

DIAL WITCH

DIAL WITCH TRILOGY - BOOK 1

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DIAL WITCH - AN INTRODUCCION

Trouble brews when a psychic enchantress shares her magic.

When the sorceress Jane Black offers spells, potions, and tarot card readings to the regular folk in her small town, she finds herself in a cauldron of hot water. Despite her good intentions, spells spiral out of control, potions backfire, and people turn against her. As Jane's problems multiply, a drool-worthy dragon enforcer, arrives on her doorstep and gives her an ultimatum.

While the universe stacks impossible odds against her, and her snarky familiar, harangues her every move, Jane refuses to give up. She's determined to make things better for everyone, or die trying.

Is Jane's magic strong enough to heal the town's problems? Will her full-service sorcery store, survive? And what exactly will Leos the dragon set on fire?

Dial Witch is the first book in the Dial Witch trilogy, set in the Mystic Keep world. It chronologically follows The

DIAL WITCH - AN INTRODUCCION

Perfect Brew trilogy, but can easily be read as a standalone story.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Jane Black

... an old soul trapped in a corrupt world.

Leos Daragon

... a three-hundred-year-old dragon with a side of mischief.

Gavin McGee

... a small-town sheriff with a big heart.

Cassie Black

... a free-spirited artist struggling with her baby's witch powers.

Merlina Black

... a witch who has more in common with Maleficent than her chin.

Sanjay Kahn

... a royal warlock with the swagger of a rock star. (Husband of Cassie Black.)

Donovan O'Reilly

... blue-eyed Irish charm, packaged in a well-seasoned warrior's body. (also the supernatural sheriff of the town and husband of Merlina Black.)

Gabriel O'Reilly

... Donovan's teenage son and local heart-breaker.

Sol Daragon

... a dragon security expert who envisions the multiverse as a giant flowchart. (also the brother of Leos Daragon.)

Taupe Halliday

... a classy old dragoness, used to getting her way.

Talon

... tall, lean and mean to the bone, the red-headed mage looked like a hurricane of trouble

Alessandro

... tall, dark, and drop-dead handsome, a vampire unlike any other, and one with an agenda of his own.

CHAPTER ONE



“By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes.”
Shakespeare, Macbeth

“It’s a stupid idea,” said Vixen.

“They have places for wayward familiars,” said Jane Black, as she glared at her orange tabby who sat on her desk facing her.

Vix’s whiskers twitched. “I repeat, stupid.”

“They don’t have sardines in the cold, dark and lonely place I’m thinking about.”

The cat raised her nose and looked away. “You can’t manage without me.”

As Jane considered that thought, she noticed someone

standing outside her front window. "See Vix, the masses are gathering."

The cat swiveled her neck. "It looks like one person to me."

The stranger, a middle-aged woman with short brown hair and round tortoiseshell glasses, stared up at the sign hanging over the shop's door. *Dial Witch*. Straightening her back, she moved closer and peered into the front window. Jane had spent hours setting up the display, arranging bundled herbs tied with ribbon, potion bottles, and sets of tarot cards to capture the attention of people passing by. The woman tilted her head as she studied the items. Jane held her breath and inched closer to the glass with Vixen at her heels. As the stranger's eyes caught Jane's, her body stilled, and all the color in her face drained. Stepping back, she crossed herself and mumbled, "It's the end of times. The end of times."

It was, in fact, a sunny Monday morning in July, and the witch Jane Black stood with her cat in her new sorcery store waiting for business.

As the woman fled, Jane threw up her hands. "I just want to help," she said. "Why can't people understand a woman wanting to use her power?"

"Like I said. It's a dumb idea," murmured the cat.

"No, it's not," said Jane.

"Regulars don't want help from a witch. They've all read the Grimm tales."

Jane smirked. "Watch it. I'll cross anchovies off the shopping list."

Vix hissed and strode over to her favorite cushion sitting in front of the fireplace. As she settled in, she turned her body, so her bum faced her witch.

"I don't get it, Vix. Why don't regulars at least check us out?" She looked around her witch store. Everything she could possibly need was there. Shelves of books on arcane knowledge lined one wall. Her trusty cauldron, crystal ball, and candelabra sat on a work table in front of a gigantic stained-glass window on the opposite wall. Herbs and potions from every realm filled a storage unit in one corner, and a glass display case filled with decks of tarot cards sat in another. The smell of secrets and magic tinged the air.

Vix shrugged.

"And why the hex isn't anyone calling? I put ads everywhere." Jane pulled out her cell phone and punched the store's phone number.

"Dial Witch, the one-stop shop for sorcery in Mystic Keep," said the recording. She grunted. Her voice sounded stiff and efficient. Maybe that put people off.

Jane started a new recording. "Dial Witch, the town's one and only full-witch-service." That sounded kinky. Jane bit her lip. How could she compress who she was and what she wanted to do into a single slogan?

Vixen, who heard all of Jane's thoughts as if they were her own, turned to face her. "A sound bite."

"Exactly. I need to reduce myself into a friggen sound-bite."

Vix sighed. "Tell me what you have to offer."

"I'm the sixth sister of the sixth sister in a powerful witch family. Should I say that? It's rather confusing." Jane exhaled noisily. "I'm a talented psychic, adept in all sorts of magical practices." She pushed her long, wayward hair behind her shoulders. "People should want my help."

"For a smart witch, you're really dumb sometimes."

"I've done everything I can to make this business work."

Vix pawed the air. "Listen. Regulars grow up believing witches are dangerous."

"We are. What's your point?"

"They think sharing anything about themselves with a witch is the first step to selling their souls to the devil."

Jane shook her head. "That's simply not true."

"And, need I remind you that the regulars aren't your worst problem." Vix swished her tail.

Leaning back as far as Jane could in her fancy new office chair, she put her feet on the top of the desk and admired her pedicure. She wore flip-flops as usual. Who knew going into business would be so hard?

"You don't have to sell your services or run a store. You have nothing—I repeat nothing—to prove."

Jane frowned. "It's not about that. Deep in my heart, I know this is what I'm meant to do."

Vix rolled her eyes. "Keep telling yourself that."

"I figured it would be a success from day one. It makes perfect sense. Everyone has problems. I can help."

Vix blinked. "Okay, let me say this slowly. They don't want your help."

"But I saw it in a vision."

"Forget the vision. The store is a bad idea."

Jane winced. "I know what you're thinking."

"At least one of us is capable."

"Sometimes, my desires get in the way and muddle up my perceptions of the future. I admit that. Not all my visions turn into reality. But this one is different, Vix. I swear. I feel it in my bones."

"First your heart, now your bones. Are you sure you don't have indigestion?"

"Stop it, Vix. The town of Mystic Keep needs healing."

Vixen's eyelids dropped to half-mast.

"I can integrate regulars with supernatural beings, Vix. Right here, right now, in this full-service sorcery. I can do this."

"First, you're a witch. Now you're a healer." The familiar tilted her head.

"Don't you see? Regulars will learn to accept magic as the wonderful thing it is, and the supes won't have to hide their talents."

"It's a noble wish." Vix checked her claw manicure.

Jane shrugged. "What can go wrong?"

"Let me count the ways." Vixen stood, did a 360, and settled back into her cushion.

The front door banged open, and a tall, slender woman strutted into the middle of the store. Bleached and brittle, blonde hair fell over her narrow shoulders. Wearing a tight fire-engine-red dress that hid nothing, she looked like a wannabe runway model, aging badly. Anger blazed in her blue eyes.

Jane stood. "Can I help you?"

The woman strode awkwardly into the room on spike heels and came to a teetering stop in front of Jane's desk. "My name is Elly Briggins, and I have a problem."

Jane inhaled deeply. The client exuded no magical energy. "I'm Jane Black, psychic and magic practitioner. Please, have a seat and tell me more." She motioned to the client's chair.

The woman held her head high as she sat. "It's my husband, Butch."

"Is he not well?"

The woman's eyes narrowed. "I want him out of my life."

"Excuse me?"

"I said." Elly Briggins spoke slowly as if she were talking to a child. "I want him gone!"

"Are you asking me to do what I think you are asking me to do?" Jane sat down.

"Kill him," the woman said. "Take him out. Zap him with the Devil's lightning or something. Just get rid of him."

Jane straightened the yellow pad of legal-sized paper in front of her. "Have you considered couple counseling?"

"Dead, I said. I want Butch dead."

Jane picked up her pencil and drummed the desk. "Why?" Anger flashed in the woman's eyes. "I want my freedom."

Jane leaned forward. "Did Butch do something?"

Elly exhaled noisily. "I want you to kill my husband. Can I be any clearer?" Her spit flew into space between them. "I'll pay you to do it. I have savings."

Jane looked up at the ceiling for a minute, hoping for inspiration, but all she saw was a water stain.

Her visitor looked around the room as if answers hid in corners.

"Elly, I'm here for you."

An evil smile laced with hope spread across Elly Briggin's thin white face.

"But," continued Jane. "I'm not an assassin."

Elly's shoulders stiffened.

"Tell me more about Butch. Maybe I can fix him."

The woman pursed her lips. "Okay," she said slowly. "Everything about him drives me crazy. He comes home late for supper. He's lazy. His socks smell. He never listens to me. And, he watches hockey every Saturday night."

"How's the sex?"

Elly squirmed as if she sat on a platter of worms. "What business is that of yours?"

"We all need intimacy, Elly. So tell me, is he any good in the sack?"

The woman blinked.

"You know what I'm talking about. Does Butch take you to the moon and back?"

"My husband?"

Jane narrowed her eyes. Why did regulars have trouble talking about something as natural as coupling?

Elly shook her head. "Look, Ms. Black, I don't see why my sex life matters."

"Killing someone is serious business."

"You're a witch. Just do it."

Jane winced. "How about I fix Butch instead. Wouldn't that be better?"

"Fix him?"

"I'll design a potion for him. All you need to do is slip it into his favorite drink, and I promise you, he will be a changed man."

"Changed?" Elly squinted.

"Yes, definitely. He'll be Butch point 2, and trust me, you won't notice the smell of his feet."

"You can do that?"

"Yes. I'm good at fixing men. I know what I'm doing."

Vix chuckled, and Jane gave her a withering look.

Elly's brows met in the middle. "All I need to do is slip him your potion?"

Jane looked up at the water stain. It wouldn't be wise to make her magic look too easy. "There is one thing I need you to do." She lied.

"Name it."

"Make a list of all the things you want me to fix, and bring it to me. Then, I'll add a silent spell to the potion to address those items."

"When will this magic be ready?"

"Come for it tomorrow." Jane stood and offered a fist bump. "Shall we say nine o'clock? The cost will be one-hundred dollars."

Elly's lips mashed together. "It's that simple?"

"Yes. I am a good witch and a competent one. I'll fix the Big Guy." Jane took her fist back.

Elly blinked. "You ... you ... know my pet name for him. No one knows I call him 'Big Guy' when we're alone."

"I'm psychic. Remember. Psychic. I can read your mind." And your heart, but Jane didn't say that. "Tomorrow, Elly. I will see you tomorrow. My potion will end all your troubles."

*A*s the front door closed behind Elly Briggins, Jane did a victory jig around the room. Her cell phone dinged with a text message. "Family dinner, TONIGHT!" It was from her sister Cassie.

"I love family get-togethers," said Vix with a sigh.

"That makes one of us." Jane shrugged. It didn't matter. Nothing her family could say about her shop could dampen her spirits tonight. She had her first customer. Things were going her way.

Nothing could go wrong now.

Vix rolled her eyes.

CHAPTER TWO



"Shiver me timbers." ~ Anon

"Not this place, again." Talon shook his head.

Maggot, a mage in a black trench coat with a silver handlebar mustache, stood by the door of the most notorious nightclub in the third realm. From the outside, it looked like a plain, red brick building with a black door, but after midnight its insides transformed into a playground for the supernatural, a palace of pleasures beyond anyone's wildest dreams. Built more than a century ago, it had the kind of storied past no one spoke about in the light of day. Considering this was the third realm, a haven for thieves and pirates, that said a lot.

The third mage in their drinking party, Colt, had been trying to grow a mustache. His face had stray hairs going this way and that on his face, but he didn't care. He was thrilled to be out drinking with the cool, bad boys and kept telling them so. He tipped back his cowboy hat. "You guys know this place?"

Maggot smacked Talon's back. "Ah, come on. You know you want to."

Maggot had been friends with Talon since their fifth year at Brambles when they set a spell-bomb in the chemistry lab and blew up half the room. He had always been fun, but he had also always got them into a mess of trouble. Talon paused.

Colt watched the interaction between the two old friends with wide eyes.

Talon wondered what kind of mage wore a cowboy hat. He had known the kid for two days and was still waiting to be impressed.

Talon said to Maggot, "Even you have more class than this."

"Ah, my red-headed friend! The Surly Wench has it all: cheap beer, fast lovers, and the promise of discretion." He winked at Colt. "Heavy spells keep us safe in this saloon. What happens inside stays inside."

Colt walked closer to the door and sniffed the air.

Talon muttered, "That's because Galen, the fucking wizard who runs the place, drains your brain before you leave."

Maggot shrugged. "That works for me."

"I'm not drunk enough," said Talon.

Colt opened the door and peered in. The sound of dance music and the smell of arcane magic escaped into the cold night.

Maggot sneered. "That's what you said the last time, and we had a shitload of fun."

"All I remember is a hangover from hell and discovering a tattoo on my back that only appears at sunset on the nights of the full moon."

Maggot shook his head. "What about you, Colt. Want to try something wicked?"

"Do you even need to ask?"

"It's the perfect place to drink. Realm enforcers are scared shitless of Galen, so they don't cross his threshold," said Maggot

"He probably gives them a cut," mused Talon. "It's a bad idea, gentlemen. Mark my words, a bad idea."

Colt touched the handle of the door again.

Maggot stared at Talon.

"It's a fuckin' den of sin," grumbled Talon.

"Yeah, it is," said Maggot. "Your point?"

Colt interrupted them. "I've got to see this place." He opened the door wide and entered.

Talon tilted his head back and sighed. "Okay. One drink."

Inside, the party was in full swing. In the center of the room, supernaturals of all shapes and sizes danced to the hypnotic beat of the band. A long wooden bar lined the west wall, supplied with every form of intoxication known to mages. People mostly sat around tables, but some lounged on sofas.

Maggot found an empty table and sat. He leered at a threesome going at it on a sofa not far away.

Talon looked around for enforcers. Seeing none, he sat. "Thirty minutes. Tops."

Colt nodded to the beat of the music. "This place is so cool."

"Wait till you see the surly wenches," said Maggot.

As if on cue, a woman with enormous breasts arrived at their table. "What's your pleasure, assholes?"

Talon looked up to her painted face, only to be greeted by eyes harder than pavement staring back at him. "Beer," he said. "Whatever's cheap and on tap."

As the woman took the other mage's orders, Talon scanned the room. A young puppy caught his attention. He looked to be a Beagle mix, with big paws and the saddest eyes he had ever seen on a hound. A rope tied around his neck tethered him to the leg of a chair. His ribs stuck out, and he panted as if he hadn't had water for a very long time.

Six mages sat at the Beagle's table playing poker. The dog whined, and the man closest to him kicked him in the stomach. The pup collapsed to the beer-soaked wooden floor.

The waitress moved on. Colt got up on the dance floor and started making moves on a young fae. Maggot leaned back in his chair to watch the party. Talon stared at the dog.

As the poker game came to an end, one player left, and Talon considered his odds. The card players looked wasted, but that could be an illusion they used to hide their poker tells. How long would it be before another player would leave?

"Maggot, you're right on time," said an unknown voice.

Talon turned his head to look at the speaker, a tall, lean pirate dressed in leather who stank of body odor. He turned to Maggot. "So, this was the reason we came to the Surly Wench?"

Maggot shrugged and motioned to the pirate to take a seat. "This is Talon, the mage I told you about."

The man nodded at Talon. "He says you know a million ways to make a man suffer."

"I don't talk magic with strangers," said Talon glancing at the puppy.

Maggot narrowed his eyes. "Talon, this is Beudreu, the captain of the ship, Assassin's Glare."

Beudreu's grey eyes had a rheumy look about them, making it hard to read his thoughts. "You'll like this job."

"Oh? Why is that?" said Talon.

"I want you to find the youngest daughter of Gredor the wizard."

Talon chuckled. "I'm not in the finding business."

"Ah," grunted the pirate. "I trust you will know what to do with her when you find her."

Maggot spoke. "Tell him. Tell him what you're offering."

Talon looked directly at the pirate.

"My ship."

"A captain willing to give away his ship. You must be really pissed at Gredor."

