of the successful artist girlfriend for all the auction dinners and charity events, and the rest of the time they gave each other plenty of space. It wasn’t the Happily Ever After painted in the tabloids, but it was the closest thing she would ever find. Despite everything, she’d managed to build something stable. Her nightmares had quieted, old wounds slowly scarring over.

Then that vision had struck out of the darkness like a whip and flayed her wide open again.

It was the first death omen she’d seen since her mother, since before her power had been bound. It felt as if something had snapped deep inside, left a fissure oozing ominous doubts into her psyche – a nagging thought that was getting harder and harder to ignore. The closer she got to the island, the more something felt wrong. It made her skin tingle and her shoulders cinch tight.

She could be strong for a few days, suffer through the signing of papers and the condolences one last time. But if she gave the past a foothold, she was afraid the walls of her fragile fortress would come crumbling down.
What then?

Downtown Evergreen Cove hadn’t changed much since Briana’s youth. She drove from the ferry dock and felt as though she’d passed through a time portal. The same art studios and bookshops lined the cobbled streets, as if they’d been preserved in a painting. A traffic light had been installed on Front Street, and a few of the businesses had closed in favor of more trendy shops and restaurants. The high school had a new gym, which dwarfed the original building. Beyond that, cow pastures and farms gave way to familiar winding roads that tunneled through the tall firs.

She pulled up to Ce-Ce’s just after four. The faded dove-white Victorian with its wrap-around porch and oak tree sentinels had once encapsulated everyone she held dear. Now it loomed like a thunderhead. Every muscle in her body coiled into a tight ball, starting with the one in her chest. The glossy green door with its polished brass handle mocked her. She would find no heartwarming greetings on the other side. The house was empty of life now, a hollow shell of the home it had been.

The windshield of her rented Lexus fogged up as she waited for her courage to kick in or her sense to take over – whichever came first. After ten paralyzed minutes, she decided to find a B&B.

A sharp rapping sounded on her window, making her jump in her seat. She let out a slow, calming breath as the opaque glass slid down.

“Goodness, Briana Celine, what are ye doing? Come get in the house.” Geraldine Cameron, her grandmother’s neighbor and oldest friend, stood beside the car with her hands on her hips. She’d gained a few wrinkles, but her tone was just as in-charge as ever. She yanked Briana out of the car and gave her a head-to-toe appraisal with eyes that had glassed over white.

Briana squirmed under her gaze, knowing the Oracle was looking through her Second Sight. Could she see the dark cloud bundled around the broken spirit within? The threads of pain that were the only thing holding her heart together?

“Hello, Mrs. Cameron.”

The old woman smiled softly, her grip tightening around Briana’s stiff fingers. Her eyes cleared, revealing a soft violet-grey that twinkled with fondness. “Have you forgotten yourself, child? It’s Aunt Geri to you, and well ye know it.”

She also knew arguing would be pointless. Briana let Geri usher her up the porch and through the front door. The light tick-tock of the grandfather clock echoed through the downstairs hall. The scents of orange oil and sweet herbs made it feel as if she’d been gone just a few days. She took in the pictures on the walls, the furniture perfectly in place. As they walked into the kitchen, she half-expected to find Ce-Ce standing at the sink staring into the backyard, as Briana had found her so many times. Her throat tightened. “I thought it would look different.”

“Ach, no. Things don’t change much in these parts.” The gas stove clicked as Geri turned it on. She moved comfortably around Ce-Ce’s kitchen, while Briana huddled in the far corner, arms wrapped tight around herself. Nothing had changed, except for her. She no longer belonged.

“Sit down, dearie.”

A fresh muffin appeared before her as she sat at the beat-up farm table in the nook. A piping hot cup of tea followed shortly after. She inhaled a deep breath of chamomile-mint steam, and some of her tight muscles softened. She sighed. “Thank you.”

“My Stars, ye look so much like your mother, child.” Geri stroked her hair before tucking Briana into the rose-scented folds of her knitted shawl. “I had forgotten. It’s good to have ye home.”

She smiled and patted the wrinkled hand on her shoulder. “I’m only staying a couple of days.”

“Aye. We’ll see.” Geri sat down. Her silver brows lifted as she blew over the top of her tea. “I suspect those friends of yours will have a might to say about that. Ye’ve been gone a long while.”

Briana studied the nicks in the knotted pine, frowning. It had been hard enough holding Eric at bay for three days. She’d avoided factoring her two oldest friends into the equation. Astrid would want to grieve and console each other. Briana could brace for that. But Kean? Thinking of him just fuzzed her thoughts, her memories smudged from years of trying to rub them out. A cowardly part of her hoped they wouldn’t cross paths at all. “I might not even get a chance to see them.”
“Oh, they’ll make sure you do.” Geri’s left eye winked, a seemingly unconscious gesture. “Especially that Fitzgerald boy. He was just by earlier today, askin’ when I expected ye. I told him I’m an Oracle, not a cuckoo clock. He’s a Taurus if ever there was one, the stubborn brute. All piss and no patience.”

Briana choked on a bite of muffin and had to force it down with a long swig of tea.

Geri chuckled as she got up to clear the table.

“What’s so funny?”

“Come lass, ye know damn well,” Geri scolded. “I told ye – things don’t change much around these parts.”

“That was ages ago.” Briana scooped her muffin crumbs into a neat pile on her napkin. She couldn’t imagine Kean wanted anything to do with her. She’d made sure of it the last time she’d come home after college. When he’d asked her to stay and marry him. Forgiveness wasn’t Kean’s strong suit.

“Dear child. When are you going to learn? Try as ye might, ye cannae outrun Fate?”

Briana opened her mouth to argue, but Geri cut her off with an impatient sigh. “Now then, I’ve stocked the cooler and put fresh sheets on all the beds. Come and collect the ashes when you’re ready. There’s something else of your Legacy we should speak of, but don’t worry on it now.”

Geri pinched her chin and stared into her face with hawk-like scrutiny, clicking her tongue in vague disapproval. “Get some rest, Briana Celene. You’ve a trial ahead yet. I’ll be right across the way if you need me.”

I won’t be here, Briana thought, watching her go. She couldn’t stay there alone.

“And get the thought outta your head about staying anywhere else. They’re all booked up.” Geri smiled sweetly and swung the front door closed behind her.

Briana shook her head, muttering to herself. She’d forgotten what a pain it was to have an Oracle around. She would have to mind her thoughts better. She stood there for several minutes, shivering in her flimsy sweater, afraid to disturb the air with her presence. A sharp breeze shook the trees outside, moaning as it passed over the steep-pitched roof.

The hair on her forearms pricked. She crossed into the front sitting room, and confirmed that everything was in fact still in the exact place she remembered. Eventually, she made her way to the center of the room. Her fingers glided over the smooth cherry wood of the piano top. She slid onto the bench, remembering her first lessons, side by side with Ce-Ce for hours. She gently lifted the cover and hovered her fingers over the keys. Her hands shook so badly, she couldn’t bring herself to play. She swallowed back tears and slammed it closed.

A vase of Geri’s prize-winning silver roses sat in the middle of the dusty wood top. Glinting beside them in the late-afternoon sun was one of Ce-Ce’s crystals – a smooth, polished piece of rose quartz the size of her fist. As a child, Briana had inherently known they thrummed with magic, but didn’t know exactly how they were used. She’d never been allowed to touch them. Before she realized what she’d done, she was cradling it in her palms. It warmed.

The curtains fluttered.

Briana…

She gasped and turned around, but there was no one there. Just her, the grandfather clock, and the wind. What she wouldn’t give to speak to Ce-Ce one more time, to tell her how sorry she was. To tell her she’d always loved her. That she ached with missing her so much.

The crystal pulsed with a faint vibration.

“Oh, Ce-Ce.” She squeezed the crystal to her chest. How idiotic to think she could come back here and remain detached. Ce-Ce and Tara were gone. How could she not regret every minute she’d stayed away, no matter what it might have cost to come back?

A child giggled.

She turned to see a five year old Tara standing in the foyer, covered in mud and holding up a toad almost as big as she was. Black ringlets were plastered to her rosy cheeks. Her gap-toothed grin flashed with mischief.

Tears sprang out of Briana’s eyes. Her breath hitched.

“Tara Jade!” Ce-Ce’s voice called from the kitchen, “don’t you take one more step in this house soakin’ wet!”

BUY FROM AMAZON
Tara laughed again and lunged up the stairs. Briana leapt from the piano bench to follow, but paused on the bottom step. She was barely holding her nightmares at bay, now ghosts were running amok in her mind in waking hours – not a good sign. Doctor Stevens would say not to indulge in the hallucination. Even knowing it was more than a figment of her imagination, she was inclined to agree.

Tara stopped halfway up the stairs and looked over her shoulder. “I’m gonna put him in your bed, Bri!”

“Tara,” Briana whispered, helpless against the pull of the memory, “wait.”

Her little sister stuck out her tongue and disappeared around the corner. Footsteps echoed down the hall, and a door slammed upstairs. A shroud of quiet fell over the house.

The floorboards creaked as she approached her old room. The last time she’d visited, Tara had taken it over. The walls were covered with posters and graffiti, the floor littered with clothes and fashion magazines. Now the room was clean, painted a cool green, and tastefully decorated with some of Tara’s paintings. Their mother’s dressing table took up the far wall, laden with candles, perfume bottles, and jewelry. Pictures were tucked into the corners of the mirror, of Tara with friends Briana had never met.

Tara wasn’t a little girl anymore. She’d grown up… and Briana had missed it. She had never gotten to know the woman her baby sister had become.

Her gaze swept over her reflection in the mirror. She’d spent hours watching her mother sit at this very table, brushing her hair and singing softly. Now she saw an empty copy of that vibrant woman looking back. Makeup smeared, blouse stained and wrinkled, rebellious auburn curls springing loose. She’d been back a few hours and all the polish and poise she practiced was already melting away. Underneath was the image that had haunted her the last fifteen years – her mother’s forest green eyes, the smooth curve of her cheek, the pout of her lower lip.

Briana bit it until she tasted blood.

This is your baby sister, take care of her, her mother had said the first time she held the squirming Tara in her arms. She’d promised to. She’d failed. She wasn’t strong enough. She wasn’t brave enough. Tara was gone. They were all gone.

It’s your fault.

“I’m s-sorry.” She clenched her fist around the rose quartz, willing her message into the ether. “I’m so sorry.”

The reflection glared at her.

She would be so ashamed of you.

“I’m sorry!”

She threw the quartz, and the mirror erupted into a web of cracks. Her voice broke on a sob. She’d failed them all, and now they’d left her completely alone in a world that was either tortured with nightmares or drugged into numbness.

She sank to the floor, surrendering to the tears she’d managed to dam up the last day and a half. She cried until she lost her voice. Until she barely had the energy to climb onto Tara’s bed and curl into a ball. Exhaustion made her breaths deep and her eyelids heavy. She fought off sleep for as long as she could, afraid of what horrors awaited her on the other side, but eventually it caught up with her and pulled her under.

The first thing she noticed upon waking some-odd hours later was that night had fallen, and she was frozen through. The second thing was…doorbell.

Her body responded automatically. She tumbled from the bed and zombie-walked towards the hall, tripping on her cast-off shoes. The lopsided bun fell out of her hair as she slugged down the stairs, wiping under her puffy eyes. A few steps later, she remembered the last two days. It wasn’t all a nightmare she could write off. The worst part was real.

A third ring.

“Coming!”

She bounded down the last few steps, swung the door open, and forgot to breathe.

Kean Royce Fitzgerald was on the porch, about to knock.
Bri looked spooked – not exactly the reaction Kean had hoped for. It had taken every ounce of his restraint to wait so long to see her, knowing how much she must be hurting. Yet after envisioning this moment for years, the reality of it stopped him in his tracks. He didn’t know her anymore, hadn’t known what to expect.

“Kean.” She sucked in a breath as if she would say more, but just stared at him.

He lowered his arm slowly, a nervous smile tugging at his lips. “Hullo, Bri.”