"The damn black wizard ruined my life."

"Why not take him out yourself?"

"Hah. Gredor? Impossible. Many have tried, but no one has succeeded."

"So, you want to gut him by taking out his youngest child."

"Her name is Jane Black."

Talon leaned back and took another glance at the pup. "I'm not looking for a ship."

Maggot glared at Beudreu. "Tell him."

"You have something in common with this enchantress."

"I doubt that," mumbled Talon.

"Something that will interest you more than my boat."

Talon stopped looking at the dog.

A malicious smile took over the pirate's narrow face. "Jane Black was kidnapped by Eirelick when she was a child."

Talon's heart skipped a beat.

The pirate studied Talon's face. "Well?"

Talon stood, pulled his wand out of his vest, and cast a

spell. Everyone in the room froze, except for the dog. He walked over to the puppy and pulled him into his arms. "It's time for us to leave, little one," he said. The dog licked his face.

On his way out, he stopped beside the pirate and burned his answer into the top of the table. "Yes."

Galen stood by the door with his arms crossed. His presence burned with a cold still fire that seared the pit of Talon's gut. Holy hell, what had he done! Before he could call his magic to protect himself, the shifty, old wizard waved Talon through. "Because of the dog, I'll let you pass."

"I bid you good night, sir."

CHAPTER THREE



“Some call it chaos. We call it family.” ~ Anon.

Glancing at herself in a long bedroom mirror, Jane wondered if she looked good enough for a family dinner. She wore her comfiest jeans, a blue sweatshirt that said 'Don't Sweat It,' and her black flip-flops. Her long red hair flowed over her shoulders in waves, and her face was touched up with just the right amount of blush and lipstick to look naturally healthy.

Family dinners pretty much defined her life. They marked the significant events, the minor events, and every-

thing in between. Whether they were heart-warming or terrorizing depended on the number of secrets Jane wanted to hide and how many of them got revealed between courses. Having five sisters and enough eccentric aunts and uncles to fill a zoo made having a private life almost impossible. But the gossip was always juicy.

Vixen, sitting on the bed behind her, stopped preening herself long enough to chuckle at Jane's lament.

"It's not just my privacy, I'm worried about," said Jane.

"Uh-huh."

Jane washed her hands over her face. "Listen, I love my family. You know that. I would do anything for any one of them." Maybe more mascara would help.

Vix rolled her eyes.

"Dealing with Cassie and Merlina has become impossible. Their estrogen levels are driving me crazy. They fly off their brooms with the littlest provocation."

"Mmhm."

"Okay. I hear you. I feel left out of the Mommy thing. I said it."

Vix swished her tail.

Jane took one more look at herself. Good enough for the gene pool. She picked Vixen up in her arms and teleported them into Cassie's manor.

The three-story stone mansion, built in 1920, had an Art Nouveau vibe that made Jane drool every time she visited. The stained-glass windows made her feel as if she had entered a palace in the Nineteen Twenties, and Mata Hari would arrive with an entourage at any moment.

Over the years, the place had fallen into ruin and become a haunted whisper of its former self. But Sanjay and Cassie were breathing new life into it, renovating every corner to suit their needs. Jane sighed as she breathed in the old-world charm.

Merlina, Jane's oldest sister, stood in front of Jane.

"You teleported? Really?" Her chin jutted out. "You need regular exercise. Otherwise, your body will fall apart. Just fall apart. And then what will you do?" Her voice, typically authoritative, rose to a jarring shrill. "We must take care of ourselves."

And there was the 'royal we,' but it sounded off. Jane stared at her.

Merlina had more in common with Maleficent than her high cheekbones. Tonight, she wore her black hair straight and parted in the middle. It framed her face like two Gothic curtains. A pretty cotton dress that brought out the green in her eyes clung to her baby bump.

Jane pulled her shrilling sister into her arms for a long hug. When Merlina tried to pull away, Jane held on. It took a couple minutes, but Merlina's body finally softened into the embrace. She choked back a sob. "Sorry," she said, and she stepped away. "It's just too much. Everything is just too much."

Too much? Jane nodded sympathetically.

Cassie, her other sister who lived in town, appeared next to her with open arms. Without a word, they embraced. Cassie felt stiff as well. She complained daily about the difficulties of raising a supernatural baby. Clearly, motherhood was taking its toll.

When they stepped apart, Jane took a good look at Cassie, the free-spirited artist in the family. Her blond hair, cut into a perfect bob, framed her heart-shaped face. Paint stained her fingers, a sign she had found time for her passion, painting. She wore a long flowing dress that brought out the color in her cheeks. Dark circles around her eyes spoke of exhaustion.

Cassie gently grabbed Jane's wrist. "Have you talked to your therapist since you got back?"

Jane removed her arm and turned her attention to baby Luna who lay snuggled in a carrier on Cassie's back. The child's hair was blacker than the night, her skin warm brown, and her eyes blazed a mischievous orange. She looked every bit the little minx of a witch her mother told epic stories about. Luna giggled at her aunt, and Jane wondered not for the first time if the nine-month-old baby had read her mind.

Jane wasn't getting anywhere reading minds tonight. The witches blocked her out.

But, it didn't take mind-melding to know something was up. It could be a long night. Where the hex was the booze?

Before she could vocalize her concern, the air around them vibrated, a silver fog descended, and the three family warlocks appeared. Sanjay Khan, Donovan O'Reilly, and Gabriel O'Reilly.

Sanjay was Cassie's husband, a royal warlock with swagger. With warm brown skin and jet-black hair, he cut quite the figure. His eyes blazed gold for a milli-second, signing his power.

Sanjay's best friend, Donovan O'Reilly, stood next to him, blue-eyed Irish charm packaged in a well-seasoned warrior's body. He was the town's supernatural sheriff. Tall and muscular, Donovan looked every bit the tough warrior people wrote legends about. Beneath his black cape, he wore fighting fatigues. Strapped to his body, he had a gun, bow, and numerous knives edged with deadly spells. That's all the weaponry Jane could see, but she guessed there was more tucked away somewhere.

A mischievous grin spread across Donovan's face. "Little sister." He enveloped Jane in a brotherly hug.

"My turn," said Sanjay, who hugged her a fraction of a minute longer. "It's a bit like holding a vessel of wild magic," he said when he let her go.

Next to Donovan stood Gabriel O'Reilly, a leaner, eigh-

teen-year-old version of his father. He folded his arms around Jane and thumped her back three times in an awkward teenage way. Jane considered burping but didn't want to embarrass him.

Warlocks! Jane searched for information in their brains, but they all shielded their thoughts.

Too many shields. Too many secrets. And the night was just beginning. Jane's witch senses screamed.

George, the manor's resident ghost, appeared next and rattled his chains in the way of greeting. Jane gave him a big smile, and he wandered off to join the familiars who gathered in a side room to gossip.

Cassie spoke up. "Let's sit and eat like normal people."

Normal? Who in her family had ever wanted to be normal?

The family sat around a large, oval table Cassie scored at an antique auction. In the middle of it were serving platters heaped with food. The smell of roast beef, potatoes, and green beans wafted in the air.

When they were younger, the Black sisters would have dived into the feast. She imagined the warlocks would have done the same, but this night they all sat politely and looked at it.

"Who's going to spill the beans?" asked Jane.

Sanjay twisted his wrist, and a bottle of Merlot sitting in front of him flew down the table to Jane. It poured wine into her glass. "Have a sip first," the warlock said.

The wine bottle continued around the table. Donovan raised his glass, "To the family."

"To the family," they chanted in unison as they each raised their glass.

Meanwhile, the food grew cold.

Merlina, who was drinking juice, chugged her glass and slammed it on the table. "I'll start."

Donovan raised his brow, but rather than say anything, he grabbed the roast beef platter and started helping himself to meat. Everyone else looked at Merlina.

Merlina looked at Jane. "A few things have happened since you left. Welcome home, by the way."

Jane laughed. "I noticed you're pregnant."

Donovan passed the beef. "Isn't that the best news ever?"

Merlina's eyes welled with tears.

Jane stood. "Merlina?"

The older witch waved her hand and shook her head. Donovan pulled her back into her seat and put his arm around her shoulders.

Jane looked at Cassie. "What the hex?"

Sanjay put down his wine glass. "A bounty has been set on warlock babies."

"What?" Jane's heart pounded in her throat.

Cassie's face paled. "Our scouts heard rumors a few months ago. We didn't want to tell you until we knew for sure that the threat is real."

Merlina nodded. "It's not the sort of news one sends in a text."

"Still. You should have let *me* know. You should have told me to come home. This is awful. We should have the whole family here protecting the babies."

Merlina looked at Donovan.

He locked eyes with Jane. "I am the sheriff of the supernatural police force in town. I will make sure we have all the protection we need."

Jane glared at him.

His lips firmed. "Nothing will happen to our family. Trust me."

Sanjay spoke up. "We didn't want to bother you because you were taking care of Gavin."

Jane winced. She looked around at their expectant faces.

"Okay. Here's the Gavin story. I tried to take care of him myself, but I couldn't stop his convulsions. So I had to take him to the PNW werewolf pack. They took him in, but they said I had to go. I would be in the way."

Sanjay nodded. "You did what you could. Transitioning is hard, or so they tell me. I know the PNW Weres to be good people. They will do their best to keep Gavin alive."

Jane shook her head. Trust wasn't her problem. "It was my fault. If he hadn't been trying to protect me, he wouldn't have been bit. I wanted to be the one to save him."

Donovan spoke. "Warriors pledge their lives to protect people, Jane. We know the danger we face every day when we leave home, and we accept it. Gavin McGee was a good cop. He knew what he was doing. You shouldn't feel guilty. He wouldn't want that."

"Maybe, you're feeling more than guilt?" said Cassie quietly.

Sanjay refilled Jane's wine glass.

Jane shook her head. "Let's stop talking about me and my little problems." She exhaled slowly. "Who the hell placed a bounty on our kids?"

CHAPTER FOUR



"An adventure isn't worth telling if there aren't any dragons in it."
~ Sarah Ban Breathnach, Simple Abundance.

Relaxing in his lair after a long day's journey, the dragon Helios Daragon shifted into his human form and poured himself two fingers of Canadian whiskey. He leaned back in his favorite chair and wondered, not for the first time, how he got himself into the mess he was in.

The only job more grueling than being an enforcer recruit was being the trainer of ten enforcer recruits.

While his students flew in somewhat straight lines through the training course in the mountainous terrain of the ninth realm, Leos traveled triple the distance to manage

them. Moreover, he was a god-damned nanny, constantly rounding up strays and bringing them back into the fleet.

Had he ever been so bad at navigation? He shook his head.

Leos's lair, hidden high in the northern mountains of the ninth, had few visitors. He liked it that way. Inside the cave, a section of the ground was covered with hay so he could relax in his dragon form. Further inside, he built a human domicile in a side chamber. That's where he spent his time in man form, drinking whiskey and remembering the time he actually had a life. A thick wooden door with the latest security protected his private space.

Building furniture took his mind off the never-ending dragon politics. He looked around his main room. A couple oversized chairs and a long sofa sat around a low coffee table made of exotic wood from the second realm. On the side, he arranged the bare essentials of a kitchen: a fridge, hot plate, and microwave, all powered by a solar-powered generator.

His tools sat beside a pile of neatly stacked wood. Maybe he would get back to his projects on the weekend.

A small archway led to his bedroom embedded in a smaller side alcove. A king-size bed covered with silk sheets and furs stood in the middle. He could easily call it a day, but the whisky called to him. One last drink. That would set things right, at the end of this, a very long and grueling day.

Leos stretched out in his favorite chair with his glass and a bottle of whisky. After the third drink, he decided his day hadn't been that bad. Despite his aching muscles, he wanted his crew to succeed. They were all excellent dragons at heart and capable of becoming genuinely great enforcers. The Nation took pride in its elite team, known to be adept at traveling within the ninth realm and between other domains. They were trained in all manners of warfare. The formidable strength of their Federation relied on their defenses. Yup.

They all relied on young dragons becoming legends. So maybe the day hadn't been so bad.

The air shifted, and Leos's heart stilled. The light in the room shimmered as his brother entered his space.

"Hey," Sol said. "Are you going to offer me a drink?"

Sol was a skinnier version of himself, or at least that's how others described him. He stood almost seven feet tall. His thick silver hair fell in a single long braid down his back to his waist, and his bushy black eyebrows loomed over sunken eyes. Some women described the brothers as ruggedly handsome. Others found their features too dragonian to be civilized. But, they never complained the morning after.

Leos smirked at his brother. "What? Waste good whisky on you?" He got up and walked over to the kitchen for a second glass.

Sol watched him closely. "You look like hell."

"Feel it too." Leos grabbed another glass from his kitchen shelf and poured Whisky into it.

"It's an honor to train enforcers," said Sol.

"Fuck that." Leos handed Sol his glass and motioned for him to sit.

"At least they didn't give you the ladies squadron."

Leos grunted and sat in his own chair. "I'm one of the most skilled enforcers in the realm. I'm in my prime. I shouldn't be teaching." He poured more whisky in his own glass and looked at its beautiful color. "They should get an old dragon to be the instructor."

A mischievous smile crossed Sol's face.

"What?" said Leos.

"It's your own fault."

"Thanks for reminding me."

Sol leaned back. "Was the woman worth it?"

Leos chuckled. "Hell, yeah." He took a slow drink,

savoring the burn as the sacred amber fluid flowed down his throat. And they say dragons made the best fire. "The good things in life are always worth it."

A couple hours later, Sol rose to take his leave. They argued over their favorite sports teams and discussed the latest family gossip and their last Mah Jong match in detail. Sol turned to Leos. "By the way, I have a message for you."

Leos flinched. "What's that?"

"You've been suspended."

Leos straightened his spine as best he could in his condition. "What?"

"Your teaching gig is over."

"I'm doing a good job." And I sure as hell don't want to be exiled.

Sol grinned. "The elders have a mission for you."

"The elders?"

"You need to report to the Magistrate at dawn."

"Now, you tell me!" Leos couldn't believe his ears. A mission? Could he be a real enforcer again? That would be so ... "Are you fucking with me?"

"Nope." Sol's smile held. "I've always said you get the hottest women and the best luck."

Leos tried to piece it together. Maybe the gods did favor him? Mmm. Not likely. Perhaps someone on the council realized he would be better placed in the field. That felt more right. "Tell me about the mission. And why the hell you didn't tell me right away."

Sol shrugged. "The details are classified."

Leos winced. "You're one of our top security geeks. You know all the secrets of the realms. You've told me yourself

that you see the multiverse as a gigantic flowchart. So why wouldn't they tell you?"

Sol patted his brother's shoulder with a heavy hand. "Trust me. There is no limit to the number of secrets in this realm, and no one knows all of them."

"You're talking in riddles."

"Let me put it this way. No matter how high you rise in our world, there's always someone above you, pulling strings. The sooner you learn that, brother, the better." A muscle ticked in his chin.

"It sounds too good to be true."

"Let me know how it works out."

"You have no idea where I'm going?"

Sol gave him a truly wicked grin, and left without another word.

CHAPTER FIVE



"You can't own a cat. The best you can do is be partners."

~ Sir Harry Swanson.

As the following day dawned in the sleepy little Pacific Northwest town of Mystic Keep, the sweet smells of roses edged the salty breeze. Jane knew in her bones, it would be a better day.

"How could it not be?" said Vix lying on the window ledge, basking in the sunshine.

Jane threw a pillow at her but missed.

The cat hissed as she jumped to the floor and strutted out the door. "Get over yourself."

. . .

At nine o'clock, Jane sat in her office chair facing the front door. Her pad of yellow lined paper sat perfectly aligned with the edge of the desk, and her pencil had been sharpened to a fine point three times. Despite her preparedness, a sense of foreboding weighed heavily on her shoulders, which no amount of coffee seemed to shake.

She looked around the shop. What could go wrong?

In her hand, she held Elly's potion, and she could feel the heat of the magic within it. This was her beginning. She had the best intentions, and the universe would reward that. Right?

"Gag me now," muttered Vix, who lay on her back by the fire, her paws dangling mid-air. She had spent the last half-hour preening her coat, and now she was in her drying mode.

Jane glared at her. "You know Brambles has a place for wayward familiars in their dark hall. I hear they have success with reprogramming felines. It's a behavioral modification program. Though some cats lose all their hair in the process." Brambles was the witch academy Jane and Vixen had attended together.

Vix gave Jane the evil eye.

Jane grinned. "I believe they call it 'Operation Meow-Meow.'"

Vix rolled over, so her bum faced her witch.

Jane's smile widened. Now to business. She glanced at her to-do list:

"One. Make an HD potion for Elly Briggins. Done." She drew a line through it.

"Two. Fix my telephone message." Crap, she still had no idea what to say.

"Three, organize the bookcase. Hmm." She'd have to be really bored to do that.

The front door banged open, and Elly Briggins, with her brittle, blonde mane, strode through the store on spike heels. Her narrow face loomed over Jane's desk. "Well?"

Jane motioned towards the client's chair. "Let me explain how this is going to work."

Elly's nose twitched as if the room smelled of cooked cabbage, but she sat. "I don't need a lecture. I need my husband dead."

"Elly, my potion will solve your problems." In the middle of the table, she placed the small jar with a cork top. It made a decisive 'clunk' when it touched the desk and then a sloshing sound as the potion and magic within it settled. On the fancy label, Jane had used a fountain pen to scroll the words, 'HD potion.' The brown liquid sparkled, but only those magically adept could see that.

Elly sat down and stared at the bottle.

"Remember," Jane said, "we agreed to try to fix him before we did anything more drastic."

"How long?" Elly said.

"How long for what?"

"How long do I have to try this stuff before you just kill him for me." The woman squirmed in the chair.

"Did you make a list?" Jane said.

The look Elly gave her spit across space between them. She opened her purse and pulled out a folded piece of paper. "I stopped at a hundred."

Right. Jane took the piece of paper, closed her eyes, and mumbled in Latin. She considered reciting her grocery list but decided it would be better to ask the universe to bless the Briggins. They needed help.

When she finished, she clicked her fingers, causing sparks of light to ignite on their tips. The sparks burst into tiny stars, which rose slowly into the air, creating a white fog that smelled like oranges ripening in the sunshine.

Elly's lips trembled as she watched the light show. "This better work."

Jane opened her eyes. "Trust me. It will. Slip one tablespoon of this potion into his drink, and you will have a changed husband. Give him the same dose once a day until the potion runs out."

Elly grabbed the jar and held it up to the light as if it were a pot of gold. When she felt its warmth, she almost dropped it. "Holy shit. What are you?"

"I'm a witch. Remember? Now—my payment."

With shaking hands, the Briggins woman pulled a hundred-dollar bill out of her purse and slid it across the desk, jumping back as quickly as she could. Her eyes widened. She turned and ran outside with the bottle of magic cradled close to her body.

With a twist of her hand, Jane closed the door after Elly.

Vix laughed. "You think the potion's going to work."

"Am I ever wrong when it comes to men?"

"Well," muttered the cat, "That depends. I remember ..."

"Shush up."

CHAPTER SIX



"What did one saggy boob say to another? You better perk up, or they'll think we're nuts." ~ Anon.

The front door slowly opened before Jane could sit down, and a tall, thin, older woman with a cane wandered in. She smelled like black licorice, the kind that comes in the shape of cats. The woman's appearance shimmered, so she was definitely a supernatural being of some kind.

"Welcome," Jane said and added a respectful bow of her head, the Namaste-motion of the adept.

The woman nodded strode towards her with a graceful but slow gait as if her joints struggled with arthritis.

The lady would probably be six feet tall if she wasn't

stooped over her cane. She wore a well-pressed, chocolate-brown pantsuit with a mocha-colored silk blouse. Her white hair had been pulled elegantly into a bun at the back of her head, revealing an oval face dominated by dark, deeply set eyes and slashed with high cheekbones. While her frame appeared fragile, her aura shone with an intensity that warned others, she tolerated no fools. Her rosebud mouth lifted into a polite smile as she stood before Jane.

Jane tilted her head as she took the woman in with all her senses. Her visitor was a classy old dame, used to getting her way. Jane offered her hand. "I'm Jane Black. I'm a psychic enchantress."

"Taupe Halliday."

"A lovely name," said Jane, though she didn't recognize it. "What can I do for you?"

"Close your damn business." The woman's power vibrated through the air, squeezing Jane's throat as surely as a big, burly man could with his hands.

Jane grabbed her throat and stood. "Excuse me?"

"Stop. Just stop what you're doing. This is your one and only warning." Taupe Halliday released her grip.

Jane took a slow, calming breath. Who the hell did this lady think she was?

'Someone who can choke you in a blink of an eye,' said Vix in her head.

Before Jane could think, Taupe Halliday spoke. "Does your mother know what you're doing?"

Jane swallowed and did her best to appear unruffled from the assault. "I'm here to help people."

Halliday chuckled.

Jane slid her clenched fists into her jeans. "Magic shouldn't be hidden. It should be shared."

"Your reckless behavior will expose us. All of us. Magic

has remained a secret in the earthly realm for a reason. Surely, you know that."

Jane wanted to growl. "Ms. Halliday, let me be crystal clear. I have no intention of closing my business."

Steam flowed from Halliday's ears.

"*I*s there anything else I can do for you? Perhaps a cup of calming tea?"

The woman stood. "Young witches! They'll be the death of us all. Mark my words." She walked out of the store. Then, over her shoulder, she added, "You'll be sorry."

"One for two," said Vix, who emerged from beneath her cushion.

"And it's not even noon."

A feeling of unease flowed through Jane, setting all her nerves on edge. Her shoulders felt heavier than boulders. Maybe everything would be alright if she survived the first week.

"If..." said Vix.

CHAPTER SEVEN



*"You can't own a cat. The best you can do is be partners." - Sir
Harry Swanson.*

At three o'clock, Jane jumped to her feet to welcome Cassie into her store. She strode through the door with baby Luna strapped to her back in a carrier. Sid, her black cat familiar, strode at her heels with her tail flying high in the air.

Cassie wriggled the baby carrier off her back and carefully placed it on the floor so the baby wouldn't wake up. Then, she hugged her sister and sat in the client's chair.

"I'm so glad you came. What do you think?"

Cassie looked around and shrugged. "Interesting. What

are you reading?" She pointed to the book Jane had just put down.

"Wiggle-wort roots and their derivatives. I'm looking for a spell to fix Vixen," Jane said.

Sid chuckled and strutted over to Vix, who lounged by her fireplace. Vix rolled her eyes. "You should know by now; there is no fixing me."

"Tea?" asked Jane.

"Sure," said Cassie, who picked up the spellbook.

Jane pulled an electric kettle out of the cabinet beneath her working table.

Cassie wiggled her bum into the cushion of the client chair. "You've hexed this seat. Should I be worried?"

"Not unless you lie." The kettle made ticking sounds as it warmed up.

Cassie laughed. "How is business? I wanted to ask you last night, but we got to talking about other things, and the time flew by."

Jane plunked two mugs on her desk, along with a jug of milk and a bowl of Manuka honey. "I've had two people visit."

"Two! That's uh, great."

"The first came yesterday. Her name is Elly Briggins—a human with husband trouble. I made her a potion and expect to hear good results soon. I'm sure she'll spread the news in town that I can do wondrous things."

"Uh-huh." Avoiding eye contact, Cassie put milk and a spoon of honey into her mug. She stirred it slowly.

Jane returned to her work table, and poured water just off the boil into the teapot. "The second person came today. Taupe Halliday."

Cassie's eyes widened. "Don't mess with her."

"Well, she shouldn't mess with me. The nerve of that

woman!" Jane carried the teapot over to her desk, and poured tea into Cassie's mug.

"I take it she doesn't like your business."

"Hell, no. But I'm not going to let her stop me." Jane sat down and prepped her own mug.

Cassie firmed her lips into a formidable straight line. "While we're on that subject ..."

"Which subject? Rude shifters or *my* business?"

"Your business." Cassie took a sip of her tea. "Do you really think it's a good idea?"

Jane fought an eye roll. "Helping others is always a good idea."

"Mhm." Cassie took another sip of her drink.

"Mother taught us it was our obligation to help our community. Of course, she was talking about the coven and not a mixed town of regular and magic folk, but the same rule applies. One should share their talents. That's all I'm doing. For the good of all."

"Speaking of mother"

Jane took too big a sip of her own tea at the mention of her mother's name and scalded her lips. She winced. "What about mother?"

"Mom is concerned about you." Cassie looked at the shelf behind Jane's desk. "Is that my black silk cloth?"

Jane narrowed her eyes. "What about Mom?"

Cassie sniffed her tea and put her mug down. "Actually, it's not just Mom. The whole family is concerned."

"Concerned? Fudge that. Since I've been born, everyone has had concerns about me."

"Yes, well, they have, but that's beside the point."

"I'm too wild in my thinking, too powerful in my witchcraft, not demure enough to find a suitable mate, not pleasant enough to invite to social gatherings, not ..." Jane groaned. "Shall I go on?"

"The family only wants the best for you." Cassie's face reddened.

"And what is that? Exactly?"

"Not opening a shop of magic in a town where the regulars don't like sorcery for starters. It's too dangerous both for you personally and for all of us. We should keep regulars away from our magic. That's not to say you can't help them. But you need to do it quietly on the side, preferably without them knowing about it. That's the way it has always been done."

Vix chuckled. "Told you so."

Jane gave the cat an evil eye. "We? We this ...? We that ...? I'm sick of it. I'm going to prove to you that my business will succeed, and ..." Jane realized she was pointing her finger like the old headmistress at Brambles and stopped.

"And?"

"You'll see Dial Witch is a good thing. It will help this town heal. I swear it. The sooner we all learn to get along, the better. The haves and the have-nots of magic need to meld."

Cassie closed her eyes for a minute and sighed. "Tell me the truth," she said in a conspiratorial tone. "Is this nonsense all because things didn't work out between you and Gavin?"

"No. And, I don't want to talk about him."

Cassie shifted in her seat. "Have you talked to your therapist?"

Jane scowled. "Enough about me. Tell me more about the bounty on warlock babies."

Cassie straightened her spine. "It's awful. There's a one-million-dollar bounty out for warlock children under the age of three. That includes Merlina's baby and Luna."

"But I don't understand. Luna's a girl and half-witch."

"She may be a witch, but she has royal warlock blood flowing in her veins."

Jane stirred her tea. "I can't believe this is happening."

"None of us can. Our supernatural sanctuary was starting to run smoothly, and now this."

"Who would do this?"

"The bounty is advertised on all the magic media platforms. A group calling themselves The Black Souls promise the money on delivery."

Jane shook her head. "It's a ghastly and evil plan. But beyond that, it's plain stupid. Who in their right minds would take on the Warlock Brotherhood?"

"Trust me, there won't be a rock left unturned in all the realms until we find out. The Brotherhood has sent elite teams of warriors and spies through all the realms in search of more information."

"And Sanjay and Donovan?"

A smile broke on Cassie's face. "Are even more protective than before. Honestly, it's almost insufferable."

"Almost." Jane gave her a quirky smile. No woman could resist the attentive charms of an alpha warlock.

Cassie gave a knowing smile back.

"What is the Magnolia Black coven doing?"

Cassie took another sip of tea and settled her mug. "Next time, I'll bring macrons."

Jane plunked her mug down hard enough that the tea splashed over its top edge. "Cassie?"

"We haven't told the coven yet."

"So, for once, I'm not the one hiding from the family."

"You're not going to tell our secret, are you?"

"Of course not. It's not my secret to tell." Jane inhaled deeply. "But I think you should."

CHAPTER EIGHT



“There are times when fear is good. It must keep its place at the heart’s controls.” ~ Aeschylus

Jane awoke at midnight with a start. Moonlight shone through her window flooding the room, and a cold, ominous feeling of fear pricked her senses. Outside, the wind howled, and the surf crashed on the shore. She sniffed the salty air and detected the smell of a night stalker. The all too familiar feeling of a cold hand squeezing her heart followed. Yup, a vampire was in her house.

A shudder ran down Jane’s spine. The last thing she wanted to do was talk to a bloodsucker in the middle of the night.

But, what if the night stalker needed help? They were cold, aloof, and arrogant by nature, but they had problems like everyone else. Jane got up, threw on a cozy bathrobe, and headed down the stairs to her storefront, the source of the deadly smell.

Alessandro from Amsterdam stood by her work table, looking over her things. He was Cassie's former partner, which made him her ex-brother-in-law. Their history was complicated. When she walked up to him, he didn't turn around. Instead, he weighed a crystal in the palm of his hand. Over his shoulder, he said. "Impressive, little one. Your store is quite impressive."

"How did you get in? I have strong protective wards?"

Alessandro turned towards her slowly. "I have my way with witch charms."

"Damn vampires," she muttered as she gave him a brotherly peck on his ice-cold cheek. They had been family once, and in her heart, he felt like a big brother—a notorious bad-boy, big brother.

Alessandro smiled down at her and lit the candelabra with a match. "Please, sit with me, little one." He motioned her to her desk.

His scent hinted at forbidden blood rituals, unbridled sex, and immortal life. Nothing new there. The hundred-year-old Italian loomed over her and smiled. Jane would never get used to vampire smiles. Her blood chilled. He was seven feet of hard muscle and fangs dressed in blue jeans and a white dress shirt. His long mahogany-brown hair had been pulled back into a ponytail, revealing high cheekbones and chocolate-brown eyes that a woman could swim in. Many had drowned. Alessandro was sexier than any man ought to be, and his presence filled the room with a sense of danger. It was so unfortunate he was stone-cold-dead.

Vix strolled over to her favorite place by the fire and lay down, ignoring everyone in the room.

Jane motioned for the vampire to sit in her client's chair.

"I'll stand." The grittiness of his vampiric voice raked her senses.

Jane could only imagine what it would be like to play with a man like him. "I hope you are well, Alessandro."

"I am little one. Fear not, for me." His eyes wandered over her body, giving her a clinical appraisal as if he were a doctor. In regular society, such a look would be considered rude, but Jane knew vampires always do their own thing. She flicked her mane of hair over her shoulders and waited.

Alessandro cocked his head to the left. "You are healthy, I see."

"Yes. Thank you."

"I thought you would return with Gavin. Did he not survive the transition?"

"Gavin McFee is well. Thanks for asking." Her mouth twitched.

Alessandro raised his left brow.

Jane rolled her eyes. "Okay. Here's the story. The werewolf alpha of the PNW pack asked me to leave. He said Gavin needed to be surrounded by his own kind."

"Hmm. More likely, he didn't want a pretty, young witch distracting his pack."

Jane nodded. The vamp always reduced human action to base motivations, and most of the time, he was right. She let their silence hang for a moment and then spoke, "I would offer you blood, but I have none on hand."

"I am good. I fed before I arrived. Unless ... you would be interested in offering me a taste of you." A mischievous smile crossed his face. He was playing with her, or so she hoped. They both knew he wouldn't cross that boundary. Cassie would stake him.

Jane leaned back. "Why are you here?"

"I need to talk with you alone, and I don't want Cassie to find out. That is why I came without warning."

"I noticed you weren't at Cassie's wedding."

The muscles of his handsome face hardened. "No. Cassie is *my* woman and always will be. This dalliance with Sanjay will end at some point. While I tolerate it, I have no intention of celebrating their nuptials."

Jane nodded.

"Besides, human mating rituals do not interest me. Too much lace and sugar for my tastes."

"And vows to top it all off. I always liked you, Alessandro. I believe in some ways we are kindred spirits."

"You will always be my little sister." He stood next to her in less than a second and lifted her chin with his ice-cold fingers. "That is why I am here."

"I don't understand." Were her teeth chattering?

"I can talk to you." His voice was exceedingly gentle. Was he trying to charm her?

"You can always talk to me. What's the problem?"

"You are direct. I like that in a woman." He let go of her chin and looked to the window as if checking on their privacy. He strode to the middle of the room and turned to face her. "The problem is Cassie. I know she's upset. I feel it in my bones."

Jane didn't argue with him. She knew Alessandro had cast a bond on Cassie and had released it recently. Still, Jane had never heard of a vampire bond being so easily removed, and she wondered if it lingered.

His brow arched. "I agreed to not interfere in Cassie and Sanjay's lives. But knowing she's upset and not being able to do anything about it is driving me crazy. It's like having an itch I can't scratch."

"That's where I come in," said Jane.

"You can tell me what's going on."

Jane hesitated. Could it hurt anyone if the vampire knew what was going on? He might be able to help them. But they hadn't asked for his assistance. No, Sanjay wouldn't allow that. He had too much pride. Jane firmed her lips. Vampires were nothing, if not resourceful, with their network of dead souls stalking around the world watching everything. Still, it wouldn't be prudent to cross the sacred secrecy of the family? But then again, if crossing the line protected them, how could she not?

Alessandro shook his head. "Jane, your mind is spinning. Talk to me."

She threw up her right hand and blocked his attempt to charm her. "Don't do that, Alessandro. Please. I just needed a minute to collect my thoughts. You know how secretive our family is."

"And?"