Seconds stretched into eons as they re-learned the lines of once familiar faces. She looked even better than in his dreams. Her mussed hair and the smudges under her pensive green eyes gave her a sultry edge, no matter how tightly she pressed those curvy lips. She had other curves too, all of them screaming for his attention. She’d left him a pretty young girl…she’d come back a heartbreaker. Desire slammed into him, backed up, and did it again, making it hard to form thoughts, much less words. He cleared his throat. “You look…good.”

Bri slanted a doubtful look at him, but her cheeks took on some color. “Do you always hang on the bell like that?”

“I didn’t ring the bell.” He tried not to scowl. He’d thought she’d be at least a little happy to see him, despite the circumstances.

“Yes, you did.” She sounded eager for an excuse to snap at him. She must have felt it too – that sizzle in the air that was making it hard for him to remember simple English.

“Nope. It’s busted. I just got here when you opened the door.”

“But—” Bri frowned and reached past him to press the button, which hadn’t worked in years.

“I heard it ring. Three times.” She kept pressing, a faint blush spreading across her face. “That’s weird.”

“Not really,” Kean said. “Ce-Ce did that all the time. She always had a place set for me when I came begging for scraps.” Bri’s gran had been the most renowned Oracle in the Northwest. She’d never needed a doorbell to tell her company was coming.

Bri scoffed as she backed into the hallway. He could tell the memory had touched her. Whether it softened her or just hit a tender spot remained to be seen. She blinked, giving no hint. “Did you want to come in?”

He stepped into the house, running his hand over his freshly cut hair. Bri stilled under his lingering gaze. Another awkward silence filled the foyer.

“You really do. Look good, I mean.” Damn. Here she was, a world-class woman, and the best he could come up with was good. He sounded like a backcountry hick and wanted to kick his own ass back onto the porch and start over.

She dropped her gaze to the floor before letting it drift up his body, darting glances at first, then with more cling. Kean’s heart gave a heavy thud when she bit her lip.

“You look…bigger.” Confusion flitted across her face, as if she hadn’t meant to say it out loud. Then she laughed – a delicate, musical sound. His shoulders relaxed.

“I missed that.” He’d sworn he wouldn’t come on too strong, even if this was the chance he’d begged the Universe for, but with Bri right in front of him, he didn’t care what had brought her back.
“Just don’t screw it up.”

“Missed what?” A hopeful lilt laced her question.

His plan to go easy sailed out the window.

“You.” To hell with trying to impress her. It wasn’t poetry, just the truth.

“I—” Bri’s eyes misted over. “I missed you too.”

Kean offered his hand, and the world froze for the heartbeat it took Bri to consider. She answered by wrapping her arms around him and tucking her head into his chest. He didn’t know what to say, so he just held her.

Much too soon, she let go, wiping her eyes. “Sorry. I don’t know where that came from. I guess I’m just glad to see a friendly face.”

“I’m glad you’re back.”

She shook her head and led him into the kitchen. “I’m not really back.”

He stalked in behind her and leaned against the counter, watching her sift through drawers. Her movements were jerky, nervous, not her usual fluid grace. Something was wrong, aside from being flustered by the sight of him.

She slammed another drawer closed and scratched her head.

“Third one down on your left.”

Bri clenched her jaw as she opened it, then set the tea out on the counter and turned on the kettle.

“Any other odd occurrences, besides the mysterious doorbell incident?” He leaned in her way and pulled two mugs down. Geri hadn’t given him any details, but she’d hinted that the tides of Fate were turning, that Bri would somehow come back into the fold. Her power had been bound since she chose her path at seventeen, but trauma could sometimes bring on a temporary flare of magic. The soul would tap into the grounding force of the Conduit without conscious knowledge. To the untrained, it could be unpredictable, even dangerous. That was one reason he wanted Bri where he could watch over her.

She circled her fingers around her wrist. That deer-in-the-headlights look came over her again. Spooked.

“Well…”

“What is it?”

“I saw Ce-Ce and Tara earlier. Not like live spirits, I mean, they weren’t doing anything new…just an echo of my memories. But it was so real. Just stirred me up a bit I guess.”

“Sounds like a psychic echo.” The Oracle. It made sense that would be Bri’s power. Her bloodline was full of them.

“You know that’s not possible.” Bri’s calm-and-cool act was fully on, but the flash of fear in her eyes told a different story. The kettle whistled, buying her a small reprieve from his study while she poured.

“It’s rare, but it happens.” Kean leaned closer and turned her around to face him. He could still see plain as day when she was hiding something. “That’s not all, is it?”

A shudder gripped her body and she tried to slip away. “I really don’t want to talk about it.”

Kean rubbed her arms gently, holding her in place. He hated to see Bri suffer, but as far as he was concerned, she’d done enough running from Fate. If it had come to find her now, she had to face it. At least here he could protect her. “You need to tell me.”

“I had a regression. A strong one.” She looked at the floor between them. “They had been getting better before that.”

That figured, if her power was flaring. As young children, all Zyne had memories of past lives, but Bri’s nightmares had plagued her well into her teens. Something told him that wasn’t what had her on edge though. He lifted her chin and gazed into her face, but couldn’t see past the defenses she’d built there.

“What else?”

She swallowed and looked away as tears filled her eyes. “Ce-Ce appeared to me. Right after she died, or right before…I don’t know.”

He let her go and eased back. Precognition, psychic echoes, regressions, and an astral visit? All with her powers bound.

Holy. Shit. “That’s…a lot to handle.”

He and Astrid had agreed to evaluate the situation once Bri was home and to tell her about their plan together. But Bri’s powers were already tipping the scales. There was no time to lose. If they were right
about the accident, they were going to need Bri to uncover the truth, and she would need them more than ever.

Bri sat at the table and stared into her mug. "Yes. It is a lot. I can't believe they're gone. I think my brain is just refusing to accept it. I feel like I'm going crazy."

Kean joined her, wondering how to ease into this as gently as possible. Subtlety was not his forte, but he gritted his teeth and tried. "You're not crazy. Your power is flaring."

She shook her head and sipped her tea. "It can’t be. It's bound with blood magic."

"How would you explain your visions then?"

She clenched her jaw. "Grief. Survivor's guilt. Coming back here after so long just brought the memories to the surface."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "And the regression?"

Bri laughed – not her normal laugh – a little too high and desperate. "Stress. Maybe my meds need to be tweaked. It happened before I even knew about the accident." She paused for a thoughtful moment, and then nodded into her teacup.

Kean reached for her arm and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "It's more than that, and you damn well know it. You can't ignore this. Maybe if we release the binding—"

She set down her cup as if it were delicate crystal and narrowed a glare at him. "I don’t want it released. Haven’t you been paying attention all these years? I don't want any part of this. I only came here to settle some business. I'm not staying."

He stiffened at the thought of her abandoning them again. How could she ignore such an obvious message from the Universe? "You are a part of this whether you like it or not. This is your home, your heritage."

She pulled her arm from his grip. "My heritage is gone. The last of my family is burned to ash. There’s nothing for me here."

"Nothing!" He spread his hands on either side of his mug, forcing himself to relax. This wasn’t going how he’d envisioned at all. "What about me? Astrid? Geri? We need you. Don’t you think it’s high time we figure out what the hell is going on with your family? What if there really is a curse?"

She was already shaking her head before he got the words out. "Don’t you dare talk to me about curses." She waved her hand in the air by her head as if clearing away cobwebs. "This whole damn thing is a curse. I never asked for it. I'm supposed to have a choice, and this is not the life I've chosen." She crossed her arms over her chest. "I shouldn’t have even come back."

Bri's mug broke into shards, exploding from the inside. Hot tea cascaded off the table and into her lap.

Kean winced. Dammit. He should have better control, but that woman got under his skin like no other. Bri leapt out of her chair to brush the beads of liquid from her skirt with shaky hands. "What the hell, Kean?"

"Sorry." He took a deep breath and reined himself back in. "You may be too stubborn to see it right now, but you're in danger, Bri. You need us as much as we need you. More. I can protect you."

Bri put the kitchen counter between them, her eyes wide with shock. Astrid was right – as usual – he was the wrong person for this job. A bull in a china shop. His charm was obviously a little rusty. He stood and gulped the rest of his tea in one painful swallow.

"You're not hearing me. I can't do this."

"It’s you who doesn’t understand, but that doesn’t change the truth. Your power is a wild card at this point, and if you’re not prepared, it could break you. You’ll have to face that eventually. One way or another."

Bri hugged her arms around herself, her expression a thin façade about to crumble any second. His stomach sizzled with bitterness at the thought of how she would reject the comfort he wanted so badly to give her.

"You should go."

He stared at her face, telling his legs to move, but his feet stayed rooted in place. Their gazes met and held, and Bri took in a shaky breath. Behind her tough mask he saw a well of sadness and fear. A phantom ache of her pain blossomed in his chest. Why was she always pushing him away when she needed him the most?
Kean leaned over the counter, letting the truth fill his eyes. “You turned your back on us, Briana, but no matter what you do, I won’t do the same. I can’t.”

*I won’t let you go this time without a fight.*

Bri’s mask started to crumple. Her face went ghost pale. “Get out.”

He clenched his jaw, already wishing that for once he’d kept his big mouth shut. He moved toward her, intent on making things right, but she spun away. Her reflection stared from the dark windowpane as she built an invisible wall between them. He had the sense to know pushing anymore tonight would only make it thicker.

Kean showed himself out, sighing as he stepped off the porch. He started his truck already hearing Astrid’s voice in his head: *Way to go, jackass.*
CHAPTER FIVE

You turned your back on us, Briana.

Kean’s words echoed through her thoughts as she swept up the shards of china from the kitchen and the broken mirror in the bedroom the next morning. She’d tossed and turned all night, too wired to sleep and too afraid to dream. At dawn, it was ten PM Sydney time. She was utterly exhausted, but had pulled herself out of bed. The upstairs bathroom needed scrubbing, the downstairs floors needed polishing, the curtains needed vacuuming. She rationalized that she was doing her part to make sure the house would sell quickly, but the reality was she needed something to channel her nervous energy into. She would normally work, but couldn’t bring herself to play music in her current state. She was still too raw. Damming her feelings up and mentally checking out with busy work seemed like a much better strategy.

There were dozens of unfinished craft projects scattered all over the house. She buzzed from room to room collecting a jumble of tarot cards, crystals, pendants, and half-burned candles to stow in Ce-Ce’s study. As a child, the small room tucked in the back corner of the house where her grandmother held readings had always fascinated Bri. She would linger in the hall, playing with her dolls, listening to the soft murmur of voices and summoning bells as the scents of sage and incense seeped out and cocooned her.

When she opened the door, she stumbled back, spilling everything in a heap in the doorway. All the books had been ripped from the shelves. Drawers were pulled out, their contents scattered across the hardwood. The furniture was toppled over. The antique Tiffany lamp broken into a hundred pieces. Shredded cushions and pillow stuffing littered the floor.

Either a tornado had hit the study, or…someone had torn through it.

A foreboding chill crept along her skin. She kicked the heap further into the room and slammed the door, then leaned against the opposite wall, trying to catch her breath. Her heart pounded down to her feet. Her vision went spotty.

Breathe. She focused all of her spinning thoughts on one thing: oxygen. After ten good breaths, she sat down in the kitchen to think through things rationally while the straps cinching her lungs slowly loosened.

This is nuts.

No way was she cut out to handle this. Insomnia, delusions, night terrors, and now panic attacks. She had not come pharmaceutically prepared to manage a breakdown of this magnitude. She had already been buckling under the pressure of her record deal and the proposal she was sure would follow soon after. Those problems seemed like a lifetime ago, squashed by the weight of the past and the uncertainty of the future. The thought that Kean could be right – that her power could be flaring beyond her control – was the most terrifying of all.

Just keep it together for two more days.

And then what? Kean said she was in danger.

What was going on here? Why would someone break into Ce-Ce’s house just to ransack one room? All the valuables and jewelry were untouched, as far as she could tell. It looked more like someone had been searching for something. Should she call the police? Had Ce-Ce gotten into some kind of trouble? Or…had she finally gone off the deep end?

You would be the last to know.

Kean was right about one thing. She had turned her back. On all of them.
What else was he right about?
When she’d first heard the rumors, Ce-Ce had assured her there was no curse on their family. Children are cruel and people – especially witches – are superstitious. If there was a curse, she would see it. Bri had believed her. According to the coroner, her mother’s death had been an accidental drowning. Still, in a small town, gossip takes root and spreads like weeds. The other story was that her mother had gone slowly crazy, lost her husband and her mind, and eventually took a long walk off a high cliff. Some rumors were easier to dismiss than others.

Ce-Ce had wanted her to see something. What? She couldn’t make herself recall the images from that night again, though she would never escape the echo of them. Her heart squeezed tight, refusing to beat for a moment.

Despite wanting to run as fast as she could back to her safe, predictable life two continents away, she trusted Kean. He wouldn’t lie, and he wouldn’t scare her for nothing. If he said she was in danger, he must have good reason to believe so. But he also clearly still had feelings for her, and therefore an ulterior motive for wanting her to stay. She needed hard facts. Luckily, she knew just the person to see for the no-holds-barred truth.

Even with its yard of overgrown sea grasses and thorny bushes, Astrid’s cliffside bungalow was hard to miss. The skull and crossbones flapping on the flagpole were a dead giveaway.

Briana did a quick make-up double-check in the visor mirror. Her belly was wound up tight with nerves. Astrid had once been the only person in the world whose opinion mattered. Until Briana’s decision to move to New York. The chasm between them as a result of that one choice had not been breached since. They’d written letters, talked on the phone, sent birthday cards…but it had never been the same. Their connection had slowly dwindled.

“You turned your back on us.” Kean’s words wouldn’t leave her alone. How would Astrid react to seeing her after all this time? Was she holding a grudge too?

When she stepped onto the porch, a Halloween witch lit up at her feet and cackled. The screeching, howling, and barking of what sounded like an entire zoo erupted inside. A few seconds later, the side curtains twitched, and the door swung open.

“Astrid, you look like the cover of Vanity Fair.”

Bri’s belly was wound up tight with nerves. Astrid gave rib-crushing hugs. She squeezed, then held Bri at arm’s length. “Hot damn, girl! You look like the cover of Vanity Fair.”

“Astrid, you look like the cover of Vanity Fair.”

“Don’t just stand there like you’re selling encyclopedias, come in!”

Astrid’s house smelled of potting soil and patchouli incense, which barely covered up the pungent animal musk. A sea of furry creatures sniffed at Bri’s feet as she stepped onto the shag carpeting. Tails wagged, curious cat-eyes stared, and a few heads of the rodent variety popped up from the crowd. The main part of the house was one large room with a woodstove in the middle, the chimney and exposed wood beams met at the central peak.

“I wish you’d told me you were coming,” Astrid said over her shoulder. She scooped up an Iguana perched on the back of a chair and put him into his habitat, right beside an aquarium full of hermit crabs.

Bri followed her to the gleaming stainless steel kitchen that took up half of the greatroom. The southern wall was made entirely of glass. Shelves full of plants, flowers, and cages spanned from floor to ceiling.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” She shook her head, mesmerized by the sprawling view through the windows. Distant islands emerged from the fog, fringed by a golden halo of light. The scene warmed her to the core, like only the feeling of coming home could. Or maybe it was Astrid’s welcoming vibe. The tension she’d harbored inside about their meeting unfurled. “This is so beautiful.”
“It’s home. When I bought the property I lived in a tipi the first two years. I just finished building the house this past summer. I’m glad you got to see it finally.” Astrid stood beside her, a fat orange tabby cat cradled in the crook of her arm. “So. How are you, Bri?”

The question sounded so familiar, so steady, as if they’d seen each other only yesterday. Bri forced a smile and reached over to scratch behind the ginger cat’s ear, a million thoughts and questions whirling through her brain. “I’m really not sure.”

Astrid squeezed her hand, her expression grave, the hint of tears building behind her velvety blue eyes. She said more with that one look than anyone else could in a whole epitaph. Unfortunately, it made the loss that much more real, seeing it mirrored in Astrid’s sweet face. Bri braced for the inevitable condolences, the thought of which made her stomach flop around like a fish on dry land.

A sly grin broke over Astrid’s face. “This reunion calls for mojitos. They’ll knock you on your ass. I make my own rum.”

She let out a surprised laugh and wiped the tears from the corners of her eyes. “I thought you’d never ask.”

An hour later, they were lounging on the overstuffed sofa, and Bri was gazing into the swirling mint leaves of her second—third?—mojito. The chit-chat and banter between them flowed as easily as ever. She was thankful that Astrid somehow knew that she wasn’t ready to talk about their recent loss quite yet. It gave her time to soak in that elusive feeling of belonging that only your best friend can give you. It coated her with a warm, cozy feeling that she hadn’t known she’d been starving for. For the first time since returning to the island, she felt like she was home.

After the mandatory life catch-up, she wasn’t sure how to broach the subject occupying most of her thoughts. Seeing Kean had unsettled her deeply, and not just his accusation or the things he’d said about the curse. The passion just under the surface of every look he gave her had made her heart race. He’d left her confused, angry, remorseful, Aroused.

Despite grief and exhaustion, her body had reacted to his smoldering hazel eyes, broad shoulders, and muscular thighs on a visceral level she’d forgotten even existed. How could he still have such a powerful effect on her?

The mint leaves swirled, very un-prophetically, and her next thought slipped out of her mouth without permission. “Why isn’t Kean married with five babies by now?”

Astrid snorted. “Have you ever seen Kean give up on anything? I don’t think there’s been a day since you left that he hasn’t found some way to bring you up. I’m actually kind of sick of you.”

She smiled in reply to Astrid’s barb. She’d always made fun of the mushy stuff. Bri and Kean called her their Prickly Pear. “Ha, ha. I’m serious. How is it even possible that he hasn’t been tagged and bagged?”

“Oh, they’ve tried. He had his party years where I didn’t bother to learn their names. Then he dated a few mundanes. They were nice girls, but no one he would ever get serious with. He had one girlfriend for a couple of years, Zyne, from a good family. She was a Ward too. They did all kinds of crazy shit together – total adrenaline junkies. He seemed ready to commit, but the family couldn’t stand her. Turned out they were right. She made a move for Drustan.”

Bri cringed. Drustan was the middle of Kean’s three older brothers. He ran the business side of their family vineyard in Eastern Washington out of his office in Seattle. Like all the Fitzgerald boys, he was total heartthrob material. And, like all the Fitzgerald boys, he put family before everything. “That must not have ended well.”

“Last I heard, she moved to North Dakota and married a mundane.”

“Oh. I almost feel sorry for her.” Bri made no attempt to keep the sarcasm out of her voice. She was totally not an adrenaline junkie. And why was she getting jealous over a girl who wasn’t even in the picture anymore?

“You’re not fooling anybody, you know. Least of all Kean. There’s still unfinished business between you two.” Astrid said business like most people would say fellatio.

“So. What am I supposed to do about it?”
“If I were you, I’d opt for hot, sweaty consolation sex.” Astrid winked and bounced the cushions underneath them.

Bri tried to look scandalized, but couldn’t maintain it when one of the nearby dogs chose that moment to jump up and bury his wet nose in her crotch. She burst into a fit of giggles. It had to be the mojitos. Or maybe just the joy of learning she hadn’t lost her best friend. She hadn’t laughed so easily, or so hard since…she couldn’t remember. Recovering some composure, she clutched a pillow in her lap and cleared her throat. “Speaking of Kean, he came to see me last night.”

“I heard.” Astrid hopped up and pulled her apron back over her head. Since Bri had left for New York, she had been to culinary school, studied abroad in Europe, and returned to North Wake to open an incredibly successful gastropub. The smells emanating from the kitchen had been enough to tempt Bri to stay for dinner. That, and she didn’t really want to be alone in Ce-Ce’s house any more than she had to.

“He seems to think I’m in danger from my family curse and need his magical protection. Were you going to weigh in on that at some point?”

“I was warming up to it,” Astrid said, slicing into a filet of fish. “I should have known he would go charging in. I told him how it seemed like you already knew when I called.”

Bri shrugged. “Ce-Ce appeared to me, but that’s not so unusual, right? She was a powerful Oracle. She could have reached out to any Zyne. With our blood connection, I would be easy.”

She watched Astrid’s expression carefully for any sign of what the two of them were keeping from her. No luck. The Edgewoods were legendary for their poker faces. “That takes an enormous amount of will, even for a witch as powerful as Ce-Ce. What did she say?”

“Just my name. She wanted me to see…something. There might have been more. I was still reeling from the regression I’d just had.”

Astrid froze as she bent to place her platter in one of the double-ovens. “Interesting.”

Bri picked at the pillow in her lap. That was the reaction she’d been afraid of. Kean was probably right about the power flare too, damnit. The two probably were related somehow. She knew practically nothing about magic or her heritage. “I never wanted any of this.”

“I know,” Astrid replied with no inflection.

“But?”

She wiped her hands on her apron, appearing lost in thought. “But maybe Ce-Ce sent you that message as a warning.”

Bri rose and crossed the room to sit at the counter while Astrid mixed them another drink. “Whatever you guys aren’t telling me, spill it.”

The wheels were visibly turning as Astrid debated her best course. She finally sighed, dropping all pretense. “This was not just an accident. I can’t explain how, but I know it in my bones. It feels wrong.”

“I know. I feel it too.” Like the ground had crumbled underneath her and she was stuck in that terrifying moment of suspension before plummeting into the abyss. She knew the feeling intimately. “It never feels right to lose someone you love.”

Astrid scoffed. “You’ve been to too much therapy. I mean it feels Zyne kind of wrong. Ce-Ce was acting strange for days before the accident…stranger than usual. Like she saw something coming. There was a bag packed in the car, full of Tara’s clothes. Then there’s the little quandary of the unexplained storm and rockslide. Weather was clear everywhere else on the island that morning.”

The tiny hairs on the back of Bri’s neck stood on end, causing her to shiver. That definitely sounded supernatural. The more she heard, the more she knew that her first instinct had been right. Ce-Ce hadn’t gone crazy and torn her own study apart. She couldn’t have imagined a storm and rockslide into existence. “I can add to that list. Someone broke into the house.”

Astrid dropped her knife. The room went eerily quiet. “What? When?”

Bri told her about the study.

“Fuck.”

“But at least that means it’s not a curse, right?” She could really use some good news.

“A curse would be easier to counter. This means there’s a killer in our midst. We need to step carefully. We don’t want to alert our quarry of the trap we’re going to set for it.”

“Wait. That makes it sound like I’m going to be bait.”
“You’re not bait.” A hard glint glazed Astrid’s eyes. She tossed her knife into the air, end over end, caught it, and chopped a head of cabbage in half with one swipe. “You’re the secret weapon.”

“Okay…except I’m useless magically.”

“That’s bull. Ce-Ce reached out to you. She wouldn’t do that without a purpose. So, the next question is, what does she want you to see?”

Bri shook her head. “I didn’t see anything useful in the vision.”

“Not see—See—as in, use your gifts.”

“I don’t have any gifts.”

Astrid pinned her with her hardest no-bullshit look. “Just because you chose not to use them doesn’t mean they’re not there.”

“I made my choice. I thought there was no going back.” At seventeen, every Zyne chooses to either pursue the study and practice of the Threefold Path, or else have their magic bound. When her time had come, Bri couldn’t get away from the island—or her nightmares—fast enough. She sometimes regretted cutting herself off from a big part of her family, but she’d found comfort in chasing her dreams instead. They were about to come true, too—which was probably why her life was falling apart.

“If you want to go exactly by the book, yeah, but a binding is just a ritual. All magic has counter-magic. Nothing is irreversible.”

“So that’s what you want too? For me to unbind my power?” Bri had been haunted by memories that weren’t hers for as long as she could remember, and she had a feeling that was just a trickle. Did she really want to open the floodgates? What was the point if she ended up locked in a padded cell, or worse?

“It’s still your choice.” Astrid said, “but hell yeah! I want you safe, and I want to find whoever is responsible for this. Now I know you are the key. Ce-Ce never did magic without a reason.”