"You're right. Cassie is in danger."

Alessandro gave a low, guttural vampire growl that frayed the edges of Jane's nerves. "What can I do?"

Vix lifted her head and stared at Jane but didn't say a thing.

Jane leaned forward. "There's a million-dollar bounty on all warlock babies." She watched the vampire's eyes harden.

"A bounty!"

"Yes, a friggen bounty. And, Luna carries royal warlock blood."

Alessandro's muscles tightened as waves of anger rolled off him. Jane had never been truly afraid of him until this moment. "Alessandro, you're scaring me."

"Who would do that?"

"The group calls themselves The Black Souls. The Warlock Brotherhood is looking into it, as well as Donovan and Sanjay. We are all on high alert."

The vampire growled so loud the hair on Jane's nape stood on end.

"I'm fucking looking into it, too. No one. No one will harm Cassie or her child."

The vampire's Italian accent thickened as he spoke. She knew from experience, that was not a good sign.

"I'll talk with my friends. Trust me, no stone will be left unturned."

"Perhaps you should talk to uh Sanjay and coordinate ..."

"No," His voice thundered in the room. "I will let you know when I learn something."

"Shall I ..." Jane didn't bother finishing her question as Alessandro had disappeared. Vampires talk slowly but move quickly. Her front door stood open, letting in the cold air of the night. Jane closed it and headed back to her bedroom.

Had she messed things up? Only time would tell.

CHAPTER NINE



“Reality leaves a lot to the imagination.” ~ John Lennon.

Jane tossed and turned for what felt like an eternity before drifting into sleep.

She awoke surrounded by a cloud of darkness so thick it made it hard for her to breathe. Slowly her surroundings took shape. Four cold stone walls and one locked wooden door. Chills ran up her spine as she smelled the damp, earthen floor beneath her bare feet. Waves crashed against the castle wall. She shook her head, trying to rid herself of this place, this time, but she knew she couldn't escape. Her stomach clenched. She was impris-

oned in the dungeon cell. A rat scurried back and forth over her feet, waiting for her to die.

Where was her father? Why wasn't he coming for her?

She wasn't six anymore, but the sheer terror of being in Eidicko's castle crippled her magic and brought her to her knees. I can't do this again. Not again. Please, not again.

A message blazed on the stone wall.

The dream master always left a message behind for her.

Before she could read it, she felt Vixen's paw pressing on her lips.

The nightmare vanished, and Jane bolted upright.

"The prison—again?" said Vix

Jane pulled her cat into her arms and held her tight.
"Trapped again."

"What message did he have this time?"

"I don't know. Eiricko released me before I could read it."

"Asshole."

CHAPTER TEN



"There are many intelligent species in the universe. They are all owned by cats." - Anonymous.

Sunlight glistened on the calm water in Mystic Bay. The sweet smell of lavender tinged the air. Seagulls squawked high above as they chased one another across the sky. In the distance, an eagle called to his mate. It was another perfect July day in town.

But, inside Dial Witch, the minutes ticked by slower than molasses running uphill. Jane leaned back in her desk chair. "I can't take the quiet a second longer. How can I find business? Maybe I should advertise."

Vix left her cushion and leaped onto the top of Jane's

desk. The cat rolled her eyes. “Seriously? You’re thinking about ads? You think people in this small town haven’t noticed a witch opened a magic shop on the main street? Give your broom a shake.”

Jane exhaled noisily. “I should look for cat spells.”

Vix’s whiskers twitched. “Are we going to talk about *our problem* or not?”

“Our problem?”

“Us. Our relationship.”

“No. Definitely No.” At least not today.

The door opened, and Merlina strolled in wearing a pretty pink summer dress that complimented her sage green eyes. Jane looked at her sister’s baby bump, and a shiver of fear slid up her spine. “Well, hello there. You look nice.”

Merlina ignored her and wandered around the store, inspecting every little thing as if it could infect the world with a contagion. She picked up herbs and smelled them, shook potion bottles, and felt the weight of the lavender eye pads. The older-sister-scrutiny routine—again.

Jane fidgeted. Could Merlina smell the remnants of Alessandro? What would she do if she did? Jane had burned sage to cleanse the air an hour ago, but her sister’s senses were extraordinary.

After a few more minutes of scrutiny, Merlina came to Jane’s desk and stood beside the client’s chair. “May I?”

“Of course. Welcome to my world.”

Jane’s gut clenched as she waited for a tirade of criticisms. Perhaps she had not used the proper color of ribbon to tie the herbs. Or, maybe the crystal display lacked symmetry. Something—no, everything—wouldn’t be good enough.

Merlina sat and raised her chin. Jane cringed. Merlina had a way of setting her jaw that made it jut out into space in a threatening manner as if, to say, its edge could slice and

dice everything standing in its path. "Jane. It's time we talked," Merlina said.

Jane took her feet off her desk and straightened her spine. "What's up?"

The muscle under Merlina's right eye twitched. "I came for a few reasons," she said in a condescending voice she reserved for the youngest sisters. "Is that my black silk cloth under your crystal ball?"

"No." Jane lied.

Merlina blinked. "The store looks organized. Though you could dust the bookshelves."

"I'll dust. Anything else?"

Merlina's lips puckered as if she tasted a lemon. "Janey dear, I don't want you worrying about the bounty business. Let the warlocks handle it. They are very good at protecting their own."

Jane leaned forward. "You want me to forget the babies in my family are in danger?"

"The matter is being dealt with."

Jane leaned back and groaned. Should she argue with a pregnant witch? "Got it. I won't worry. Anything else?"

"I came is because of mother. You didn't listen to Cassie yesterday, so we all talked, and Mother sent *me* today."

"Mother?"

"Yes. And I have to say, I agree with Mother on this matter." Merlina's chin turned its razor-sharp edge to the right.

"And what matter is that?"

"It's insane to open a shop for sorcery in a town with regular humans. They've just learned about us. They don't trust us. They don't want us meddling in their affairs. It's not something you, a member of the Black family, should be doing."

Jane stared at her.

"Just last month, they burned a witch effigy."

Jane shrugged.

"All the crazies will find you. You know what scared regulars do with witches."

Jane said nothing.

"It won't be a straw witch they burn the next time. It will be you."

Jane held her tongue, but doing so made her lips vibrate.

"Think of how exposed you are, of how exposed you're making the rest of us."

Jane held her sister's glare.

"We don't want regulars close to our magic. It's not safe for any of us."

"This is what Mom wants you to tell me?"

"No, Mother, as always, got right to the point."

Jane waited for the blow. She could feel it coming, as surely as a steam engine rolling into its home station.

"Mother wants me to tell you that if you do not close your shop down, she will disown you."

Vix raised her back and hissed.

Jane smiled. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Did you hear me?"

"Perfectly. Good grief, Merlina. You spoke loud enough and plain enough for the Goddess herself to hear you."

"And you don't care?" The shrill sound of Merlina's voice rattled the bottles in the room.

"I care. You know I care, but this is something I must do. I saw it all in a vision."

"I call bullshit." Merlina stood.

"Settle your hormones. I don't need your approval. You, mother, and all the witches in town don't have to like what I'm doing. It's my life and my business."

Merlina put her hand to her heart. "Mark my words. Your

childish behavior will get us all into trouble. You know the mages are chatting on Twitter."

"Bring it on."

Merlina turned and strode out the door, which banged as it closed behind her.

And the day was only beginning.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



"It's choice—not chance—that determines our destiny"

~ Jean Nidetch.

Ten minutes later the door swung open, and a male witch stepped in, bringing with him a gust of air so cold it could flash-freeze the balls off a polar bear. Jane looked over the top edge of her coffee mug at the man. Tall, lean and mean to the bone, the red-headed mage looked like a hurricane of trouble. He stood close to six feet and dressed in enough black leather to hide amongst all the other mages in town.

She took her feet off her desk and gave him a slight nod. "Can I help you?"

The man snickered. It wasn't a pleasant sound.

"You're new in town," she said.

He wandered over to her bookshelves and said nothing.

"Are you looking for a specific spell?"

The visitor ran his finger down the spine of a rare tome on demon curses.

"Those manuscripts are for my own reference, but I would be happy to share my knowledge."

The stranger turned and looked directly at her. His crystal-blue eyes flamed with magic. "I had to see this place for myself."

"And?"

"It's worse than I thought." He strode towards her.

Jane leaned back. "What do you want?"

"They say you help people. So, help me."

"You have to tell me what your problem is first."

His right brow rose slowly. "Which one?"

She smiled. Maybe, the dark mage did have some charm. "Let's start with your name."

"Call me Talon. And yes, I know who you are, Jane Black. I know all about you."

Jane picked up her pencil and wrote his name on the top of a sheet of paper. "So, tell me, Talon, why have you crossed my threshold."

"I was kidnapped when I was five."

"Seriously?" Goosebumps pebbled on her arms.

"Yes."

"That's horrible." Jane made a note on her paper.

He leaned forward and whispered. "I know you were also abducted."

Air rushed out of her lungs. No one knew about her past, at least no one but her family and a slew of therapists. "I don't understand."

"You weren't the only young witch stolen by Eirelick."

"I didn't know that."

He shrugged. "None of that matters now. Right? The past is the past, and we must go on."

Jane dropped her pencil. "So, they say."

"The dark master took me in the night and locked me in a cold cell in the dungeon beneath his castle. It smelled of damp earth and dark magic. Sound familiar?"

Jane nodded.

A knowing grin flashed on his face. "First, I called for my dad. When he didn't come, I cried for my mom. But no one came."

"His fortress was impenetrable."

"No one ever came."

Jane swallowed.

"They left me with that man."

"And you haven't forgiven them."

Talon shrugged. "I suppose I have, in my own way. My parents were dead by the time I got free. I learned that my father couldn't find any trace of me. My mother died of grief within the year, and my father died the following year in a bar fight."

"I'm sorry."

The mage nodded. "Me too. But that brings me here. I want to know what you know about Eirelick."

Jane fisted her hands to stop them from trembling. "Almost nothing. He took me when I was five and put me in a dungeon cell. Days passed. I don't know how many. I remained alone, in the darkness."

"In his castle."

"Yes."

"Do you understand the spells he used?"

Jane closed her eyes. "Hmm. Over the years, people have asked me a lot of questions about what happened. No one asked that one."

"I'm asking."

“He used black magic, which left a trace, and that’s how my father found me.”

“Did he kill the bastard?”

“He tried, but Eirelick is even stronger than my father, Gredor. They battled while my mother took me to safety. My father was gravely injured in the fight. He’s never been the same, really, and that is a regret I live with. Eirelick escaped. My family searched for him for ten years but couldn’t find him.”

Talon firmed his lips. “The asshole disappears whenever anyone gets near him.”

“How did you get free?”

The mage’s eyes blazed brighter. “That is a tale for another day.”

“I’m sorry that happened to you.”

“I don’t want your pity or anyone else’s.”

“What do you want?”

“To tell you that I know your pain,” said the mage. “You can pretend to the world that you are fine, but I know how you feel inside. I know your scars run deep. I know your dark secret.”

“You don’t know what I feel.” Cold anger brewed in her gut. Anger with the dark wizard. Anger with the mage who made her relive that time. Anger with herself for letting it bother her.

Talon scowled. “I understand your tormented soul. We are one in that pain, locked in the dark dungeon forever. That is the mark of Eirelick.”

“I am free now,” Jane repeated her mantra, “I choose to be free.”

The mage shook his head. “They say if you keep telling yourself that shit, you’ll eventually believe it. They don’t know how fucked we are.”

Cold sweat trickled down the back of her neck. "I refuse to be Eirilick's prisoner."

"Keep telling yourself that." He chuckled. "We both know you'll never be free of him."

Their eyes locked.

"Eirelick comes to you in your dreams, doesn't he?" said Talon. "He leaves you messages."

Jane firmed her lips. "What do you want from me?"

"I thought we could swap stories. We are the dungeon people."

Jane stood.

A slow grin spread across his narrow face. "Not in the mood?"

"Leave."

The mage rose slowly. "As you wish, enchantress. But before I go, there is one other thing I want."

"What?"

"As a representative of the local mage guild, I demand you close your shop. Openly sharing your magic endangers us all."

"I already got that email, asshole."

"But you ignored it, so they sent me with this warning. Close your store, or the mages will rise against you."

Before Jane could say another word, Talon vanished in a puff of smoke that smelled like the dungeon cell of her nightmares. His sick laughter hung in the air.

And the day wasn't over.

CHAPTER TWELVE



“Big sisters are the crabgrass in the lawn of life.” ~ Charles M. Schultz.

Before Jane could catch her breath, the door swung open, and three women entered, Jill, Pat, and Marilyn. She figured they were in their late thirties, and she saw them often at Cassie's coffee house, The Brew. They liked to gossip and flirt with Oscar, the head barista.

The ladies marched to her desk.

Jane stood to greet them. “Is there something I can help you with?”

Jill, a slender Kindergarten teacher with sensible shoes,

gave a nervous giggle and spoke first." We want to wish you well with your new business."

Standing beside her, Pat, a nurse in the local hospital, nodded. She wore green scrubs, and her brown hair was pulled back into a neat ponytail. A bow-shaped mouth dominated her black face. "We like witches."

Marilyn, a petite, travel agent nodded vigorously. Her eyes darted around the room as if something terrible might happen if they lingered at any one point for too long. She wore a white pantsuit and bright red lipstick. She stepped closer to Jane's desk. "Let's get right to it."

Jane felt her brows rise.

Marilyn continued, "This store scares the hell out of me. We wish you well, of course, but we really came because we want HD potion." She leaned back on her high heels.

"You each want a bottle?" Jane looked down at the paper pad on her desk, picked up her pencil, and made a note.

"Yes, the magic potion you gave Elly Briggins to fix her no-good husband, Butch. We would all like some of that."

Jill folded her arms. "Elly is thrilled with your magic."

Jane tapped her pencil. "I'm glad to hear it, but I wasn't expecting a rush on the potion. I only made one batch."

"We'll pay cash." Pat opened her purse and pulled out a one-hundred-dollar bill. "You can make more, can't you?"

Jill blinked. "I can drive to the next town if you need more ingredients." Sweat glistened on her forehead.

"I can make more HD by tomorrow. But, are you sure you need it?"

"Yes," the three women said in unison.

"I'll need to interview each of you, separately, to determine if the HD potion is what you really need."

"That would take time," said Marilyn.

"How about I set up an appointment for each of you tomorrow."

The women looked at each other.

Marilyn spoke. "If that's the only way."

"Couldn't we just try one dose?" asked Jill.

"No, I'm sorry. I'm cautious with my magic. I'll give Jill a 9 o'clock appointment, Pat 9:30, and Marilyn 10:00. I'll have HD potion on hand, in case it is what you need."

"And the cost?"

Vixen jumped on Jane's desk and stared at her.

"One hundred and twenty dollars."

When the door closed behind them, Vix said, "That was too easy. You know what they say about too-easy."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



"If you can't handle the heat, don't tickle the dragon." ~ Anon

Meanwhile, a storm brewed in the mountains of the ninth realm. Lightning zigzagged across the sky, the barometer dropped, and sensible dragons stayed in their lairs. But not Leos. He had been summoned to a meeting he could not refuse.

Leos paced outside the magistrate's office. The last time he had been called in, the "most-honorable asshole" ruined his life. What more could the bureaucrat do to him? A shiver ran across Leos's shoulders.

A new assignment, Sol had said. A unique opportunity, Sol had said. Leos hoped it would be a chance to prove

himself once again. He was the best enforcer in the third dragon realm.

He had lain awake all night trying to guess what task the magistrate would have in mind. The asshat clearly hated Leos's guts. Was it a suicide mission?

Nah. Ninth realm enforcers were never given such orders. Perhaps he needed to stop an insurrection somewhere. Leos had proven his espionage skills over and over again. He was both stealthy and deadly, or at least that's what the last magistrate had said. The one who shared his passion for good whisky.

Perhaps the realm needed him to find a lost relic. He liked those missions and had always succeeded in finding treasures. He particularly liked it when the objects were shiny.

Maybe they wanted him to assassinate someone. His gut clenched. Death didn't scare him, and he dealt his share of death blows in battle. But he wasn't a cold-blooded assassin. Would his realm ask that of him now? Would he agree in exchange for his freedom? That idea made him nauseous. Would they ask him to do something that crossed his own moral code.

As the pre-dawn light shimmered on the horizon, Leos became certain that the damn magistrate must be asking something huge and dangerous of him. Why else would they commute his sentence?

Leos wore his one ceremonial suit. It fit his body perfectly, but he felt like a trapped sardine wrapped in black fabric ready for a funeral. He paced.