“Let’s say for a minute that I go along with everything you’re telling me. What about my life? Am I supposed to just put everything on hold? Drop my career? Tell my almost-fiancé, ‘Sorry, honey, I have a magical murderer hunting me. And by the way, I’m a witch?’”

“Well…yeah. This is bigger than just you.” Astrid’s eyes, the color of the night sky, twinkled with unshed tears. “Don’t you think you owe it to them? Don’t you want to know?”

“Of course I do!” But she’d also seen the strain of her mother’s powers. She’d watched it drive her father away, tear their family apart. Powerful Oracles were rare because it was the hardest of the Threefold Paths to master. It could drive you—quite literally—insane. Ce-Ce and Geri handled it better than most, and sometimes even they seemed to be talking nonsense to nobody. If only Astrid could see the blaring Vegas-style sign that said This Way Lies Crazy.

Everything was changing so fast. Her entire world felt unsteady, as if the tracks of destiny were uprooting under her feet and twisting into a new pattern. Now her best friend wanted her to open Pandora’s Box, bursting full with—quite literally—her worst nightmares. She didn’t have the courage to let her escape hatch close all the way. She had built a life in Sydney. A normal, settled, safe life.

But.

Whatever Ce-Ce was trying to tell her, it must be important. If a witch was hunting down her family members, running would do no good. She didn’t know anything about combating magic—she’d never worked a single spell. If other people got hurt because she was too afraid to do her part to uncover a murderer, she would never forgive herself.

“This is the only way to get justice,” Astrid said.

“I don’t understand why the Synod hasn’t gotten involved. Isn’t dispensing justice their job?” The Synod was responsible for guarding the Legacy from the mundane world and upholding the laws of magic use. Her father had left them when she was ten to take a Council position at the Arcanum on one of the nearby islands. Surely he’d heard about Ce-Ce and Tara’s accident. Didn’t he care about his youngest daughter’s sudden and unexplained death? She knew he was cold, but how could he just look the other way?

“The Council will only intervene if there’s firm evidence that magic was involved. As long as Gawain is cock-blocking us with his ‘open and shut case’ bullshit, there’s nothing we can do. But Ce-Ce’s message could be the smoking gun. If we can prove there’s someone behind this, they will have to act.”

Briana pulled herself from the mire of wretched feelings that came with thinking of her father and tried
to catch up. “Wait... what does Gawain have to do with anything?”

“Oh, you didn’t know? Pesty Gawainey Waney is not only the town Sheriff, he’s also the coven Sigma. When the Synod speaks, he is their voice.” She mimicked gagging herself.

“Wow. That must really get under Kean’s skin.”

Astrid rolled her eyes. “History’s longest pissing contest continues — you have no idea. Most of the coven would follow Kean if he wanted to challenge for Sigma, but he refuses to be the Synod’s message boy. One thing I will say for Gawain is that he’s a good little stooge.”

“How were you planning to get around that?”

“Ideally? We would break off from the coven, so that he can’t stick his nose into what we’re doing anymore.”

“You can do that?”

“We could, but we need a third. Kean’s a Ward, I’m a Summoner, we need an Oracle.” Astrid gave her a pointed look.

Right. Back to this. “What about Geri?”

“I tried that angle. She said it’s not her place. We figured she knew something we didn’t...”

The rest of the thought hung in the air between them. That explained why Geri seemed confident she wasn’t leaving so soon. But as everyone was so adamant about pointing out – it was her choice to make.

“Well.” Bri shoved her empty glass aside. No matter what it was going to cost, she couldn’t turn her back now. She’d spend the rest of her life looking over her shoulder. “I can give you a couple of days to see if there’s more to Ce-Ce’s message. Maybe that will be enough to get the Synod to investigate. But we have to do it in a way that doesn’t require releasing my binding. Those are my terms. Take them or leave them.”

“Deal, but I reserve the right to renegotiate at a later date.” Astrid smiled as she washed her hands. It lit up her face, and the mood of the whole house seemed to lift. The birds started chirping happily. The plants rustled. “So, how did things go with you and Kean last night?”

Bri scooped up the black kitten batting at her toes and snuggled it under her chin. “Same as always.”

“Anything broken?”

“Just a teacup.” Maybe both of their hearts.

“Huh.” Astrid lifted her eyebrows. “He doesn’t lose control much anymore. You must have really pissed him off.”

Bri nodded. She still knew how to push Kean’s buttons, and once he went over that edge, he was incandescent in his fury. The thought made warmth pool in the center of her body. Not that she’d pushed him on purpose. Mostly not. She hadn’t considered what else had changed in the years she’d been away. He’d grown a half-foot and put on at least thirty pounds of muscle, but the deepest changes were invisible. Kean was a Ward, a Zyne warrior. He’d broken the cup with a tiny slip of unrestrained will. She couldn’t help wondering how much raw power was leashed inside him now.

“Well, I hope he’s over it, ‘cause he’s gonna be here any minute.”

Bri hissed in a breath as the kitten sank his claws into her neck. She set him on the chair and rushed across the room to snatch up her purse and dig for her compact and lip gloss. “It was all part of your plan to get me liquored up before telling me that, wasn’t it?”

Astrid grinned, revving her food processor like an engine at a red light.
Kean found Bri on the beach, wrapped in a scarlet sweater the wind kept trying to strip away. Sunlight sparked off her hair in strands of ruby fire. Even if he’d wanted to stay angry, the sight of her in the flesh washed away everything but the truth carved into his soul: he still loved her.

She shaded her eyes to watch him approach. The tide was going out, a ring of wet sand widening beneath her with each lapping wave.

He glanced down at her pretty pink toes. “You did notice it’s November?”

“Yeah, well, those are five-hundred dollar shoes.”

He whistled between his teeth and revealed the paper-wrapped mug he’d brought. “Good thing I didn’t explode those. Here.”

“Is this a peace offering?”

Maybe he could have handled things better last night. Astrid had already read him the riot act, even though everything he’d told Bri had been the truth. None of that mattered now. “Astrid said you’re going to help us.”

Bri studied him for a thoughtful moment. “I thought I didn’t have a choice.”

“You always have a choice.” Kean kicked a rock free from the sand to roll down the beach. Second chances, on the other hand, were rare. The wind brought Bri’s sweet, honeysuckle scent to him, mixed with the salt air, and it took all his control not to reach out. This was their second chance, if she’d only see it.

She crossed her arms over her chest. “I’ve died so many times in my nightmares, unable to escape. My body doesn’t know the difference. I don’t just see it, I experience it – all the pain and suffering that’s not mine. I wanted to be free to live a normal life. Now you’re asking me to open myself up to more. You have no idea what it’s like to not be in control of your own thoughts and feelings.”

She shivered, and he stepped close enough to wrap her in his shields. They blocked the chill of the wind and muffled some of the noise. He felt more at ease as soon as they closed around her.

“No, I don’t know what that’s like.” He did know how awful it felt to be helpless. That was why he needed her to stay where he could make sure she was safe. “But I do know that whatever magic is behind this, you’re better off with me standing in its way.”

He took her hand and pulled her back towards the path. Bri fell into step beside him, as if they strolled like that every day. “That’s what I’m trying to say – I’m not sure there’s anything worse than the monsters in my own mind. You can’t protect me from them.”

“Your power is overwhelming at first, but once you learn to control it, it won’t be so bad.”

She squeezed his hand, a shadow of doubt passing over her face. “I think I might be broken. That’s why Ce-Ce never pushed me to stay. That’s why she bound my magic without even questioning my decision. What if she knew I couldn’t handle it?”

“Maybe she was just trying to keep you safe. She always knew more than she let on. Hell, if she’d told someone instead of trying to handle it herself…” He stopped there. No reason to rub salt in the wound. He should have known something was wrong. He would never understand why Ce-Ce hadn’t trusted him. He was a Ward – defending those he loved was his purpose.

*I won’t fail again.*

Bri blinked back tears. “Maybe she had the right idea, keeping me in the dark. I felt a lot safer when I
was an ocean away from all of this. What if…”

He didn’t realize he’d grabbed hold of her arms until surprise blossomed on her face. His heart was pounding, but he kept tight control over his voice. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

And if she ran away again, he would follow. Halfway around the globe if he had to.

Bri stared up at him and licked those soft, red lips. She looked torn between planting a big one on him and bolting. His blood turned to lava. He slid his hands to her shoulders, her neck, traced her jaw with his thumb. Fresh tears chilled his fingertips. He leaned in—

She turned her head away at the last second. “Kean, don’t.”

He heard the words, but the way she said them sounded like please. His body had a hard-wired response to that please. He wanted the kiss hanging between them, but he couldn’t afford to scare her away again. He needed to take it easy. He wrapped her in his arms instead.

She tensed at first, but then all the fight went out of her and she leaned against him, releasing a shaky breath. “What if I end up just like her?”

He realized what she meant and squeezed tighter. “You’re strong enough, I know it. You keep forgetting one thing.”

“What?”

“You’re not alone.” He brought their hands up between them and laced their fingers together, which got a small smile out of her. “C’mon, before Astrid feeds all our dinner to the animals.”

She let him lead her back down the beach towards the path to Astrid’s, but turned down his offer to carry her up the hill. She hiked ahead of him instead. He didn’t complain, since he enjoyed the view so much. Those shoes were worth every penny.

***

Astrid had cooked a feast big enough for a reunion of their ragtag family, plus the furry and feathered family, and then some. The best pairings from her private wine cellar flowed throughout all five courses, and Bri had never been so eager to clean her plate. By dessert, they had shaken out the last of their awkwardness and were making fun of each other just like old times.

She pushed her chocolate-raspberry soufflé aside and wiped the corners of her mouth. “So, your culinary Voodoo, more than anything else, has convinced me to help kick off this magical investigation, but that begs the question: how? I assume you guys have some kind of plan.”

Kean leaned back in his seat, his joking demeanor evaporating. “We find the bastard who got past my wards without so much as a whisper, and I destroy him.”

“Astrid.” Kean bristled.

“You are, Kean. You know it.” Astrid got up and cleared their dinner plates. “At least, you were. Until now.”

“Since when have you been warding Ce-Ce’s?” Astrid asked.

He waved the question away. “A while. The blood wards were down for a couple of days, but mine were still in place. They should have at least alerted me of an intruder.”

“What does that mean?” Bri asked, before they lost her.

“It means whoever did this is either very powerful or extremely skilled with spellwork, to sneak something past the most powerful Ward in the islands.”

“Astrid.” Kean bristled.

“You are, Kean. You know it.” Astrid got up and cleared their dinner plates. “At least, you were. Until now.”

Bri studied Kean, the hard set of his jaw, the bunching of his shoulders as he clenched his fists. He’d been so angry when they told him about the study, and brooding for quite a while after. She’d thought he was upset that she wasn’t agreeing to all their plans. Now understanding dawned. He saw it as his job to protect them, and felt like he’d failed. That’s why he was so adamant about keeping her under guard.

“Does that mean I shouldn’t stay there?”

“You’re safe there now,” Kean said. “The blood wards revived when you came home. Those are unbreakable.”

“Oh.” That was a relief, though she would have welcomed an excuse to stay the night at Astrid’s. She
didn’t want to be alone with her ghosts. “So, the attacker was a Ward too? That narrows it down, right?”

“Not necessarily,” Astrid said from the kitchen. “The rain and the rockslide sound more like the work of a Summoner.”

Kean nodded. “We can’t rule either out. I’ll double check the wards, see if there’s a signature I can pick up on.”

“I can ask the animals around the house if they saw anything unusual.”

“So…what do I do?” Bri asked.

“There are a couple of things we can try.” Astrid circled the table pouring coffee. “The simplest is to see if there’s more to Ce-Ce’s message. A Sight potion or a séance should do the trick. Might not get much from the other side now that she’s moved on, but she might have left a message somehow.”

“I’ll take potions for one hundred, Alex.”

“Sight potion puts you into a trance-like state, connecting you with your higher consciousness. If it works, then, like tuning an antenna, you can pick up any psychic messages left for you in the ether.”

“Sounds simple enough.” She couldn’t believe she was saying that about taking a magic potion and entering a trance-like state. If she thought too hard about how much her reality was shifting, she’d get woozy. “Any potential side-effects?”

“Yes.” Kean chose that moment to interject. “Anytime you chemically alter your state of consciousness, you’re taking a risk.”

Bri raised one eyebrow. “Are you really going to give me the ‘this is your brain on drugs’ speech?”

He leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. “It’s more than that. If you let a drug take you there, your mind doesn’t always know the way back. You can get stuck, or lost.”

“We can ground her.” Astrid reached out and squeezed Bri’s hand. “We will make sure you get you back, don’t worry.”

“Right.” She imagined herself lost in the maze of her own subconscious. That sounded like a living horror flick. And that was the easiest option? The space between her shoulder blades broke out in a cold sweat. “When do we do it?”

Astrid lifted the black kitten into her lap and fed him some whipped cream from her finger. “I just have to procure the potion. We can do it tomorrow night.”

“We should wait for the full moon,” Kean said. “We’d be able to form a stronger connection.”

The full moon was when Zyne power was at its peak. All major rituals were performed then, or else on nights of cosmic conjunctions and events. But the full moon wasn’t for another three days. “I’ll be in New York by then.”

“Can’t you put it off? You just had two deaths in the family.”

“She has to meet her international playboy fiancé there,” Astrid said, “or else he’ll just show up here with his whole entourage.”

Bri glared daggers across the table.

*Way to put your foot in it, Edgewood.*

Astrid pressed her mouth firmly closed and sank lower in her chair, trying to hide behind a ball of black fur. Bri sipped her coffee, on a mental countdown until Kean popped like Mount St. Helens. As if sensing the imminent blast, the dogs abandoned their posts under the table.

*Five. Four. Three…*

“You’re engaged?” Kean asked. Zero inflection. He’d gone scary-still, staring at her left hand.

She tucked it into her lap. Her face heated. “Uh…no. Not exactly. I mean…he hasn’t asked me. Yet.”

Without another word, Kean unfolded from his seat, jerked up his flannel shirtsleeves, and loaded his forearms with plates. Plates Bri really didn’t think should be in his vicinity at the moment, though she wasn’t stupid enough to say so.

She mouthed a “thanks a lot” at Astrid behind Kean’s back and excused herself to the restroom to try and put out the fire in her cheeks. They glowed vibrant red, branding her as a betrayer. She’d done nothing wrong, technically speaking. Except that Kean had kept himself unattached, while she’d planned to move on with someone else. Permanently. She’d crossed an unspoken line.

She splashed cold water on her face, took a few calming breaths, and tried to put things into perspective. Truth: she had planned to marry Eric. Keeping that secret from Kean would have been worse
in his eyes. Truth: Kean would be her friend no matter what. Of course, knowing that and imagining how the news must have hit him made her queasy.

Truth: you’re not so sure that’s what you want anymore.

When she’d finally settled down enough to face the firing squad, Bri emerged from the sanctuary of the commode into an eerie indoor forest. The Pacific night sky poured in through the beveled windows. Tangled leaves glittered frosty silver in the moonlight. Several candles lit the small sitting area, and Kean crouched in front of the woodstove’s warm orange glow. Yellow eyes of every shape and size flashed from the shadows.

The Righteous Brothers eased into hearing, and she stifled a laugh. She moved toward the man she’d once imagined herself loving forever. Those had been an innocent girl’s wishes, dreams now bundled up in the pain of so much loss. Loss caused by her own cowardice. If she had chosen to stay instead of running away, would Ce-Ce and Tara still be here?

When she was close enough, Kean reached for her hand. “Dance with me.”

She dug in her heels as he tried to sweep her closer. “Where’s Astrid?”

“Out for a run.” His lips, glistening in the firelight, rolled into a cocky smile. “You worried what’ll happen without a chaperone?” He lifted her hand and kissed her fingers so intimately her heart stuttered. “Afraid I’ll take advantage of you?”

He turned her hand over and kissed the center of her palm.

A tingle snaked up her arm, wiggled down her chest, and coiled in her belly. When was the last time such a simple touch had affected her like that?

“Give me some credit here.” Kean yanked her forward and caught her in his arms. He had her swaying to the music by the next beat, swaggering his hips in a way that made her want to throw her head back and laugh as if she was drunk. Maybe she was a little drunk. She’d been ready for a fight, not for this.

“Is she safe out there alone?”

“She won’t leave the property. She owns three miles of beach. Her blood wards are new, but they’ll hold. You have permission to relax.” Kean draped her arm around his neck, keeping them moving together. Bri shivered with a mixture of familiarity and anticipation. She breathed in the scent of his neck, and almost against her will, her body molded to his.

“See, you remember.” Kean hummed softly in her ear, with the Righteous Brothers as backup. Bring back that lovin’ feelin’…

She remembered all right. “That’s why I didn’t want to dance with you.”

“Chicken.” Kean slid a breath closer, his fingers splayed on her lower back. With his other hand, he released the clip out of her hair. Before she could utter a protest, his fingers were massaging her scalp. She went practically limp in his arms.

When his lips sighed over the tiny scratches on her collarbone, her senses came clambering to the surface. She pushed him away and struggled to catch her breath, to rein in her galloping heartbeat and runaway brain. “I can’t do this.”

“Do what?” Kean’s eyes glittered with silent laughter. “Me?”

Her cheeks went hot again.

A low, male chuckle rumbled from his chest. He lifted her chin, his thumb tracing a sensual arc over her throat. “I have wanted this for so long.”

She swallowed hard. “I want you too.”

His fingers tightened ever so slightly.

“But it’s complicated.”

“It’s not that complicated.” Kean nuzzled behind her ear and started dancing again, a barely perceptible link keeping their motions in time. She couldn’t help but surrender to it. The man could move.

Her imagination filled in the blanks, and warmth pooled where their bodies touched. “Are you going to argue with everything I say?”

“Only until you stop being so difficult.”

She laughed uneasily. “You’re such a stubborn ass.”
Kean nodded, dropping kisses across her cheek. “I like hearing you talk like that.”

The whisper of his breath on her skin, the way their bodies fit together…she’d locked away all the subtle nuances somewhere in the deep recesses of her memory. Forgetting had made it easier to pretend she had everything she wanted. Now, faced with the intimate reality, those details flooded her system. Miles and years between the two of them, and still just his lips close to hers – something as simple and as complicated as a dance – had her forgetting she’d ever left and not caring why.

She rested her head on his chest and let his arms slide across her shoulder blades. “You never give up until you get what you want, do you?”

“Nope.” Kean smiled and ran his fingers through her hair. His gaze slid to her lips. “And I want to kiss you now.”

Her mouth fell open in surprise, and then he leaned in and filled the empty space with his. Bri came up on her toes to meet him. She melded to the front of his body, as if drawn by a magnetic force. Somehow he’d snuck right past her defenses, and she felt herself give-in, open to him in ways she had never been with anyone else.

He groaned with pleasure and deepened the kiss. His taste filled her senses. Red wine, chocolate soufflé, and underneath it all, Kean. He tasted like the summer of seventeen, those two steamy months right before she left for college, when all that had mattered was the heat of their skin, the slide of their bodies against one another. The next thing she knew, he was backing her towards the couch.

“I’ve missed you so much, baby.”

Bri made a muffled sound of resistance and started to pull away. He gathered her closer, keeping her mouth too occupied to make any more objections. She clutched his shoulders, felt the mounds of muscle under her palms, and the only thing she could think was that she wanted to see the hard body underneath those clothes naked and sweaty on top of her in the firelight.

Was she really doing this?

He arched her back and traced the line from her ear to her shoulder with hot kisses as his hand slid up the back of her shirt, reaching for her bra clasp. She imagined the press of her naked breasts against his broad chest, his strong arms surrounding her. It would feel so safe. Even with all of her issues, and flaws, and her beat-up soul completely bared to Kean, she felt safe. Blame it on nostalgia, or the booze, or the grief—or the fact that her life could be in imminent danger—she was totally doing this.

A witch cackled in the background, and then the whole house came alive in a screeching clatter, followed by a loud knock. Bri flinched, sliding out of Kean’s hands, and plopped onto the couch as he rounded on the front door.

“This better be important.” He stalked across the room with his fists pumping and his jaw set.

Bri smoothed her hands over her face and took a few deep breaths to get her thoughts to reboot. What the hell was she doing? As if she hadn’t made enough of a mess of things by agreeing to let her friends drug her in the name of supernatural sleuthing, was she really about to blow up this can of worms? Somehow Kean could still hotwire her body so well it short-circuited her brain. She needed some air. After she pulled her hair back up into a twist, she grabbed her purse and slipped on her shoes.

“Evening, Sheriff,” Kean said as she came up behind him.

The brown uniformed figure on the porch leaned to the side to look past Kean and right at Bri. He tipped his hat and smirked. “Why, Miss Briana Spurrier. When I heard you’d come back to North Wake Island, I didn’t believe it. You are quite the sight.”

Gawain Preston—whom Astrid and Kean still called Pesty—Wanely had followed the three of them around since primary school, though he’d never been a part of the gang. He was too much of a rule-follower. He was always sweet to Bri’s face, but she suspected that was more to piss Kean off than because he actually liked her. He’d grown about a foot since high school, and looked fit enough to compete in the Crossfit Games. His tan face was clean-shaven, showing a curved scar over his lip that hadn’t been there before.

She tossed him a casual wave, her cheeks flushing at the thought of the rules she’d just been about to break. Seeing Gawain was just the splash of cold water she needed. “Hey.”

“What do you want?” Kean practically growled.

The sheriff hooked a thumb on his gun holster, pulling it low on his hip. “I’d like to have a word with
Briana. In private.”

“Now’s not a good time.” Kean started to close the door, but Bri caught his arm.

“Actually, now is fine.” She gave Gawain a half smile, then turned to Kean. “It’s late. I’m tired. Tell Astrid thanks for dinner. I’ll come by the pub tomorrow and talk to her about the other thing.”

Kean scowled as she stepped onto the porch, his ears turning red, but he didn’t try to stop her. She followed Gawain down the terraced path towards the gravel driveway and felt the heat of Kean’s irritation burning into her back. She shot him a warning glance over her shoulder. He answered with a determined look that said she wasn’t getting off that easy, and shut the door.
Gawain stopped Bri a few feet from her rental car and gripped her arm. “I wanted to give you my condolences and assure you that our department conducted a thorough investigation. Despite what you might hear around town, there was no sign that magic was involved — I would have detected it. Your grandmother and sister died in an accident. That’s what I believe, and that’s how the report has been filed with both the Synod and the county.”

“I understand.” Bri pulled away from him and shivered. The damp chill stole away the lingering coziness of Astrid’s house. She understood perfectly. She was with Astrid on this one — something was off. Why was Gawain so anxious to write-off her family’s string of tragedies as a mere coincidence? Astrid thought he had his head up his ass, and Kean thought he was just incompetent, but Bri had an odd feeling the man before her was sharper and more dangerous than he looked. Her gaze drifted back towards the house, and she half-wished Kean had come too. She rubbed her arms. “Is that all?”

“I’m afraid not. You know this is a small town. People talk.”

“I’m well aware of that, Sheriff.”

“Come on now, Briana. We’ve known each other a long time. Call me Gawain. I’m not here on official police business. This is a courtesy call.” He stepped closer. Just like on the beach with Kean, she felt a bubble of warmth surround her. Coming from Gawain, it felt heavy and too intimate, like a stranger’s steamy breath against her bare skin.

She took a step back and bumped into her car.

“People are talking, and because of what they’re saying—curses and all that—some folks might not feel real safe with you here on the island. It’s my job to make them feel safe, so I feel obligated to tell you I think it’s best if you don’t stay around these parts too long.”

Bri opened her door. “I appreciate the courtesy of telling me in person that I’m not welcome here, Sheriff. I’ll be gone in a couple of days, but I really don’t care what people say, we both know there is no curse.”