At precisely nine o'clock, the office door opened. The smell of the man, a mixture of dragon musk and tobacco, hit Leos hard, as it brought back memories of all he had lost during the last visit. He marched through the entranceway.

The magistrate was a thin, pale man with a pencil neck. He wore a dark green uniform with large patches on his

shoulders, signifying his rank. "Helios Daragon, I had hoped I would never see you again."

Leos bit his tongue to stop himself from replying something nasty. There were, after all, worse things than being a teacher, and the power-crazed magistrate had the power to inflict all of them on him.

Squaring his shoulders, Leos put a respectful look on his face and genuflected. "How may I be of service, your grace?"

The magistrate's brows rose slowly. "Sit." He motioned to a chair.

Leos did as he was told.

The magistrate looked at him through rheumy eyes. "I have a delicate situation to manage, and I think you could be useful."

"I am a sworn enforcer of the realm. You can count on me." Leos thumped his chest.

"Yes, yes," murmured the bureaucrat. He leaned back in his chair. "You're good at flying and burning things down. I know all that."

"Anything for the ninth." Leos thumbed his chest again.

The magistrate's grin puckered on one side. "This matter is something quite different."

Leos waited.

"It occurs to me that you are rather good at managing women."

"Uh. Well, yes. I grew up with three sisters, aunts, and a mother. So yes, sir, I do believe I understand women." What he understood was that no man could ever understand a woman. You could cajole, seduce, and entertain a woman, but at the end of the day, she would not smile, or care a donkey's nut about you, unless she wished to.

A smile broke slowly across the magistrate's lean face, threatening to destroy his stone-like appearance. "Yes."

"But, I'm really not the diplomatic type, sir. I'm more of

the rock 'em, shock 'em, knock 'em all down dead kind of dragon. I'm a warrior at heart, not a lover."

The magistrate stared at him as if he had lost his mind. "You are handsome, I suppose." He steepled his fingers.

What could Leos say to that?

"Do women find you handsome?" The magistrate waved his hand to dismiss an answer before Leos could make one. "Of course, they do. That's how you ended up in my office to start with."

"Sir, if there is anything I can do to redeem myself in the eyes of the Grand Council of the Dragon Federation, I will do it." He thumped his chest.

"Well. Well. I do like it when you beg."

"I promise you, I will do anything for the Ninth."

"I suppose you would want recompense," the magistrate said.

"No, sir. It would be an honor to work for the realm."

"I could return your freedom."

A rush of joy swept through Leos. He folded his hands in front of him and made as humble an expression as he could, the way he had been taught by his father. It was too good to be true. Sometimes it was just better to say nothing, even if your gut was jumping for joy.

"Yes," said the magistrate with the sound of finality in his voice. "If you succeed in your mission, I will set you free to rejoin our elite enforcers and take to the sky once more. You can serve the rest of your sentence with your colleagues."

Leos bowed his head. "You are too kind, sir."

The man laughed. "I wonder if you will say that after you hear about the mission."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



"If the skies were able to dream, they would dream of dragons."

— Ilona Andrews, *Fate's Edge*

Another beautiful, sunny day dawned in the quiet seaside town of Mystic Keep. The weatherman forecasted clouds, but they hadn't arrived. In the distance, an owl hooted.

Inside Dial Witch, Jane brewed a fresh batch of HD potion in her cauldron. She lined up the main ingredients on the table, plus some additional herbs she thought she would need, to individualize vials for the coffee-house divas. "Jill the teacher, Pat the nurse, and Marilyn, the travel agent." She repeated their names like a mantra to help her remember

them. Reading minds had always been easy for her, but remembering names was another matter.

"Maybe the HD potion will be my signature product, the one that made regulars open their hearts and trust witches?" she said out loud.

Vixen, who lay on the windowsill with her legs sticking in the air, snickered. "Trademark- Shademark. Don't get all cocky on me. A witch's life can turn on a breeze."

Jane smiled at her cat. "I won't let you bring me down. It's a beautiful day outside, and beautiful things are going to happen."

"Keep telling yourself that." Vix rolled over to her side and yawned.

A shiver stole down Jane's spine, alerting her that magic was afoot. The front doorknob turned slowly to the right.

Jane raised her hands and took a defensive position.

As the door opened, the heat of the day tinged with a scent she couldn't quite put her finger on flowed into the room. A giant of a man filled the entranceway blocking the sunlight. He had to be at least seven feet tall, and everything about him oozed power, from his cloaked aura to his otherworldly, leather boots that she would give her best wand for.

"You're blocking the light," Jane said.

An easy smile spread across his ruggedly handsome face. "You're already complaining about me, and you don't even know my name." His voice resonated with power.

"Should I be worried?" she asked.

"That depends," said the man.

Jane motioned for him to sit in the customer's chair. He closed the door quietly and looked at the seat.

Jane had placed three charms on it. First, a truth-telling spell that made the bottom cushion heat up if a client lied to her. The second, a comforting spell that would send loving warmth to the client if they felt unsafe or insecure. And

third, a protection spell to keep Vixen and herself safe. The chair would grow or shrink to accommodate its passenger and eject the person if it detected ill-will.

The stranger eyed the chair and shook his head. "I'll stand," he said.

Jane tried not to look impressed as she took in his appearance. His broad chest filled out his black tee-shirt too well. Clearly, the man knew his way around a weight room. His square chin had just enough scruff to give her wild thoughts.

The silence in the room grew heavy. Jane knew she shouldn't stare.

The tall stranger wandered around the room and stopped beside Jane's work table. He sniffed the green mist rising from her cauldron. "It smells like fermented toads."

"Close. It's a potion to make a man more agreeable. The use of an amphibian without a tail seemed appropriate."

When he didn't respond to her attempt at humor, she added. "Did you know they croak at midnight?"

He chuckled.

"I'm Jane Black." She waved a hand around the store. "And, this is my business."

"A full-service sorcery, they say."

"You got it."

As he stepped closer, her heart skipped a beat. His silver hair had been pulled back into a long braid that reached his waist, revealing a square-shaped face with broad cheekbones and a lumpy nose that looked as if it had been broken several times. While his rugged handsomeness intrigued her, his power threatened to swallow her up.

Clasping the crystal amulet Jane always kept in her pocket for protection, she tried to probe his mind, but all she found was a brick wall.

He folded his arms.

"Are you a griffin?" That would explain why he smelled like mountain air. She had only met one in her lifetime, and he had been a giant of a man in human form, just like this guy.

"No. Tell me, Ms. Black, what do you think you can accomplish with a magic shop in this little town?"

"I help people." He was too bulky to be fae. Her scalp didn't tingle the way it did when she encountered a warlock, and her third eye didn't twitch the way it should if he were a witch. "Are you a gargoyle?"

"No." His eyes wandered over her body, lingering on her breasts and caressing her hips before they returned to her face. They came to a searing stop on her lips. "My name is Helios Daragon. You can call me Leos."

Her female parts thrummed at the deep gravelly sound of his voice. Powerful yet intimate. "Can I help you in some way? I'm a ..."

"Psychic enchantress. I've imagined your skills."

"I got it. You're a shifter mix with a side of cockiness."

"Almost. But I am pureblood, honey. There's nothing diluted about me."

"Not even your arrogance, I see."

He chuckled.

"What do you want from me?" she asked.

"I want you to close your shop."

"Hell, no."

"Before it's too late," he said.

They glared at each other, and not in a sexy way. Jane closed her eyes and took a long breath engaging all her witch senses. "Dragon." Jane hissed.

"Yes, and we have much to discuss, witch."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



"The hunger of dragons is slow to wake but hard to sate."

— Ursula K. Le Guin, *A Wizard of Earthsea*

Leos walked over to the client's chair and sat down. "You do not want to mess with me," he said.

"You, sir, are an arrogant dragon."

He couldn't help but smirk. "I'm a dragon enforcer from the ninth realm."

She tossed her gorgeous mane of thick red curls, the kind he'd love to put his hands through, and glared at him. Her right hand rose. So delicate. So feminine.

He put up his hand, ready to protect himself from whatever spell she unleashed.

"Listen, dragon. Listen closely."

As he leaned forward to appear threatening, he realized he made a big mistake. The enchantress's scent grabbed him by the balls and twisted. It smelled so sweet, so innocent ... so alluring. It reminded him of the meadows of alpine flowers from his home range, of sunlight at the first stroke of dawn, of a woman in full heat. Worst of all, he realized too late, it was laced with irresistible magic. He groaned.

A smile crossed the witch's pouty lips, and she sat on her throne. "Listen, scaled-one. I'm not pure or noble. I play dirty when I need to." She closed her eyes and made her scent squeeze his prized jewels. She released him when he groaned.

Leos rubbed his chin and tried not to laugh at her. He loved her spunk. Imagine an earth-witch taking on a dragon! Her line about playing dirty made him hard. He would be pleased to expand her education in such matters.

"Well?" said Jane. Fury lit her blue eyes.

Carefully, he reached out and stroked her cheek. "I can play dirty, too."

Jane stood and squared her shoulders. "How dare you stomp your sorry dragon ass into my shop and tell me to close down."

Oh, the fire in this one! Mmm, the fire! He imagined what it would feel like to have her beneath him. "Ouch," he cried as his fingers, the ones still touching her face, burned. "What the hell?" he said.

"If you're not careful, I'll burn your balls until they melt into coal dust and blow it into the sea," she said in a husky voice. Hot damn. A woman willing to play with fire. Now that was a rare event.

"Well?" she said.

"I came to warn you," he said in as soft a tone as he could muster.

"About what?" Her cheeks turned a hot red color.

Did she blush in other places? "The Dragons are not happy with you and your store, and in case you haven't noticed, we breathe fire." His eyes watched her breasts move up and down beneath her tight halter top. Bedding this wild witch would be something.

Jane turned and walked away from him, leaving him only one option, to watch her perfect ass.

She paced for a couple of minutes, mumbling to herself in angry tones, and then turned to face him. "We've gotten off to a bad start. Can we have a do-over?"

A do-over? That sounded rather kinky coming from this siren. What the hell was wrong with his mind. He was on a mission. He was always serious when he was on a mission. But Jane Black changed everything. Everything the witch said, everything she did, everything about her made him think of only one thing—having her in his arms.

Sex was not in his mission plan. Nope. Not now. Probably, not ever. She was a witch, for dragon's sake. And he was an enforcer with a job to do. "Sure," he said in a calm voice. "A do-over is a good idea. You start."

"Okay. Leos, let me explain myself." She sat behind her desk.

He leaned back and waited.

"I want to help people. It's as simple as that. My bigger plan is that by helping both supernatural and regular people, I will do my part to bring our community together."

"Together?" What the Hades was she talking about?

"Yes, you see, everyone in this town got along fine before the regular folk discovered magical beings lived amongst them. Now there's a rift between the magical and regular folk, a polarization of the haves and have-nots." Her voice dropped. "Actually, it's more like a chasm. They fear and resent our power."

Dragon Lord have mercy on my beating heart—she has the purity of an angel! Leos fought to keep a smile off his face. “How’s it working out for you?”

Jane exhaled. “Like crap. The humans in town are terrified I’ll turn them into barking toads. The supes give me the evil eye whenever they see me. And worst of all, my mother’s furious I’ve dragged everyone out of the broom closet. She’s threatened to disown me.” Jane tossed her head, making her curls flow, and his fingers itch.

He nodded.

“Everyone’s scared of the unknown. I get that. But what I don’t get is why people won’t give me a chance. Why can’t they...? Why can’t you...?” she pointed her finger at him, “... understand that I just want to help people. I know what it’s like to hurt inside. I want to help people with their pain.”

Leos stroked his chin. Could she be any sweeter? Or, any more naïve? Or, any more, damn sexy? It was time to take control of the conversation and the situation. It was his duty.

He stood and looked down at her. “Frankly, little Witch, I don’t give a damn. Close this full-service sorcery within the week.” He turned and marched to the door without looking back.

Her cat familiar hissed.

It broke his heart to be so brutal, but it would be better for her in the long run. It was always better to rip off a band-aid and let a wound heal. There was no friggen way in this universe she could make a go of her shop. The sooner she closed it, the better for her, him, and everyone else.

A furry object hit his shoulder. He flinched. What the hell? The damn familiar came out of nowhere. Her teeth sunk deep into his neck. Blood trickling from the wound.

“Get your damn cat off of me before I kill it.” As he wrapped a hand around her torso, she sunk her teeth deeper.

Jane walked over to him and folded her arms.

"Get. Her. Off. Me," Leos said through gritted teeth.

Jane slowly put her hands on the cat. "Vix, please. Vixen," she said louder. "Vixennnnnn!"

The damn cat's bite hurt like bloody hell. If he yanked her off, she would surely take a mouthful of his body with her. "Damn it, witch. Can't you hex her?"

To get a better hold on her cat, Jane moved closer. He had thought her scent unbearably intoxicating, but her touch was even more so, like the heat of a fine shot of whisky sent directly to his manhood. He clenched his teeth.

"I'm sorry. My familiar sees you as a threat because you raised your voice at me. Please, don't hurt her. She's only doing what comes naturally to her."

"I mean you no harm, Witch. I'm just doing my job."

"If you don't mind me getting closer, I can nudge her off you," said the enchantress.

Leos raised a brow. Part of him sang the Halleluiah chorus, but his voice of reason said, 'Hell, no. She's a witch!' He growled. "Anything. Do anything you can before I kill it." Orange, fluffy monster.

Jane pressed against him. His pulse sped.

Blue flames flowed from her fingertips as she caressed the cat's head and spoke a charm in a foreign tongue. His breath hitched.

The cat released her hold. The beautiful enchantress removed the beast and took a step back.

"I am sorry."

Leos grumbled as he put a hand to his bleeding wound.

"Let me help you. I can clean the area and ..."

"Don't touch me," he said. A dragon could only take so much heat.

"But ..."

"You and your cat have done quite enough." Leos strode to

the door and stopped. "One week, Ms. Black. I give you one week to close down," he said over his shoulder.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



"Cats' hearing apparatus is built to allow the human voice to easily go in one ear and out the other." - Stephen Baker.

Jane held her cat in her arms. "What the hell, Vix?" The familiar's muscles convulsed, and she jumped onto the floor. Then, after a good long hiss, she took one squinty look at her mistress, twitched her whiskers, and stalked off to her spot in front of the fireplace. Her tail rose high into the air like a flag pole.

"Vix?"

"Hmph." The cat turned her bum towards her witch and settled into the cushion.

"I remember there was a time I called you Cuddles."

"That was before. This is now. And besides the stuff going on between us, know this—I intend to keep that dragon away from you."

"But ..." Jane stopped herself. What was it about Leos that got Vix so hissy? Had the familiar been able to detect something, she couldn't? It wouldn't be the first time.

The door jingled open, and the coffee divas arrived. Marilyn the travel agent with her siren-red lipstick, followed by Jill, the mild-mannered teacher in another pair of sensible shoes, and Pat, the nurse who wore blue scrubs with bunnies on them.

Jane interviewed each of them and accepted their long lists of complaints. Their men weren't keeping them happy. The essential HD potion would work, but she noted modifications to tailor them for each woman. Marilyn's partner had a bad case of halitosis, so she would add mint to his dose. An anti-fungal berry juice would cure Jill's partner's horrendous case of athlete's foot. And, apple-cider vinegar should address issues Pat was too shy to say out loud.

The ladies left with smiles on their faces, promising to return the next day for their individualized HD potion. Hope sprang in Jane's chest. If her magic worked, the three women would tell their friends about it.

As the afternoon sunlight flowed through the display window, a spirit of calm fell within the store. Vix snored, and Jane tapped her pencil. She imagined hordes would soon descend upon her. Was she ready?

Looking around, her eyes fixed on her bookshelves. They definitely could do with dusting. But she only cleaned one book before she started reading it. Finally, after two hours, her eyes began to cross, and she figured it was time to call it a day.

Her phone dinged, a text from Merlina. "Family dinner tonight. Must come."

Jane sighed. Why was it that everything was a must with Merlina? She could have just said 'family dinner,' and the must would be implied, especially with bounty hunters roaming around the realms hunting their children. But no. Merlina had to—had to—add 'must come.'

Jane twisted her lips and shrugged. Maybe they have more information about the bounty.

And what could she contribute to the conversation? Could she tell them how well her sorcery store was doing, minus the dragon? Sure.

"Mhm," murmured Vix.

"Yeah, I should probably mention the dragon. But not the vampire."

"Mhm," said Vix swishing her tail.

"Yeah, definitely not the blood-sucker." Since when had her life become so complicated?

"Family dinners are always complicated," said Vix.

Jane looked at her cat. Maybe her sisters would know what to do with her. But, unfortunately, things were getting out of control. Her cuddle monster was turning into a hissing dragon-slayer.

Jane chuckled at her own joke and fired up her laptop. She had avoided this chore long enough. "Dear Mom," she wrote in an email template.

"I hear you want to disown me." Jane deleted the line.

"You want to disown me." Jane deleted that one, too.

"I don't want you to disown me." She shook her head.

What exactly did she want to say? No mother should disown her child; it was against the laws of Mommery. Wasn't it? Jane straightened her spine and tried again.

"While I understand you're concerned for my safety..." Better, thought Jane. Definitely better. "and would prefer I become a dental hygienist." Hmm. Maybe that's a bit too biting. But it was the truth, the honest to witchy-goodness

truth. Her mother had sent Jane pamphlets for dental office jobs for the last three years.

"I'm writing to tell you that my witch store is a humungous success. Just today, I helped three humans repair broken relationships. Who knows what tomorrow will bring. Mom, all I want to do is help people, and that's exactly what I'm doing. You'll see, my magic will heal this town. Love Janey."

She hit the send button and leaned back in her chair. Her mother had always listened to reason.

"You didn't mention the scale-beasty," said Vix licking her paw.

Jane shrugged. "Dragons have a way of elevating everything to the next level."

"Or your midnight visit from a vampire."

"Well, no one in the family trusts Alessandro."

Vix purred.

What a strange day it had been, and strangest of all was the appearance of Helios Daragon, a dragon enforcer. His image filled her senses. Yup, it wasn't just his ruggedly handsome face that made butterflies dance in her stomach. His supernatural presence fried her circuitry. Was it normal to have the hots for an enemy? Maybe he didn't need to be an enemy. She laughed at herself and shook her head.

Trust a dragon to liven up her life.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



*"I had been told that the training procedure with cats was difficult.
It's not. Mine had me trained in two days." – Bill Dana.*

The Black witches and their warlocks gathered for another family dinner at Sanjay and Cassie's Manor at seven o'clock. After a warm welcome of hugs and kisses all around, they gathered around the table in the dining hall. Jane took a seat beside Donovan figuring he was the least likely to criticize her.

As she unfolded her napkin, she took a moment to enjoy the smell of garlic and basil wafting in the air. In the center of the table sat the feast: two wooden bowls overflowing with green salads, three large serving bowls of noodles, three

pitchers of sauces, two dishes of meatballs, and one plate of hot Italian sausage.

"If we keep meeting like this, I'm going to gain ten pounds," said Jane.

Donovan, ever the gentleman-warlock, gave her a brotherly side glance and said, "You can handle it."

Four whole words. That was a lot for him. Jane smiled back.

No one had to voice the rule of leaving serious talk until later. The family dug in. After a few minutes, the chatter began. Merlina, with her sharp chin, lifted high in the air, talked about painting yellow ducks on the walls of her nursery. Sanjay talked about buying lilacs for his garden. And Gabriel told a story about putting out a fire his chemistry teacher started during a demonstration.

"We had a fight at The Brew," announced Cassie.

"What?" said Jane. Everyone got along at the coffee shop. It was a place of peace and tranquility laced with caffeine. That was its mojo, enhanced, of course, with more than a wee bit of magic.

"Yeah, I know! Strange things are happening these days," said Cassie.

"You didn't tell me about a fight?" said Sanjay, his marmalade eyes blazing with magic.

Cassie looked at him with softened eyes. "Sorry, honey. I got busy with dinner when I got home and didn't have a chance to tell you. Anyway, Oscar took care of it. He punched the new guy in the nose."

"A kitchen witch made a scene?" Merlina put down her fork.

"When I hired him, he seemed okay. He told me to call him Talon because the name enhances his magic. I should have known right then. He was a wing nut."

Jane put down her fork.

"Anyway," continued Cassie. "His legal name is Larry Michaels. He claimed he wanted to help people with his magic, and he thought The Perfect Brew was a perfect fit for him."

Jane swallowed.

"How powerful is Talon?" asked Donovan, whose tone had turned official.

"I sensed 'very.' He whipped me up one hex of a good coffee, and I'm sorry to say, I bought his whole story," said Cassie.

Sanjay raised a brow. "I bet it had whip cream on the top."

"He had an honest, kind face," said Cassie.

"Is he hot?" asked Gabriel.

Cassie blinked a sure tell. "Ah, yeah. Kind of in a mage way." She looked at Sanjay. "But of course, I didn't notice." She patted her husband's knee. "The guy is almost six feet tall and built like a gymnast. You know, slender but strong."

Donovan chuckled. Sanjay did not.

"Tell us about his honest face," said Merlina.

"Oh, that. Well, the mage has red curly hair, which he pulls back and clips at the nape of his neck. His long face is cut with sharp, intriguing angles that give you the feeling he has a mysterious past, and a prominent scar runs from the corner of his left eye to his mouth."

Sanjay stared at her.

"And Talon's eyes are a brilliant crystal-blue. He looks like a red-headed pirate."

The three men at the table groaned.

Merlina patted her mouth with her napkin. "Why did Oscar hit him?"

"Well, that's the interesting part. The first two days, Talon impressed the hex out of everyone with his spells and potions. But Oscar told me he had always had his doubts. He

told me this morning that he was suspicious of Talon from the moment he met him and was watching him closely."

"Oscar's a good man," said Sanjay. Donovan nodded.

"What did Talon do?" asked Merlina.

"Apparently, he had been flirting for two days with Jenny, you know, the new, hot weretiger in town. She turned him down when he asked her out because she's involved with Jericho."

"And, then?" Donovan looked exasperated.

"Well, then, according to Oscar, he cast a nasty spell on Jenny."

All eyes stared at Cassie.

"Jenny climbed on top of a table and started singing, 'I put a hex on you.' Apparently, her voice was sexier than hell. The crowd loved it."

Sanjay leaned towards Cassie. "Oscar wouldn't hit him for that. He would fire him, but he wouldn't hit him."

"Stop rushing me," said Cassie. "It's a good story. The crowd applauded, and Jenny, who is as you know usually shy than a bat before dusk, grew even braver. She started singing a salty sea shanty and"

"And?" said Jane.

"To quote Oscar, 'Jenny threw off her shirt exposing her amazing body'" Cassie stopped there.

Donovan's head lowered. "Jenny has nice breasts."

Merlina elbowed him.

"And that's when Oscar hit him?" said Sanjay.

"No, that's when the five other kitchen witches on duty surrounded Jenny and cast their own spell to calm her down. Jenny put her top on and left."

"Then Oscar hit Talon?" said Jane.

"No. I arrived then because Belle had sent me an SOS text. Oscar was yelling at Talon, threatening all sorts of

things. Talon took one look at me and said, "Fine. I hate working for that bitch of a witch, anyway."

"And, that's when Oscar punched him," said Sanjay.

"Yup. Gotta love Oscar." Cassie lifted her wine glass. "To Oscar."

Sanjay looked at Donovan. They nodded and drank. Jane imagined the nods represented a whole conversation of bro-talk. They would undoubtedly look into where Talon lived and what he was up to. They would also deliver a fine bottle of wine to Oscar.

Sanjay put his hand on Cassie's shoulder.

"Hey, how did you like that squall this morning?" said Jane, wanting desperately to leave all conversation of Talon behind. The less she heard or thought of that mage the better. If she were lucky he would leave town soon, and no one would ever discover that she had something dark in common with him. A chill ran down her spine.

As she predicted, everyone had a story about where they were and what they were doing when the singular dark cloud descended. And best of all, their forks started twirling noodles once more.

After the weather discussion ended, Merlina, who sat on the other side of Donovan, leveled Jane with a stare. "How's Dial Witch?"

Jane lifted her chin. "Fine."

"Fine?" Merlina's jaw jutted out even more.

"Yes. It's just fine." Except for the dragon, Jane thought, and the vampire. "I have three new customers, and my first client is pleased with my counseling and potion."

Cassie put down her wine glass. "Uh-huh. If everything's so fine, Jane, why is Vixen acting weird?"

"She's a cat," Jane replied. Everyone laughed.

Sanjay grinned. "Hey, don't complain. My familiar's a

peregrine falcon. When he gets mad at me, he pecks my shoulder, and it hurts like hell.”

Cassie looked at Sanjay and then at Jane. “Is Vix mad at you? Is that why you’ve been looking for cat spells?”

Jane shrugged. “This is the best bolognaise sauce I’ve ever tasted. Who made it?”

“It’s out of a can,” murmured Merlina. “Get a grip and tell us what’s wrong.”

Jane took a deep breath. How long had she sat at the table? Maybe fifteen minutes. And they were all turning on her. She clenched her jaw.

“Enough,” said Sanjay holding up his hand. “We don’t need to be picking on each other. We have enough trouble. Let us enjoy our meal, and then we’ll get down to the real business after that.” He didn’t say it, but the look he gave Cassie and Merlina firmly told them to leave their little sister alone.

Merlina stared at Jane. “One last question.”

Jane nodded.

“Did you contact Mom?”

“Yes, Merlina, I wrote her an email.”

Donovan stood. “A toast to the family.”

Everyone raised their glasses. “To the family,” they said in unison.

Donovan sat down and sniffed the air. “Odd,” he said.

“I love the smell of garlic and basil. It’s half the fun of eating spaghetti,” said Jane.

The warlock’s nostrils widened. “I smell vampire.” He gave Jane a speculative look. “Do you have a vampire for a client?” He wiggled his nose.

Okay, thought Jane, she needed to take back her warm, fuzzy feelings about having brothers. Jane shrugged. “I don’t have vampires for clients, not yet at any rate. And for your information, I’m not opposed to having them. Maybe I picked up a vampire’s cloying scent from the Rusty Anchor.”

Sanjay looked over his wine glass at her. "No one told me you were spending time at the local bar."

Damn his intelligence service, thought Jane.

Donovan leaned closer to her and took a long sniff. She nearly jumped out of her seat.

He shrugged. "I could be wrong. It could be a dragon."

Jane jumped up. "You've all done a wonderful job of putting this meal together. Let me do the cleanup. It's gotta be my turn."

Sanjay's right brow rose slowly, like a door in a haunted house that creaked inch by inch. "We don't *clean* in this house. We use magic. You know this. What's the matter with you?"

"Oh, of course," Jane said and sat down again. "I'm sorry. It's not every day you get picked on for starting a business. I really want it to work, and all you guys do is shoot it down."

Everyone fell silent for three seconds. That had to be a record.

"I'm sorry you feel that way," said Sanjay. "It's not easy to start a business in this town. I hear the regular folk worry you'll turn them into toads." The edge of his lips quivered as he fought a smile.

"And the mages are suspicious you'll reveal their secrets," added Cassie.

"They're planning an uprising on the Tweeter," added Gabriel.

Jane's gut burned with anger. "Yes. And you can add Mom wants to disown me. It would be nice if you guys supported me. For once!"

The room fell silent. George, the manor's ghost, filled Jane's glass with more wine. She sighed.

Sanjay returned his orange gaze to Jane. "I get the feeling there's something you're not telling us."

Jane firmed her lips and shrugged as nonchalantly as she

could manage. It's hard to fool a warlock, harder to fool a royal warlock, and nearly impossible to fool a royal warlock who takes his role as her big brother so damn seriously. "This is a hard time for all of us. You're letting suspicions get the best of you."

Sanjay shrugged. Donovan shrugged. What was with warlocks and their shrugs? She swore it was half their language.

For dessert, they ate chocolate-dipped strawberries and vanilla gelato. Then, the conversation turned to a discussion of where each of them had tasted their first gelato.

When the food and dishes had been swept away, Donovan stood and stretched his shoulders. "Let me bring everyone up to speed. Today we got a lead from a stranger."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



“Good things happen when you meet strangers.” ~ Yo Yo Ma

“Who’s the stranger?” asked Jane.

“He signed his message, Kai Letalis. I’ve never heard of him.”

Jane’s gut clenched. Swirling images filled her senses. Her full wine glass dropped from her hand, crashing to the table, and splashing red wine over everything.

Jane’s heart hammered in her chest. A tingling wave of awareness flowed through every cell of her body. “Kai Letalis,” she said slowly.

She could feel her family watching her, but they said nothing. Though many of them had psychic abilities, none of

them had the sight as strongly as she did. They respected that.

Jane swallowed as her mind kept spinning. "You know the feeling of having a name on the tip of your tongue, but you can't spit it out?" she said. "That's how I feel. The information is close to my consciousness, but it won't reveal itself. At least not yet."

Her mind steadied, and she opened her eyes. "Sorry."

"Did you see any clear images?" asked Merlina, who now stood by her side.

"No."

"Let me hold your hand, and we'll try together."

Jane closed her eyes and focused on the name Kai Letalis.

Merlina's breath stuttered. "I feel him, too."

In Jane's mind, an image emerged. "I see a couple holding each other in a green mist."

"Green?" said Cassie.

Jane let go of Merlina's hand. "Donovan, tell me what the message said. Maybe that will help."

Donovan looked at the witches with wide eyes. "It said, 'Beware the Kryg.'"

"Who are the Kryg?" asked Jane.

Sanjay answered. "The Kryg live in the sixth realm. They are a motley crew of supernaturals from all corners of the universe who settled on one planet and waged war on all the others in that realm until only they remained. They are most famous for their elite warriors."

The muscles in Donovan's face hardened. "Their warriors share a mutant-cyborg-vampire ancestry. They are amoral, deadly, and strong—perfect killing machines. I've only fought one in my life, and I don't want to fight another."

Sanjay chuckled. "But you lived, my friend. He must have died."

Donovan's head bowed almost imperceptibly, and he said

no more. Jane guessed her sisters were training them to not share gory details at dinner.

Cassie lifted her paint-stained hand. "Letalis means 'lethal' in Latin."

Donovan spoke. "Our scouts have been sent to search all the realms for information about Kryg warrior movements. So we should know more soon."

Merlina's chin quivered. "Leave Letalis to us. We'll work with enhancing Jane's vision."

Jane blinked. "It's come and gone. What's to work on?"

"Green, my dear. Think green," said Cassie.

Jane stared at her. "I don't get it."

"Green was Great-Aunt Ophelia's signature color," said Merlina.

"Letalis could be her infamous secret lover," said Jane.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



"Everyone wants to live in a fairy tale, but don't forget there are dragons in those stories."

~ R. Queen, Darkchylde

When Leos knocked on Taupe Halliday's front door, he expected to be greeted by a frail old dragon of a lady. Instead, a slender male fae with long blond hair and green eyes greeted him.

"I'm here to see Ms. Halliday," said Leos.

The man's pointed ears quivered, and he sniffed the air. "A dragon enforcer from the ninth, I presume."

Leos nodded. "You can tell her Leos Daragon is here to see her."

"Follow me. I'll lead you to the gazebo and let milady know you've arrived." He turned his slender back and strutted into the house with the grace of a ballet master, leaving only a whiff of magic in his trail. Leos followed.

Flower gardens surrounded the gray-stone patio at the back of the house. Leos took a seat in the shade and enjoyed the smell of the earthen roses.

Thirty minutes later, Taupe Halliday appeared. The rest of the universe would probably consider her elegant and well-kept for her age, possibly even beautiful. But not Leos. With her narrow face ending in a pencil-thin neck, she looked too much like her nephew to deserve any of that praise. He shuddered.

She held out her hand for a kiss as if she were a queen.

He took it lightly in his and gave it the appropriate smooch. "Milady."

She motioned for him to take his seat and sat opposite him.

"Jonathan," she called out. "Bring us tea."

"My name is ..."

"Leos Daragon. Yes, I know all about you."

"I am honored, milady." Leos genuflected.

She gave him a withering look. "You're wondering why the ninth sent you all this way to take care of one little witch."

Leos held back a smile.

"Tell the truth, young dragon."

She did have a century or two on him. "I have wondered. Yes."

"Jane Black is a dangerous witch." The dragoness held up her hand to warn him not to interrupt her. "Yes, I know she doesn't look it. What decent enchantress does? But she is. Mark my words. Jane Black is a hazard to us all."

"Hazard," he repeated.

"To show my appreciation to you for shutting her business down, I will give you this." She took an opal ring off her finger and handed it to Leos.

He felt its weight. It had to be worth at least a million dragons, and would be an excellent shiny addition to his horde. "I'm sorry, I can't accept it."

"Oh, don't be dramatic. It's yours. You deserve it for dealing with the wicked sorceress."

Leos put the ring on his finger. It felt right.

Jonathon the fae wheeled in a full tea service on an antique tray. A three-tiered platter displayed small sandwiches, scones, and sweet cakes. All very earthy.