“Good. I’m glad you finally have the sense to not let those rabble-rousing friends of yours fill your head with wild ideas. Things never end well for mundanes who get tangled up in Zyne affairs.”

Indignation burned on the tip of her tongue —this mundane was going to do his job for him— but she bit it back. Step carefully. Gawain had already made up his mind, whether actively covering something up or simply blinded by his ego, they couldn’t trust him not to muck things up. He couldn’t get a whiff of their intentions. “I’m sure everything will work out as Fate intended.”

In the light from Astrid’s porch, Gawain’s wide-brimmed hat shaded half of his face, making his answering smile look more like a smirk. “I’m sure it will. Drive safe, Briana.” He tipped his hat and walked towards his Explorer parked up the road.

Bri climbed into the Lexus vibrating with nerves. Her hands shook as she tried to find the ignition. A silent alarm was bleating in the recesses of her mind, making her thoughts jittery. What the hell had she gotten herself into? She’d been back one day and she was already hip deep in Zyne politics. She had a boyfriend to keep at bay with a pile of bigger and bigger lies, the coven Sigma breathing down her neck, her grandmother’s dying wish to puzzle out, her two best friends’ hopes hanging on her, and her untapped power flaring out of control.
Two more days of this could kill me.

Gawain waved as she backed her car out of the drive. She didn’t skid out, tempted as she was to slam the accelerator to the floor. If she could have driven back to Sydney, she would have. But she was on an island, with nowhere to hide. Even the things familiar to her were equal parts joy and torment. She needed to call Eric, to get her head on straight again. Except the thought of holding in what she’d learned in the past twenty four hours, of pretending everything was okay…exhausted her beyond reason. No surprise she took a wrong turn and ended up on the scenic route back to Ce-Ce’s, stretching the half-mile drive out over five miles of narrow, winding coastline.

She pulled around a blind curve and noticed a net of chicken wire over the rock face to her left. The missing guardrail on the right was marked off by bright orange barrels. Her whole body went rigid with a surge of comprehension. This was where it had happened.

She parked on the shoulder and got out of the car with the engine still running. The door ajar bell dinged into the darkness. She inched up to the mangrove guardrail and peered over the edge. Her stomach jumped into her throat when she saw the hundred-foot drop to the rocky shoals below.

The world was suddenly spinning too fast. She fell to her knees. *It’s him, Bri,* her grandmother’s voice whispered on the wind.

Briana gasped, searching the empty night. An unnatural wind rustled the branches overhead. Ce-Ce was dead and gone, burned to ash, yet the scent of lilacs and baby powder surrounded her. Bri gulped back tears. “Ce-Ce?”

The breeze caressed her face, lifted her hair, then drifted away.

She went back to the car, emptied her purse onto the front seat, and snatched the rose quartz out of the pile. She clutched it next to her heart and looked up at diamond-studded night sky. “I’m here, Ce-Ce. I…call to you. Who? Show me what you want me to see.”

For the first time in her life, she willed her mind to get sucked into that void that funneled into her nightmares. Her vision flashed with a fast-reeling image. Colors faded in places, flared ultra-vivid in others. She had no control over it. She held perfectly still, trying to make sense of the chaos.

Ce-Ce was driving, her knuckles white on the steering wheel as she navigated through what seemed like a hurricane. Rain, branches, and leaves lashed the car from all sides. The wipers screamed across the windshield. Tara sat beside her in the passenger seat, talking urgently, but the words were garbled. She could barely see five feet ahead, but they couldn’t slow down. They had to get away. It was coming for them.

Suddenly, the car lurched to the side. Tara fell limp in her seat, blood oozing down one side of her face. The car spun and spun, the wheel flying out of her hands no matter how hard she tried to hold on. A loud crunch echoed through her very bones. Her legs went numb, and a jolt of pain filled her chest.

Briana, child of my blood…I bid you to see. You must protect the Legacy. It’s him Bri, you have to see…

The world flipped upside down. Blackness, and then a froth of white lace waves, getting closer. She closed her eyes just before the icy tentacles of the Pacific pounded through the windows and tore them to pieces.

Bri collapsed into the grass, clenching her middle as she sucked in desperate breaths. She rolled onto her back. Her vision went black for a while. The spinning slowed and eventually stopped enough that she could sit up. The earth stayed put. A normal breeze blew against her face. But she felt stripped raw, bare to the elements, as if her nerve endings were floating outside her body. It took another few minutes for that to pass.

Okay…that just happened.

Maybe not the brightest idea to try and do impromptu roadside magic, but at least she hadn’t passed out that time. Shaking and chilled through, she felt oddly calm as she climbed back into the car. She drove the rest of the way to Ce-Ce’s house in a shocked daze. When she pulled into the drive, Kean’s truck was parked in front, his hunched figure on the porch steps.

She took a few deep breaths to gather her wits, then got out and stumbled across the lawn to him. Kean didn’t move or speak as she approached. She was sure he had quite a lot to say. She probably deserved most of it, but after the past few minutes, she couldn’t be anything but relieved to see him.

“Kean.” She collapsed to the steps beside him and started to cry. She’d been doing more of that in the
last two days than she had the past seven years, but she was beyond caring anymore. Her delusions of control had been obliterated one by one since she set foot on the island. She needed something solid to hang on to, and Kean was the most solid person she’d ever known.

He brushed his hand over her cheek. “What happened?”

“I was there, where they died. I saw it. I was there!” She sucked in a blubbery breath, just to fall apart again. She could only get out two words at a time, with giant gulps of air between. “It’s him. Her message. The blood. The Legacy.”

“Damn it. You don’t do anything the easy way, do you?” Kean carried her inside and set her on the sofa. He covered her with a blanket, then sat beside her rubbing warmth into her hands.

She shivered as Ce-Ce’s words echoed in her mind. What if she was doomed to be harassed by visions and ghosts for the rest of her life no matter what? She would end up in a mental institution, or killing herself. Just like her mother… A whimper escaped through her gritted teeth.

“Shh.” Kean squeezed her to his chest. “It’ll be okay.”

“She said, ‘It’s him, Bri. You have to see.’ They were so scared. He killed them!” She pressed her eyes closed, but Ce-Ce’s last few moments played on a loop behind her eyelids. “I don’t want to see anymore.”

“I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Briana relaxed into his embrace and tried to match her breath to the steady rise and fall of his chest. He was exactly what she needed right then – strong, steady, and alive. Real. Kean was really holding her. What would she have done if he hadn’t been there? Packed her bags and left. Or taken enough pills to knock her out. Permanently? He’d brought her back from the brink once before, just before her powers had been bound, when the nightmares kept her from sleeping for days on end, and half of their high school class acted like they would die on the spot if they touched her. She’d walked into the ocean, haunted by the vision of her mother, ashamed of the rumors. She’d got it in her twisted teenage brain that she should join her on the other side.

As if Kean had read her mind, he loosened his arms and leaned down to brush his mouth across her cheek, saying the same words he had that day, shivering in their soaking wet clothes. “I’ve got you.”

She tilted her face up to him, swallowed back her tears. “I know.”

“I’m not letting go.” His hands tightened on her shoulders and he leveled their gazes. His eyes burned with such raw devotion, it took her breath away. “Do you see that?”

“I see.” She’d been so blind. All her work at building a new life, and it was an illusion. A house of glass. Now she could see all the cracks, could see how isolated she’d been, how desperately lonely, locked away from everything she’d ever known. She didn’t have to be lonely anymore, if…

Bri wrapped her hands around his neck and pulled him forward for a kiss. Kean gave her everything she didn’t have the courage to ask for, and demanded everything in return. He stole all thoughts, all words. She wanted to tell him how sorry she was, how much she needed him, then and now. Always. All she could get out between hot, deep kisses was the “need you” part.

He answered with his body, which coiled around her like a spring ready to bust loose, then lifted her from the couch in one smooth motion. “Your room?”

The husky undertone in his voice made her body shiver in a completely different way. Bri swallowed hard and nodded. He’d taken two steps towards the stairs when Vivaldi’s Spring blasted from her sweater pocket. Kean froze and then set her down in the middle of the hall rug.

“Sorry,” she said, pressing answer. “Hello?”


“Hey.” She cleared her throat and straightened, cringing inside. Her voice was raspy from more than crying. “I forgot to call. I’m sorry.”

Kean took a few steps away from her, tension bunching his shoulders.

“Is everything all right?” Eric said. “You sound upset.”

“Everything is, uh…” She stared at Kean’s broad back as he paced to the door. Everything was royally screwed up, and had been about to rocket into irretrievable territory. She sat down on the stairs. Her thoughts felt slow and clunky as she tried to shift gears. “Fine. How are things with you?”

Kean shot her a warning look. She stared back, feeling trapped. What was she supposed to do? Tell her boyfriend of three years she couldn’t talk because she was about to jump in the sack with her first and only
real love? Her body flashed hot and cold at the thought. And she wasn’t listening to anything Eric was saying. “Uh-huh. I’m sorry, it’s been a really long day and I’m exhausted. Can I call you back tomorrow?”

She reassured him their plans for New York hadn’t changed. Two more days...

“I love you,” Eric said over the line, just as Kean slammed the front door.

Bri burst out onto the porch behind him. “Kean, wait!”

He stopped halfway down the stairs, his face contorted in a mixture of anger and heart-wrenching hope. The idea of staying in the empty house alone warred with the thought of soothing her fears with Kean’s warm, solid body. She’d been drifting alone for so long…but the words stuck in her throat.

“Don’t. I can’t take you pushing me away again. So, don’t. Not unless you’re sure of what you want.”

“I can’t stay.” She silently pleaded for him to understand. She wanted to be with him, but she still had a whole other life hanging in the balance. Maybe she was lonely there, but there were good things too—things she wasn’t willing to sacrifice. With Kean, it had to be all or nothing. She wanted him, but if she let go of her life in Sydney, her connections, her career, she wouldn’t know who she was anymore.

Kean’s jaw ticked. She had to let him go, or they would both only hurt more later. He read the decision on her face, and his expression steeled over. He walked down the drive and climbed into his truck without another glance her way. Bri watched his tail lights disappear down the street. She’d done the right thing, but knowing that did nothing to ease the hollowness in her chest. Kean Royce Fitzgerald had recaptured her heart in one dance and a handful of kisses. No matter what happened now, he would possess it forever.

It was far less than he deserved.
CHAPTER EIGHT

Bri stared at the horned logo for Witch's Titty Dark Ale engraved into the mahogany paneling of the Devil's Pub & Brewery and mused on the term “hiding in plain sight.” The town tavern had been one of the first establishments built along Front Street, at the very heart of Evergreen Cove. When Astrid had purchased and updated it, she'd catered to the curio appeal of the island's occult roots. She served fishbowl cocktails in miniature copper cauldrons, fake shrunken heads hung from rusted iron sconces, and the bar itself was a single piece of polished redwood with eerie gape-mouthed faces burnt into it. A large oak table spanned the entire dining room, flanked at either end by a five-foot high fireplace.

The locals gathered in the high-backed booths in the rear. Most of them were fishermen and craftsmen, all of them were Zyne. A few cast wary glances their way. The latest news on the Spurrier curse was probably grocery line chatter by now, and they'd agreed letting that rumor circulate was a good cover for now. Astrid was tending bar while one of her employees was on break, and Bri had been keeping her company. In almost thirty minutes, not one of them had risked exposure to come ask for a refill.

“It's him, Bri, you have to see?” Astrid rolled the words with a different rhythm for the fifth or sixth time.

Bri picked at her sweet potato fries, not really hungry. “Mhm.”

Astrid drummed her fingers on the bar and rolled her eyes at the ceiling. “That's not very helpful, you old hag.”

Bri shushed her and glanced around to see if anyone had been listening.

“You'd think if you went through the trouble to send a message from beyond the urn, you'd make damn sure it was clear. Why does Ce-Ce have to be so freakin' cryptic all the time?”

Bri choked on a sip of water and started coughing. Once she got it under control, she felt like everyone in the pub was watching, probably waiting for her to keel over dead. Her linen blouse itched like burlap.

“What if that’s all there is?”