Taupe Halliday picked up the teapot and poured him a cup. "I understand you don't take milk, sugar, or lemon." She handed him the delicate china cup and saucer, which had an intriguing dragon motif painted on its side. It must have been custom-made.

As he carefully placed his teacup on the table, he wondered what she didn't know about him. There was nothing the dragon aristocracy liked more than collecting other people's secrets. "I spoke with Jane Black today," he said.

"What did you think?"

"She is young and impossibly naïve, but I believe she means well. She talked about healing a rift in the community."

"Hogwash."

"I didn't say she could."

"She can't. Mages and regulars aren't meant to mix."

"I'm just saying her intentions are good."

"I don't give a donkey's poop about how pure her intentions are. They're going to expose us. Have a sandwich. Jonathon made them just for you."

Leos lifted one to his mouth. It smelled like tuna, one of

his favorite foods, but it had enough mayonnaise on it that it could be any white fish. "I didn't shut the witch down," he said.

"What?"

"I gave her a week."

Taupe looked at the nails on her right hand. "What they said about you is true, young dragon."

"That I'm a sucker for a pretty face?"

"Well, that too, I suppose." She sipped her tea. "But I was referring to your heart. You are both brave and kind."

Was that approval in the dragoness's eyes? Leos bit his sandwich and chewed slowly. He could like this woman.

"But you need to grow some balls."

Soon after that comment, Leos headed to the local bar, The Rusty Anchor. It had been a while since he had been on earth, and he wanted to taste the earthen whiskey.

As he sipped a fine Scotch, a text came in from his brother Sol. "Where are you?"

"Small town, Pacific Northwest, Earth," typed Leos.

"Earth?"

Leos imagined his brother's wide smile. "Yeah, blue planet."

"What's the assignment?"

"You still don't know?"

"Nope. It has to be a top-secret deal."

Leos took a sip of his whisky. "It sounded easy."

"The tricky ones always do. But it has to be big for the magistrate to free you from teaching."

Big? Leos shook his head. "It's not easy."

"Just tell me. What's the assignment? I've added extra

security on my phone. So you can talk about the dark secrets of the realm."

"I'm supposed to close down a business."

"A business?"

"The magistrate's aunt retired here and called in a favor. I have to close a shop."

"What the fuck?"

"Yeah." Exactly.

"What kind of business is it?"

Leos imagined Sol would be thinking something dangerous and intriguing, like his usual missions; stopping dragon-scale trafficking, dragon-blood pirating, or the development of dragon-gene splicing technology. Something big and vital to the realm. His duty to protect dragons had always been a serious, take-no-hostages, warrior profession. Sol would think the business was truly evil and threatened the entire dragon world.

"Leos?" said Sol.

Leos swallowed and typed, "A full-service-sorcery."

No response. Leos imagined Sol's mouth dropping the length of a dragon's cavern.

Leos wrote, "She calls it, 'Dial Witch.' She wants to help people."

"She's a witch?"

Now, Sol would be laughing. Leos was sure of that.

"Yes, I've been sent to tame a witch." Leos shook his head. He still couldn't believe it himself.

Sol would be laughing harder now.

Sol wrote, "Remember, the last time you tangled with a sorceress?"

Leos's gut wrenched. Trust his brother to bring that up. "Different witch," he wrote.

Sol sent an emoji of a witch on a broom with lightning coming out of her head.

"This one's really young. Not the conniving type."

"Beautiful?"

"She's an enchantress with great power. Of course, she's beautiful."

"Uh-huh

"What?"

"Is the business closed yet?"

"I gave her a week."

"A whole fucking week?"

Leos shrugged. "I wanted to be fair. She was in the middle of brewing a potion."

"Who was the potion for?"

Leos smiled. "It smelled like fermented toads."

"What was it for?"

"Taming men. She really believes she can help people."

A delayed answer. "What aren't you telling me?"

"You know the air on earth is different or something. I just couldn't shut her down right away."

Sol sent a devil emoji.

"Anyway, I don't mind hanging around for a week. It's not so bad. And it gives the witch time to close things down at her own speed. She put a lot of work into her shop."

"Does the magistrate know you gave her time?"

"His aunt gave me an opal ring for my trouble and told me to grow a pair." Leos signaled for a refill and silently thanked the gods for whiskey.

"Wherever you go, bro, you have woman trouble."

"Is there a better kind?"

"Gotta go," wrote Sol. "Duty calls. Be careful."

CHAPTER TWENTY



"You have witchcraft in your lips." Shakespeare (Henry V)

When Jane opened the shutters of her shop the next day, bright July sunshine flooded the room, drenching everything inside with warmth, but that's not what caught her breath. Outside, eight women and one man had formed a line to see her. She watched as a woman in yoga pants used her elbows to keep her space.

Elly Briggins stood at the front of the line with her hands clasped around an empty potion jar. Things were looking up.

Jane tossed her hair behind her shoulders. There was no way on Goddess's green earth she could manage nine people

at once. Nine people! A horde of customers! "I'll wing it," she said.

"That's what you always do," mumbled Vix, who jumped into the front display window to lay in a sunbeam that hit between the tarot cards.

Jane opened the door wide. "Come inside." They walked in, and the store space seemed to shrink.

Elly headed straight for the client's chair and sat down while the others spread out, looking at different parts of her store as if it were a museum.

"A witch's lair," whispered one woman to another. "Imagine what potions she must have?"

"A place of magic," whispered another. "Pure magic. Be careful what you touch."

"I just hope she can fix my problem," murmured another.

A man wearing shorts and a linen shirt said, "By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes," in a prophetic tone.

Shakespeare, no less! Jane, having excellent hearing, caught all the conversations. She closed the door behind the last visitor, a teenager with a bad case of acne who was chewing gum.

Jane faced her crowd. Most of them avoided looking directly at her. Jane cleared her throat. "You are welcome to browse, as long as you like. If you want to talk with me, you'll need to make an appointment. I keep regular business hours, and ..."

"We want what she has," said a plump woman in overalls with a red kerchief in her black hair. She pointed at Elly.

Others mumbled, "Yeah."

The teenager who stood beside Jane cracked her gum. "Lady, you need a system."

Jane took a deep breath. "You should know that every

potion I make and spell I cast is individualized. One elixir will not heal all wounds.”

“Make us take a number,” said the teenager with another crack of her gum. “That’s what the butcher does.”

“A fine idea.” Jane nodded. “I’ll just get a piece of paper and”

“That’ll take too much time,” grumbled a lady wearing a baseball cap. “I need to pick up my kid. Can’t you whip us up faster, magic?”

The teenager cracked her gum again. Who knew gum could be so authoritative? “Give the witch a break. If you want quality work, you need to wait for it and pay for it. This ain’t MickeyDees.”

Jane looked closer at her gum-chewing savior. Eighteen, maybe. Clad in loose clothes that hid her figure, it was hard to tell for sure. Her pink hair, divided in half, was braided on one side and fell loose to her shoulders on the other. Warm-brown eyes lined with dark makeup dominated her round face. Pimples marked her forehead. She smelled like double-bubble.

Jane breathed in her essence—a human with a faint something. Her aura spoke of a pure heart and kind soul. “Would you like to organize butcher tickets?”

The teen nodded. “I’ll need paper and”

Jane took her new friend gently by the arm and walked to the desk. “I really appreciate this. What’s your name?”

“Emerald James. You can call me Em.”

Jane dug in her drawer for paper and markers and handed them to her. “Can I get you to give out the numbers by the front window, so I can use my desk area?”

“Sure.” The teenager marched to the front of the store. The ball-cap lady rushed out the door, slamming it so hard the display window rattled, while the rest of the crowd formed a line in front of Em and waited for their ticket.

Jane shrugged. It probably wouldn't be the last time someone rattled her windows.

Elly Briggins, who sat in the client chair, gave Jane an anxious expression as if she really needed to pee.

"Elly. Nice to see you," said Jane as she settled into her office chair.

"I need more," Elly said as she plunked her empty mason jar on the desk.

"Did it work?"

"Like a charm. All the problems vanished. I couldn't believe it. Even his feet smell better." She swallowed.

Jane looked at the empty jar. "Elly, the potion should have lasted a month."

"Well, I might have used too much, but you can't blame me. It's so awesome."

"Elly, too much of a good thing can be a problem."

Elly blinked.

Jane leaned forward. "You can't play with magic. You have to use it as prescribed."

The woman sniffed. "I need more. Please. I'll do anything, pay anything."

Jane shook her head. "I can't have you using too much on Butch. I could make you a diluted potion, or I could give you less, or you could learn to behave yourself."

Elly dropped to her knees. "Please, give me more. I'll follow the directions."

The front door banged open, and a rush of mountain air swallowed the room. Leos Daragon stood at the entrance.

Jane stood. "Elly, please excuse me. I have to deal with him. I'll have a potion ready for you by nine tomorrow morning. We can talk more then."

Elly nodded. "Thank you." She took one look at the angry dragon and scuttled around him to the door.

The crowd parted as Leos strode to her desk.

Em called out to Leos, "Hey, mister, take a number."

His chuckle rumbled through the room like thunder in a dome. "I don't take numbers."

He stopped in front of Jane's desk and glared down at her. Dragons in fairy tales have fire in their breath, but this one held it in his eyes. The black contacts he wore could not mask the anger mounting behind them. A thin streak of light escaped along all the edges. It was like looking at the sun with the moon's shadow in the middle.

Jane sat down, leaned back, put her feet clad in her flip-flops on her desk. "Mornin' Leos. Enjoying the sunshine?"

"Hmmm." He put his hands on his hips, making him look even larger and more intimidating. Was that smoke coming out of his nose?

Jane shrugged. "I'll take that as a no. If you would like a consultation with me, take a number."

"I told you to close down."

"Yes. Yes, you did. I recall you gave me a week, and the week is not over. Now fly back to whatever cave you hide in."

"You can't say no to me."

"I just did. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have customers."

"Do I have to remind you who I am?"

"Nope. I got it. You're a big, fierce dragon enforcer from the ninth. You breathe fire and vengeance, and you want to boss me around. I totally got it."

"Don't be foolish, young witch. It is not wise to play with a dragon."

Jane locked her eyes on him, ready to cast a protection spell if need be. Instead, the heat between them seared every part of her. There was anger there, for sure, but there was something else too, something deliciously wicked. Would he escalate matters?

"Leos, I caution you. Don't do something you'll regret." She raised her hand, and her most powerful wand appeared.

His Adam's apple went up and down.

"Leos?"

"We need to talk. In private."

"Take a number, buddy," yelled a woman in the crowd.

Jane closed her eyes for a moment. "Where?"

"The peak of Mount Chaos, tonight, at ten." Without waiting for an answer, he turned and strode out of the room, taking the fresh smell of mountain air and dragon anger with him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



"Oh well, what's life without a few dragons?"

~ Ron Weasley, Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire

Leos strode out of the witch's store and dragged fresh air into his lungs. What the hell had just happened? He shook his head, hoping to clear it. The damn enchantress dismissed him as if he were an errand boy. Fuck that.

And he should know better. Jane Black wasn't the first witch he had dealt with. But she was the ... the most frustrating.

Leos ambled down the sidewalk towards the park. He didn't hear her cast a spell, but Jane had enchanted him. He washed his face with his hands. Damn, she was powerful.

A growl emanated from low in his throat as he recognized the truth he did not want to face. He could feel the tentacles of a claiming seize his dragon heart, and there was nothing he could do about it. The Fates were playing with him.

And she thought he was just an errand boy! Leos wanted to hit something, stomp something, burn something. Yes, a fire would feel good. Lots and lots of fire.

A warlock rounded the corner and stared at him. Black hair, blue eyes, warrior build—he fit the profile of the local supernatural sheriff, outlined in his brief, the legendary Donovan O’Reilly.

Leos studied the mage as he approached. The warlock moved like a panther, all muscle flowing towards his prey. The hard lines of his face spoke his intent to protect all that was his.

Leos didn’t need a confrontation.

Donovan came within two feet and stopped.

“Good morning, sheriff,” said Leos.

“What are you doing in my town, dragon?”

“I am Helios Daragon from the ninth. I intend no harm.”

“I am the local sheriff. Why did you not alert me of your trespass?”

Leos returned his scrutinizing gaze. “I don’t plan on staying long.”

“We have a strong force of supernaturals protecting this town.”

Leos raised his hands in supplication. “O’Reilly, I swear, I will not hurt anyone.”

Donovan’s nostrils flared. “You’ve been inside my sister’s shop.”

Sister? Oh, hell, he forgot that little detail. “I mean no harm to Jane Black.”

“No one hurts my family.”

“Understood.”

Sunlight glinted off the warlock’s hard blue eyes. “Do you have other intentions with Jane?”

“No. I am on a mission. It is not personal.”

The sheriff’s jaw froze. “A mission? What kind of mission brings a dragon enforcer from the ninth to our earthen sanctuary?”

“I’m here to close Dial Witch.”

Donovan chuckled. He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Good luck with that, buddy.”

Leos was beginning to like this warlock, but the mage vanished into a silver mist before he could say anything.

Mystic Keep was indeed a strange place. The idea of a sanctuary for mages on earth seemed ridiculous when he first heard of it, but it was growing on him. He looked around. People wandered, mingled, and looked into shop windows. He shrugged. If the Irish warlock could vanish on the street, so could he.

Craving the freedom of the sky, Leos shifted and rose high into the air.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



"You will always be lucky if you know how to make friends with strange cats." - Colonial American proverb.

By noon, Jane had a screaming headache. Women came through the door by the droves to get HD potion. With as much patience as she could muster, she listened to their endless complaints and took orders. Jane had no idea how much energy it would take to help people.

When two men came in with different requests, she did a victory dance in her head. The first, a burly fisherman wanted to lose weight, and she promised him a potion for the next day. The second, a banker, wanted his boss dead but

she talked him out of that. Day five and her business was branching out.

The last customer left at five o'clock. Her young assistant, Em, had managed to keep the business running smoothly and closed on time.

Jane locked the door and put up the closed sign. "Now," she said to Em, "It's your turn."

Em flinched. "I don't want HD potion. It's driving the town wild."

Jane laughed. "I didn't think you did. Come on. Take a seat. Tell me about yourself."

"Uh, I can't. I gotta go." She threw her backpack over her shoulder.

"Wait. Please. I have to at least thank you. I couldn't have done this without you."

Em nodded. "It's kind of a cool gig."

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

"I'm good."

"How about I prepare a special lotion for your pimples?"

The girl blinked and ran a hand over her cheek. "Okay. Cool."

"Great. Listen, you are my hero. I've never been good at organizing people or even things, but you are absolutely amazing. I really appreciate your help."

The girl shifted from foot to foot. "I like that you want to help people."

Jane smiled.

Em walked to the door and stopped. Over her shoulder, she said, "I could set up a better butcher-ticket thing if you like."

"Hell, yeah. That would be great."

After the door closed, Vix jumped on Jane's desk. "Do you want to know what I think?"

"Do I have a choice?" Jane sat down and put her feet up.

"You're lousy at business."

"Gee, thanks." Jane rubbed the spot between her eyes that hurt the most.

"To start with, you need to charge your customers more money."

Jane shook her head. "Not a chance."

"You have bills to pay."

"I'll put a tip jar by the door if people feel they want to add a bit."

Vix rolled her eyes. "That's not how business works."

Jane shrugged. "Anything else?"

"Streamline your potion production."

"I need to what my what?"

Vix rolled her eyes. "You heard me. The news of HD potion is out. You will have trouble keeping up with the demand."

Jane frowned.

"Get serious, witch. You can't make five-hundred individualized potions."

"True. But I make a basic batch and modify it. My system is working fine."

"You don't want to spend all your time making minor variations to the HD potion. People will come with other problems. What then? You don't want to be a factory." Her whiskers twitched.

"You've got a point." Jane pulled her notepad out from under Vix's butt. "I'll look over the requests and try to narrow them down to ten variations."

Vix put her nose in the air.

"Okay, five."

"And give the damn potion a sexier name."

"Any ideas?"

"A few."

"Hit me."

"My top three are, The Juice, Hunka-Hunka-Hallaleuliah, and Soulmate Serum."

Jane laughed. "I'll consider them. But talking in business terms, the potion already has a good reputation with its present name."

"But you'll never tell them what the real name is."

"Hell, no. I'm a professional."

Jane leaned back. "Any other insights, Vix?"

"Put Em on the payroll."

"Payroll? I don't"

Vix glared at her.

"Okay, I'll offer her a regular job with pay tomorrow."

Jane tossed her hair behind her shoulders. "Anything else?"