They knew they were looking for either a Ward or a Summoner, most likely in the North Wake coven, and now they knew he was male. That narrowed it down quite a bit. Over lunch, she'd learned there were twenty-two male Wards – not counting Kean – and a little over twice as many male Summoners on the island. Only a handful of them were impressive witches, according to Astrid. Bri didn’t know the others, but Gawain had moved to the top of her list. He had no known motive, but he fit the profile. That and her gut feeling about him were enough to keep him pinned there until they learned more. Of course, it could be someone from off-island too, but it was unlikely. In such a small community of magic-users, a stranger didn’t go unnoticed.

Astrid cleared Bri’s plate and wiped underneath her. “There has to be something else, something that will only be revealed once your Inner eye is open and your Sight is engaged.”

Though she hated to admit it, she agreed with that assessment. Ce-Ce wanted more than for Bri to be tortured by those final moments. There was something else. Protect the Legacy, she’d said. “Geri said she had something to discuss with me about my Legacy. I didn’t think anything of it.”

“Fucking Oracles.” Astrid poured them both a shot of whiskey. She tossed hers back, winced, and gave Bri an apologetic look. “Sorry. They just play everything so close to the chest.”

Bri shrugged. She couldn’t disagree. Her experience with Oracles hadn’t been grand. It’s impossible to
lie to them, and Ce-Ce had always had a way of pulling feelings out of her she wasn’t even ready to admit to herself yet. It was hard to have a normal life when you couldn’t sneak out of the house for a midnight teenage tryst without finding a box of condoms on the hall table.

After the whiskey was through burning a path down her throat, she plucked some money out of her purse and set it by the vinegar bottle. “Thanks for lunch. I should get going. I have to meet the lawyer in thirty minutes, and make a phone call.”

She could only put Eric on hold for so long.

“Wait up.” Astrid shoved her money back and took off her apron, revealing a T-shirt that featured a naked pin-up riding a broom and said *Real Witches do it Moonclad*. She yelled at someone in the back to take over. Outside, she retrieved her bike from the side of the building and caught up with Bri halfway down the block, slowing to pedal beside her. “I know this is scary, the idea of opening yourself up to your magic.”

“It’s not that.” It was pretty obvious her power was flaring whether she liked it or not. Her only choice was to try and control the flow – to decide when and where. That’s why she was still going through with the potion tonight. If there was any other message from Ce-Ce, she should get it loud and clear.

“What is it then?”

“It’s silly, just…” She felt like a pariah, like everyone was waiting for her to start spewing pea soup and spinning her head around. As if to illustrate the point, Charlie Sheppard drove by in his family’s produce truck. He waved at Astrid, but looked away when Bri smiled, and she’d let him get to second base in middle school. The truck doused them in a cloud of exhaust. Bri cleared her throat and resumed her march up the sidewalk. “I could never come back here for good. I don’t want to be *that girl* anymore.”

“What girl?” Astrid hopped off her bike and started walking it. The dangling pink braids of her Bavarian ski cap made her look about twelve, but the expression on her face was much older.

“The sad one with the crazy mother, the family curse, and the tragic story.” Bri was used to a certain amount of isolation, but in Sydney the distance was on her own terms. Here, all it did was hurt.

“C’mon.” Astrid pulled her down the alley. “I want you to meet someone.”

“Where are we going?” Bri didn’t recognize anything, though the buildings on that block were some of the oldest in town. How had she left a single stone on the island unturned? Or had it really been so long that she’d forgotten?

They’d only gone a few steps when an invisible cord yanked at her stomach. Her skin erupted in goose bumps. She would have run in the other direction if Astrid hadn’t kept such a tight hold on her arm. The brick walls on either side of the alley seemed to lean in to the point of toppling down. They blotted out the sky and encased the narrow walkway in thick, prickly shadows. Cold crept up Bri’s spine, setting off instinctual alarm bells. She planted her feet, which were heavy as lead anyway, and squeezed out a few shallow breaths.

“Oh, shit. Sorry! It’s okay. They’re just aversion wards to keep out mundanes.” Astrid dragged her a few more steps, and like a bubble popping, the ringing in her ears ceased.

The oppressive shadows lifted away. She shook herself and inhaled a deep breath of plain old moss-scented air. She still felt a bit woozy. “You could have warned me.”

“I didn’t know they would work on an uninitiated Zyne too.”

They stopped by a rusted green Dumpster beside a steel door painted to blend in to the brick wall. Astrid tapped on the door in a sharp four-beat staccato with one of the many silver rings on her right hand.

The door rattled and opened inwards to reveal a familiar face looming above them. Mr. Moaggen’s mustard yellow handlebar moustache and bushy eyebrows had silvered at the tips. The frown lines on his forehead and cheeks had splintered off into a hundred more papery wrinkles, but his frosty blue eyes still made Bri freeze like a rabbit caught in a clearing, or like a fourteen year old caught smoking stolen cigarettes.

He sized the two of them up from his towering six and a half foot height and poked his polished bald head out to check the alley in either direction.

“Hullo, Earl.” Astrid grinned and batted her lashes. The legendary Edgewood charm had gotten the two of them out of quite a few sticky situations, but Earl Moaggen appeared immune. His lips rolled in a
gesture suggesting he was about to either snarl or spit. The door opened a crack wider.

Bri's feet didn't want to cooperate, but Astrid led her into the gloom. She sneezed repeatedly as tobacco smoke, pungent herbs, and a thick coating of dust filled her lungs. Mr. Moaggen slammed the heavy door. One foot dragged slightly as he shuffled behind a long wood worktable in the corner. Her vision slowly adjusted to the dim.

The back room of Moaggen's Smoke Shop was an infamous adolescent dare on the island. Many attempts had been made to infiltrate, but no one had ever returned to tell the tale. Those who tried ended up hauling ass up Front Street with a Viking berserker limping after them, broom in hand. Looking around, Bri now understood why.

The shop was a cover.

Glass vials and bottles of every shape, size, and color lined the oddly-angled walls from grimy floor to cobweb-ridden ceiling. A few choked-out plants struggled for life on shelves behind the back counter. A gigantic stuffed owl with reflective yellow eyes stared from the doorway to the front shop. Astrid walked over to stroke its breast, and the bird blinked.

Bri clutched her purse tight to her chest.

Astrid cooed to the man-eating sized creature and whispered something under her breath.

"Don't be givin' him any ideas," Mr. Moaggen grumbled.

The owl fluffed its feathers and tilted its head, inviting Astrid to scratch its neck. She smiled and obliged. "He wants you to let him out more. He can't stretch his wings in here."

Mr. Moaggen's chuckle sounded a bit like a rumbling chest cough. He didn't look up as he shaved pieces of some knotted root into a beaker, which bubbled over an open flame. The congealed brown liquid belched occasional puffs of steam.

"Did you have a reason for disturbing me, or did you just come to see Loki?" His smile twisted at an odd angle, pulling at a scar on his cheek. Grotesque, but a smile nonetheless.

Astrid huffed and slid behind the counter. "You don't have to be so grumpy. Bri's scared shitless of you already."

Bri shuffled her feet when he paused in his carving to study her. Those eyes—so light they were almost white—were like brittle ice over aqua water, threatening to crack and swallow her up. She gulped.

"Besides, if I didn't pay you regular visits, your plants would die." Astrid fondled the leaves sagging miserably on the back shelf. They stirred and uncurled, the stalks straightening. The greenery darkened, and a few sparse buds opened up, as if they'd soaked in a week's worth of sunshine and fertilizer. Astrid sauntered over to the table and sniffed at the beaker. "Mariposa Thrall? Who the heck actually buys that stuff? Are you selling to tourists now?"

Bri took a tentative step forward, her curiosity getting the better of her. This was a deeper glimpse into the world of the Zyne, the one all her family had been a part of without her. Plus Mr. Moaggen—good ol' Earl—didn't look like he was going to beat them with a broomstick any time soon.

He sighed and set aside his root and knife to regard them both, stroking the left side of his moustache. "What kind of mischief are you looking to get into today, Miss Edgewood?"

Astrid didn't waste the opening. "I need a Sight potion, and I'm not talking about that Peyote-laced crap you sell to the mainlanders. I want the good stuff."

He opened his mouth to answer, but Astrid held up a hand to stop him. "I know you have some, Earl. You're the only person on this side of the Rockies who does. I asked around."

His gaze slid from Astrid to Bri. Something in his shoulders stiffened, making them seem even lumpier.

"Fine," Astrid said, exasperated. "Bri's power is bound, but Ce-Ce sent her a message from beyond that she wants her to See. Her power is flaring, we just need a little something to help things along."

Earl shook his head. "No."

32
“—without the potion, all we can do is a séance, and it won’t even be the full moon.”
“No,” he said again. His cheeks started to redden. “You should know better. She hasn’t been prepared. It’s too dangerous.”
Astrid opened her mouth to argue, but Bri grabbed her arm and shuffled them both toward the exit.
“It’s okay. We can think of something else.”
She had no idea if that were true, but she also had no desire to see the Viking berserker come out, while her best friend seemed hell-bent on it. Astrid twisted her arm free, but Bri swung the door open. Cold air from the alley swept in, dank and smelling of rotting lettuce. Freedom was imminent—
“Come here, girl.”
Bri froze, one foot out the door. She turned back to Mr. Moaggen, and Astrid shouldered her into the center of the room. Her heel snagged and she tumbled forward, catching herself on the workbench.
His lip twisted again. She couldn’t tell the difference between the snarl and the smile. “Give me your hand.”
Behind her, Astrid closed the door and leaned against it, sealing off their escape.
Bri took a deep breath to steel herself and laid her hand lightly atop Mr. Moaggen’s large, calloused one. She met his gaze again, a blizzard of ice and salt. She felt naked under it, disturbingly bare to the elements.
She flinched away, but his fingers closed around her wrist.
“D-don’t.” Before she could struggle, Astrid wrapped an arm around her shoulders.
“He just wants to taste your power.”
“Do w-what?” she squeaked.
Astrid made an impatient noise. “Earl is a Ward. He’s going to test your energy. It doesn’t hurt if you don’t fight it.”
The reassurance did little to quell the flow of electricity bouncing up Bri’s spine and bursting at the base of her skull. Mr. Moaggen closed his eyes. A subtle warmth wrapped around her hand, oozed up her arm, and poured over her shoulder to glide down her back. He let go, and the feeling slowly faded, leaving only the echo of sensitized nerve endings, like emerging from a hot tub into frigid air.
Earl looked pointedly at Astrid. “Her magic is potent, but it feels contained. You really think you’re going to uncover the truth of what happened to Cecelia?”
“That’s the plan.” Astrid offered no further explanation.
Earl turned to Bri. “You understand the risks of taking the potion?”
She chewed on her lip, rubbing her fingers together. They still felt charged with some kind of static. She could potentially end up lost in the proverbial woods, basically schizo. But the alternative was to do nothing and maybe wind up dead. “Yes, I do.”
He studied her face for a moment, then hefted himself from the stool and disappeared.
Vanished. In the blink of an eye.
Bri jumped back and jammed her hip into the counter hard enough to bruise. She knew –theoretically – that Wards could fade, but she’d never actually seen it happen with her own eyes. It was a lot more dazzling than the subtle Oracle powers she’d been exposed to for most of her life. She cleared the nervousness from her throat. That would take some getting used to.
The owl clicked its beak, as if it was laughing.
Under their feet, there was a loud thump, followed by a crash and a string of curses. Mr. Moaggen reappeared in the center of the floor, his cheeks a blotchy red.
Astrid raised one eyebrow in her classic High Noon style.
His flush deepened as he ran a hand over his smooth head. “I, uh…just broke my last vial.”
The owl fluffed its feathers, and the plants rustled with a hair-raising whisper.
“I have everything I need to brew a new batch. I just need a few hours.”
Astrid nodded, and the tension evaporated, like the mist from rain on a hot day. “Okay, sure. I’ll pick it up on my way home, after the dinner rush.”
Earl’s eyebrows furrowed as if he were thinking really hard about how to say something else.
“Yes, I’ll bring you a crab potpie,” Astrid said, sounding put-upon.
His teeth flashed. They were surprisingly straight and white. “I’ll have it ready.”
“Great! Thanks, Earl.” Astrid was back to her normal chipper self. “C’mon, Bri.”
Bri hovered at Earl’s side until he glanced up. “What changed your mind?”

Mr. Moaggen re-situated himself on his stool and bent his head over his carving. “Way I see it, things got tied up a might too quick, and a might too tidy. Something feels off about it. I knew your grandmother well. We weren’t close friends, but she helped me a time or two. She was a good woman. If somebody done her wrong, they deserve justice.”

She needed no magical talents to see true remorse for her loss in Earl Moaggen’s face. It meant the world to her to be reminded there was more to her family name than an ugly rumor. Her grandmother was a great woman, and had touched many lives. Just when she thought the whole of Evergreen Cove had turned their backs on her, she found support in the most unlikely place. She smiled, blinking back tears. “Thank you. That means a lot to me.”

His expression softened. “You be careful. You’re all that’s left of your Legacy.”

“I will.”

A lump formed in Bri’s throat as they walked back down the alley. She hadn’t realized she was the last of her Legacy until that moment. Zyne bloodlines were traced through the mother. Bri had a great uncle, but his children took his wife’s name. She was the last living Spurrier. Maybe that’s what Ce-Ce had meant. Protect the Legacy could very well mean stay alive.

I hope I don’t let her down this time.
He waited for Briana and her friend to leave the shop, seething at this unwelcome development. Ruining the potion should have been enough to waylay their plans until he could find a more suitable alternative. He’d underestimated Briana’s ingénue appeal. It seemed the shop-keeper had a soft spot for lost little girls.

He would burn the whole harbor down if it would stop the genesis of yet another meddlesome Spurrier witch. But he was far too close now – subtlety served his purposes better. Briana had to leave the island, whole and alive. He hated to show mercy, but on this single matter, his host held too strong to make the effort worthwhile. Briana could not be harmed without risking the loss of his host.

His psyche pressed at the edges of its flesh prison. Very soon, he would be free. All of the Zyne would suffer for his time spent in this infernal half-life. He would glut himself on their agony.

The shop keeper faded back to the basement and hunched over a chest in the back. It would be so easy to rip away those feeble shields and feast on the pain underneath, but he mustn’t forget his primary objective.

Patience.

He’d waited centuries. What was another few earthly days? Crush a few potions, chase Briana away, find the key—

An energy blast slammed against his invisibility shields, and they dematerialized. He blinked at the witch, who stood facing him with both palms together, calling power.

“You,” the shopkeeper snarled.

Another blast hit his shields and bounced off, shattering the shelf of glass behind him. His eye twitched. He dusted the debris from his shoulder.

“Yes, me.” He smiled as his power punched through the Ward’s shields. Another tendril wrapped around the weakling’s windpipe and slowly squeezed.
Eric didn’t answer his phone. Bri didn’t think too hard about the wash of relief she felt when his voicemail picked up. She left him a detailed update, assuring him she was keeping busy getting things wrapped up. Easy-peasy. Cool as a cucumber. Lie. Lie. Lie. Just as she hung up, she walked by Starling’s Fine Art, and halted. The ground beneath her lurched.

The window display featured a huge print of the painting in Tara’s bedroom – hypnotizing swirls of gold, green, and blue – a perfect reflection of the sun on turquoise waves. Smaller pieces were tastefully arranged around it on easels. In the right corner was a portrait of her baby sister, next to a vase of white lilies.

Bri stared at the photo, trying to copy it over the last time she’d seen Tara face to face. She’d grown up so beautiful. She took after their father, with her sleek ebony hair, deep blue eyes, and thick lashes. The only feature the two of them shared was the smattering of freckles across their noses. Angel’s kisses, their mother had called them.

The image of Tara went wavy, turning glass to water. She reached into her purse for a tissue. At that moment, a gust of wind swept up the street and tore it from her fingers. She grabbed for it, but from the corner of her eye, she saw another silhouette in the window, just over her left shoulder. She turned…no one behind her.

When she looked back, she could clearly see the figure of a man, shrouded in shadows. Fire pooled at his feet, and before him, on his knees, was Earl Moaggen. Earl had both hands crossed over his throat. His eyes bulged with terror. Another breeze pulled some hair into Bri’s eyes. She blinked, and the image was gone.

“See.” she whispered. Not again. Her mind hadn’t caught up yet, but her body was already in motion. She marched back down the lane, lashing down her panic. She rounded the corner and tripped, rolling her ankle. She picked herself up, tossed off her shoes, and starting running full-out. She forced herself to ignore the pain zinging up her leg with every other step.

She prayed it was nothing – just her mind playing tricks – but knew with every molecule of her body it was real. Her breath sawed in and out as she launched herself down the alley. The aversion wards pulled a ghastly moan from her throat, but she pushed through.

She skidded up to the door and banged her shoulder on the dumpster. There was no handle on the outside. How was she supposed to get in? She pounded on the hollow steel, clawed frantically at the rusted edge. “Earl! Damn it!”

She ran around the corner to the shop front. The door was locked, the inside dim and still. The placard in the window read Closed for Lunch.

Bri banged her fists on the window until it rattled in its frame, shouting for Mr. Moaggen. No one came, except for the barber next door and the store clerk from across the street. They stared like she was a woman gone mad. No one was going to help her – she had no choice. Bri picked up a ceramic flowerpot, and threw it through the glass door.

“No!” a man yelled. A woman let out a startled gasp.

She barreled through the mess, heedless of the broken glass under her feet. She saw the blood, but
didn’t feel the cuts. Adrenaline spiked in her veins, making it feel like time slowed down. She hurled herself over the counter and through the door into the back room.

The heat hit her first, before the flames and smoke registered. Those blasted forward next, swept into a frenzy by the open door. Huge wings beat against Bri as the owl made its furious escape. She ducked into a ball in the doorway. A trail of fire outlined the perimeter of the room, starting at the counter and climbing up the shelves. More shattered glass littered the floor.

“Earl!” she screamed, coughing as her lungs filled with heavy black smoke.

He was a large man, and it was a small room. He wasn’t there. Her gaze drifted across the floor as the flames ate the gnarled wood planks in neat little rows. One square panel in the middle remained untouched. Bri crawled over to it, her vision spotty. Her fingers found a purchase and she flung open a trap door. The air from the cellar was blessedly clear. She hung her head over the edge to suck in a few gulps of it before attempting to scale the ladder.

Sirens blared in the distance. Help would be there soon.

“Earl! Hold on!” She swung her legs over the side, found a rung with her good foot, and climbed down. It wasn’t far to the dirt floor. When she reached the bottom, Bri turned in a slow circle. “Earl?”

An eerie silence met her. Whatever had been fueling her heroics plummeted out of grasp. Her heart was thundering, her clothes sticking to her sweaty skin. She glimpsed the man-shaped lump five feet away on the ground, and a dry sob bubbled up her throat.

Was she too late? All of that for nothing? What was the point of her visions if she could do nothing to change the outcome? She staggered to Mr. Moaggen’s side and fell to her knees.

“Earl!” She gripped his shoulders and shook him. His face was ashen, jaw slack. “No.”

Bri fell over him, her limbs lethargic and thoughts hazed from lack of oxygen. Was this the cost for trying to help her? How many more deaths would she have on her conscience? Something creaked overhead. She looked up, half-expecting to see the shadowy figure from her vision. A part of her would be glad to face him, to meet her destiny. She was so tired of death.

Instead, bits of burning debris rained down from the orange-lit opening above as the wood groaned and cracked. She covered Mr. Moaggen’s body instinctively. She hugged his massive shoulders and pressed her face to the cool, dank earth as the fire roared above them. The shelves upstairs collapsed. A heartbeat later, the ceiling came crashing down.

***

The Synod’s lack of action sent a clear message. They would do nothing to stop the slaughter of yet another coven. It would be suspect, especially with the Church’s bloodhounds on the loose. All of Vivianne’s efforts to save those she loved had proved to be in vain. She had spared them from the Black Death, only to lead them into the noose.

She’d weighed the risks, and deemed them worthy. How easy it was to bargain with lives when one didn’t believe they could be wrong. Pride – her only true sin. A costly one.

They would all hang on the morrow.

She’d balked at advisories from the Synod, at the speculation of the court gossip-mill, at the rules against her unbalanced union. For the sake of love, she’d broken one of the Threefold Laws and done forbidden magic. Now she would bear the stain of eight other deaths on her soul; nine, counting the one in her belly.

Such a heavy price Fate exacted as penance for her blind, bloody pride.

Soon they would return to begin the questioning. By the time the sun rose, she would be in a new dimension of suffering. Her blood froze in her veins. She clenched her hands together in her lap until they ached. She didn’t fear death, but she did have regrets. She would not see Marguerite blossom into womanhood, nor bring the fruit of her love with Lucas to birth.

Lucas was the one thing she could not regret. She’d known completion for a time, and true, sublime happiness. Enough to last several lives.
The door at the top of the stairs creaked open, and a faint orange light bounced off the damp stones. Had they come for her so soon?

Other prisoners shifted across dirt floors, some to the edge of their bars, some melting into the farthest corners. Vivianne waited in the middle, beneath the small air shaft, where a thin beam of moonlight reached her face. She drew strength from it and bolstered her courage to endure the trials ahead.

She was not prepared to see Lucas’s face. Nor for the selfish anger that ripped through her at the sight. By the Stars, how she wanted to live!

“Ana.” Lucas dropped to his knees beside the grate, lowered his lantern to the ground, and reached through the bars.

Vivianne spilled forward in a tangle of soiled gowns, her chains clanging across the floor. She pressed kisses to Lucas’s hands as he pulled her closer. His lips, normally so warm and welcoming, were chilled and salty with tears. Bitter streaks met and mingled on their tongues. She pulled away, gasping. She had never thought to see him again. “My love, you should not have come.”

“I had to,” Lucas growled. “I will not stand for this. I will find a way to save you. I’ll ride to the Synod and tear down the Arcanum one brick at a time if I must. I will make them intervene.”

She forced out a humorless laugh. “We both know it would do no good. They are not wrong to leave me here – my choices have cost too many lives already. I do not want any more blood spilled for my sake, last of all yours.”

She ran her fingertips down the crease between his brows. This was the last time she would look at him. “Then I will take you away from here.” His grip on her shoulders tightened. “We can run.”

“And be twice-hunted? The Church would come for us, as would the Synod for risking more exposure. You cannot fight them all.” She stroked his cheek with all the tenderness she had left. Her heart heaved and sank. She would miss his face, the golden fire in his eyes that burned only for her. “These are not choices. They are the impulsive thoughts of a desperate man.”

“Yes,” he said in a hoarse whisper. “I am desperate. I cannot lose you now.”

Vivianne held back her next wave of tears and clasped his hands. They both knew this day would come: she was mortal, he was not. She just hadn’t expected it to be so soon. “You must get Marguerite away from this place. You know where I keep the gold. There’s enough there to travel for a year. Take her to Scotland – we have family there, Clan Cameron. My great aunt, Eileen. Promise me!”

“I will see that she gets there safely.”

She let go of him to reach into the inner pocket of her gown, then held out the key she had hidden there. “See that she gets this. Our family’s Legacy is hers to protect now.”

He clutched it in his fist. “I will.”

“Promise me something else.” She sought his flickering gaze in the dimness. The intensity of it stole her breath – a treacherous play of light and shadow that saw into the deepest, forbidden parts of her.

“Anything.”

“Live. Live, and find me again.”

He gave her a pained look, the stern determination faltering for a moment. Tears welled in his eyes, like swells in a storm-swept sea. She shuddered, sick with love and grief. This immortal, who had seen more souls come and go than she could fathom, shed tears for her.

She kissed his closed fist, and stumbled back before the strength to let go abandoned her.

Lucas unfolded from the dirt like a Nekros from the grave, took a wooden step towards the stairwell, then paused. “I will never stop searching for you, my Ana – my heart – I swear it.”

CONTINUE READING (Buy from Amazon)

Return to www.gwenmitchellfiction.com