Vix licked her white paw and then her orange paw. She wiggled her whiskers. "What are you going to do about the dragon?"

"Meet him tonight on Mount Chaos."

Vix lowered her eyelids to half-mast.

"I'll straighten him out. Dial Witch is not closing, and I can't have him disrupting my store."

"You're going to lecture a dragon?"

"He asked for it."

"You know, they breathe fire."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



"What strange creatures brothers are!" ~ Jane Austen

Jane cringed at the thought of meeting with Leos, but if she didn't show up on the damn mountain, he would barge into her store again, of that she was sure.

What made Helios Daragon of the ninth think he could shut her down? And why would he want to? Talk about dragon-sized arrogance!

Jane spent two hours researching the winged man. Her background check on the Internet came up with nothing on the human, mage, or dark webs.

Vix sat on the desk, watching the screen. "Dragon enforcers don't leave digital footprints."

"He has to have left a mark somewhere."

"Ask the Grench."

Jane winced. Was she that desperate? Isabella Grench attended Brambles Witch Academy the same time as Jane. Well connected by birth and gossipy by nature, Issy claimed to know everyone worth knowing in all the realms, and the thing was, she didn't just know them. She gathered their secrets. The last time Jane talked with Grench, she had just purchased a lovely bungalow in the alps.

Jane flipped her hair behind her shoulders. "You know she never got a job after school."

Vix's whiskers twitched. "Didn't need to."

"Do I really want to ask a blackmailer for information?"

Vix gave her a knowing stare. "Do you really want to know the dirt on the dragon?"

"Truthfully, I don't, but I guess I need to. I'll be damned if I let a big lizard shut me down."

Jane opened her text app and sent a note to Isabella Grench. She had almost finished making coffee when the woman replied, "Nope."

Nope? "You never heard of Helios Daragon?" Jane typed. The dragon really was invisible.

"Should I have?"

"Nah. He's just a hot guy I met at a bar."

Silence for a minute.

"Would he also go by the name Leos? As in the brother of Sol Daragon?"

"Yes."

"Ooooooh. The Daragons are a powerful family."

Tell me something I don't know. "And?"

"I'd stay clear of them."

Vix's tail flicked in jerky motions.

Jane thanked the Grench and signed off.

What now? Sanjay would know more than Grench about

powerful dragon families, but if she asked him for information, he would want to handle the dragon. The last thing she wanted was for the warlock to step in and escalate matters. Dial Witch was her business, and she would address all the problems that came with it.

“Uh-huh,” said Vix.

The thought of handling Leos made her smile. Damn the dragon. How did he get through all her defenses so easily? She had sworn off men.

“Yeah. And that always works.”

“Well, I hoped to avoid entanglements at least until I get the business rolling.

Vix trotted over to her cushion and snickered. “Celibacy is not your strong suit.”

“I have one more option.”

“Yeah. Sex.”

“Vix. I’m not talking about that. I’m talking about help.”

“Okay.”

“Donovan hasn’t been my brother as long as Sanjay, and he’s much more understanding about my sex life.”

Vix tilted her head. “If you say so.”

Jane texted Donovan, “Do you know Leos Daragon?”

As she watched her cell phone screen for an answer, Donovan manifested before her in a cloud of silver mist. He was dressed in full warlock warrior attire, complete with weapons strapped to his leather-clad legs and magic potions hidden in his cape. He nailed her with his piercing blue eyes. “I know Daragon’s in town. Do you want to tell me something?”

Jane put her feet on the floor. “I noticed him. That’s all.”

A muscle in the warlock’s square jaw twitched. “Noticed as in, noticed?” His black brow raised slowly.

“Give me a break.”

“He’s a dragon. A dragon.”

"Tell me something I don't know."

"You, little sister, have power, but you shouldn't be messing with the likes of him. He has scales. He's not one of us."

"What can you tell me about him?"

Donovan's eyes locked with hers, and she used her energy to block his mind probe. After a minute, he grunted and pinched the top of his nose. "He's from the ninth."

"Friend or foe?"

Donovan looked around the room. "Don't know."

"Has he a reputation?"

"He's a dragon."

"You already said that."

"You want me to spell it out for you?"

"Ah. Sure."

"He's a dragon. Dragons are dangerous. He's also an enforcer. Dragon enforcers are among the most skilled warriors in battle. And he's from the ninth realm."

"So?"

"Dragon enforcers from the ninth are the deadliest. And, they do not take holidays in small Pacific Northwest towns. He's here for a reason. We just haven't figured it out yet, though he said he wants to shut you down."

"Yeah. I know."

Donovan chuckled.

"Seriously. You're laughing about a big beast wanting to close my shop?"

"I wished him luck."

"Gee, thanks, bro."

Donovan folded his arms. "So, tell me, sister, why would a dragon enforcer from the ninth want to shut you down?"

"I wish I knew." She filled him in on the dragon's last visit and why she figured she had to make their rendezvous.

As Donovan listened, his body became rigid, and he kinda

looked like a kettle about to boil over. "The peak of Chaos mountain? No fucking way."

"I'll report back to you later tonight," said Jane.

"It's a bad, bad idea."

"Look, you have to go. I have to get ready for my uh date."

Donovan groaned. "Have you told Sanjay?"

"I don't need his permission. Or yours."

The warlock reached out and pulled her into an embrace. "Be careful," he whispered in her ear.

"Always."

He held her at arm's length. "I get it. I do. You're a badass witch, like your sisters, but for the love of all that's holy in our world, you need to be sensible."

Jane took a step back and shrugged. "I doubt the ninth would send an enforcer to take care of little old me. I'll find out why he's really here, and I'll fill you in on the juicy details in a few hours. I will be your spy."

Donovan smirked. "Don't even think about having sex with him."

"Have you seen Leos Daragon? How could I not think about a little playtime?"

The warrior looked at his feet and winced. "Merlina's going to kill me."

Jane shrugged.

"And Sanjay's going to fry my remains."

Jane stifled a laugh and put her hand on his hard chest. "You know this makes sense. The sooner I find out what he's really after, the better for all of us."

"I can't believe I'm letting you go."

"Donovan, you don't have a choice."

"I'll be your backup, ready to teleport to you at a moment's notice. Text me if you need help. I'll have shifters combing the woods nearby. I don't care how skilled a mage

you are or how independent a woman you are. I won't risk your life, Jane."

"Sometimes, a witch has to do what a witch has to do."

The warlock groaned. "That's what I'm afraid of."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



"If the skies were able to dream, they would dream of dragons."

~ Ilona Andrews, *Fate's Edge*

Jane looked around her bedroom. It looked as chaotic and carefree as her life, and she liked it that way. A thick, soft comforter lay rumpled on the top of her bed. She never fully made it because she intended to sleep in it again. Her reading chair could barely be seen beneath the pile of clothes that lay on top of it. She shrugged. Leaving them there helped her decide what to wear next. The side table beside the wing chair had a stack of nine urban fantasies on it, along with a pair of reading glasses, a dirty coffee cup, crumbs from a scone, and a half-eaten box of chocolates. Her two favorite

pair of flip-flops sat by the door. Vix could usually be found soaking in the sun on the ledge of her large window, which overlooked the bay, or in the bed snoozing. Today he lay on the ledge. Yup, her bedroom was her domain.

After a long shower, Jane threw on fresh clothes. Jane stood in front of her long mirror, brushing her hair to make it shine, while she checked herself out. What the hell did one wear to meet a dragon? That was the question.

She wore the warmest jeans she owned and a navy-blue cashmere sweater. Her lightly applied make-up would do. As she pulled a fleece-lined parka out of her cupboard, she said, "Is meeting Leos alone stupid?"

"As stupid as stupid gets. But that's never stopped you before when it came to men," said Vix.

Jane twisted her mouth. "I need backup."

"You've got Donovan."

"Fire travels fast. The warlock may not be able to get to me in time."

"The shifters will be near."

Jane grumbled. "I've had enough of werewolves for now. Hell, I've had enough of the dogs for a lifetime. Damn pack animals."

Vix sat up and tilted her head. "The shifters are not your enemy."

"I don't want to talk about *that* now. How the hell can I create an adequate backup plan for a meeting on the peak of a mountain? The air will be thinner, and the family far away. I'll be alone."

"With a dragon," Vix's whiskers twitched.

"Okay. Time to fight fire with fire. I'll brew a potion and whip up a few extra protection spells."

"Dragon-sized?"

Jane gave her a sizzling look. "You're really enjoying the dragon bit."

Vix chuckled. "You know he breathes fire. Probably farts it too."

Jane smirked. "Thanks for that."

One potion, three spells, and a few hours later, Jane closed her eyes and teleported to the top of Mount Chaos. Moving about on a molecular level had never been her favorite way to get to places. It often gave her hiccups. She preferred the experience of slow travel. She liked viewing the landscape and meeting people on the way to her destination. But since she couldn't hike up a mountain and be on time, she had no choice.

At the last minute, Vix jumped into her arms, and Jane squeezed her eyes tight. She pictured herself on top of the mountain and created a magic portal around them.

They landed with a thud on an icy rock ledge. Frigid air tinged with dragon scent burned her nostrils as she struggled to gain a solid footing. Gravity won. Her feet flew up, and she slipped into two feet of powdery snow. Oh, how she loved to make an elegant entrance. This had to be the stupidest thing she had ever done.

"Not sure about that," said Vix shaking snow off her body.

Leos, in human form, approached. He reached out his hand to help her up. "You're right on time."

She batted his hand out of the way and rose to her feet, trying to ignore the current of electricity running through her body ignited by the brief touch of his skin.

"Mmm." His low voice had a trance-like quality to it that had its own gravitational pull.

Jane tugged her personal wards tightly around herself. "Dragon," she said. His seven feet of perfectly chiseled masculinity looked taller on the mountain top and perfectly at home.

He bowed. "Enchantress."

They stood for a moment, taking each other in.

Leos wore a parka, not unlike her own, over dark jeans. His silver hair fell straight and loose over his shoulders, partially hiding the exotic tattoos on his neck. He wasn't Hollywood handsome. But his rugged masculinity mixed with his sexual charisma was overwhelmingly powerful. Maybe too powerful for her. Her whole body felt electrified by his presence, and the air shimmered with his potent dragon energy.

Jane licked her lips without thinking and silently cursed herself.

He tilted his head, and his black inner eyelids slowly lifted, revealing his irises.

Jane swallowed hard as a kaleidoscope of colors shone from each of his eyes. It was like looking at two stained-glass windows at the brightest time of day. They glowed with every color in the rainbow and cast their light in all directions. The effect was mesmerizing. As a young girl, she had been warned to not look directly into a dragon's eyes, and now she understood why. They could swallow her up, and she wouldn't even notice.

Leos stared at Jane. He had meant to assess her power and beauty with a respectful, business-like glance, but his eyes got stuck. She had looked captivating in her store, but here, on a mountain top, her beauty truly shone. And it wasn't just her perfect body. He could feel her pure heart.

Mon trésor whispered a voice deep inside him.

Dragons liked nothing more than treasure. Some hoarded gold, others diamonds, and rare jewels. Leos had thought himself immune from the obsessive trait of wanting one woman as his ultimate treasure. But now, he faced her; he could not lie to himself. Dragon shit!

It wasn't as if he hadn't had women. He had had many entanglements in his three-hundred-year life. Some of them involved deep feelings and a few marriage ceremonies. But never, ever, had he had his dragon heart declare, '*Mon trésor!*'

A shit-load of emotions flooded his system, enchantment, attraction, lust-fever, and fear. A lot of fear. Leos had never felt afraid of a woman. Yet this young human made his inner scales shake.

The silence became uncomfortable. Had he been staring too long? Leos cleared his throat. "Thank you for meeting me, Jane. Please, come inside my cave. I prepared food and a warm place for us to talk." He waved his hand for her to follow him.

Jane pulled the strings on her parka to tighten her hood. She rubbed her hands together to warm them and stomped her feet. What the hex had she gotten herself into? Her mother would never imagine Jane could be so stupid. He was too powerful. Way too powerful for her to control.

"Ya figure," mumbled Vix, who strode at her feet, shaking snow off her paws with every step.

"I'm not leaving this realm," said Jane stopping at the opening of the cave.

"Relax, young one. I mean you no harm."

"But, you said you are here because of me."

"Yes, I am."

"I'm not sure being here with you alone is safe."

"Trust me. You are safe."

"One of the first things a witch learns is to be wary of beings more powerful than themselves." Yet his words and the tone of his voice did made her feel safe.

"That is wise, but you need not fear me, young one. I give

you my word, as a dragon enforcer of the ninth, I will not harm you."

A dragon's word meant a lot. She walked into the cave.

Leos followed. "Besides, if I had wanted you dead, you would already be dead. If I wanted to fly away with you, we would already be gone. I just want to talk."

"We definitely need to talk."

"I've got a good fire started and a fine bottle of wine. I swear on my honor as a ..."

"Yeah, yeah, I got it. You're good with words."

His eyes blazed with colors. "Jane Black, you are always safe with me."

"If you say so." She tried to sound harsh, but his words touched her heart. Actually, they invaded. This guy had serious mojo.

Vix nudged her leg. "Be careful."

Big fluffy snowflakes fell silently as they entered his lair. Jane stuck out her tongue to taste one. Leos grinned. She picked Vix up in her arms and strode forward.

The mouth of the cave was wide enough for a full-sized dragon, or so she imagined. Once inside, the space narrowed. He led her through a tunnel to a small chamber the size of her bedroom. On one side, a fire blazed, and its heat warmed the air.

The dragon motioned to two large cushions placed close together against the wall, and a smaller one sat next to the fire.

Vix leaped out of her arms and walked over to the cushion by the fire, where she sunk into its comfort with a purr. She kept one eye open.

Jane and Leos sat on the cushions placed against the wall. In front of them, wine and apples lay on a thick chunk of wood.

She undid her hood and shook out her hair. "Nice."

A warm smile spread across his broad face. He was definitely too sexy for her own good.

"Why did you want to meet here?" she asked.

He handed her a large crystal glass and filled it with red wine. "I wanted to talk to you alone."

"What is this?" she held her glass up, so she could look at it backlit by the fire. It had the dark coloring of a Cab Sav, but it sparkled like no wine she had ever seen. Surely, he wouldn't try to drug a witch.

"It's called Sianen. It comes from my realm and reminds me of home." He motioned to the food. "Please eat."

"You thought of everything." She took a piece of cheese in her hand.

"It is our custom to offer food and drink before a negotiation." He watched her over the edge of his glass.

"Mmm. Tasty." Jane raised her glass. It really was extraordinary.

"To be honest, I'm *the clutz* in my family. The one who they ban from the kitchen."

He smelled like the mountains, a heady scent of fresh air, alpine meadows, and snow. Jane looked around. "I find you very ..." seductive, she thought "...welcoming," she said.

He chuckled as if he read her mind. "Thank you."

Did he notice the cave grew hotter by the second? Talk about a smoldering dragon! Jane unzipped the front of her parka.

A lone wolf in the distance gave a melancholy howl. Jane stiffened at the sound and realized it was just her backup checking in. She settled back against the rock wall.

*L*eos cocked his ear for a second and shrugged. Wolves wouldn't dare enter his lair. The light of the fire

shone on Jane's long red hair. He'd love to touch it, feel its silkiness between his fingertips, and draw her closer.

His heart raced as her baby blue eyes watched him. He wanted to rip off more than her jacket, more than he wanted his next breath. He swallowed.

Jane bit into a slice of salami. He liked the way she bit.

She used her tongue to lick the flavor from her bottom lip.

His whole body stirred.

The magistrate be damned. He wanted this woman for himself.

Should he just lunge?

Jane sifted his physical reactions to her through her witch senses. So male. So hot.

Leos looked away for a moment and then turned to face her with a scorching intensity. "You are smart, talented, and powerful, Jane Black."

Jane couldn't look away from his amazing eyes.

"You have bewitched me. I swear."

"No. I'm not using any charms. I hope you won't either." She put her drink down.

"No," he said. His Adam's apple went up and then down. He cleared his throat. "We need to come to an agreement. You and I."

"I totally agree." Lustful heat pooled inside her, hotter than molten lava.

"You need to shut Dial Witch down."

"That's not going to happen."

. . .

“No?” Leos swallowed. Did this little human think she could say no to a dragon from the ninth? “You can’t say no, to me.”

“I just did.” Her sensual lips looked so damned kissable.

“You don’t understand. Let me start again.” He shed his jacket and took his time pushing back the sleeves of his button-down black silk shirt.

She gave him a don’t-fuck-with-me stare.

“I am a dragon-enforcer from the ninth.”

“Got that. I like your wine.” She held up her glass.

“I have been sent to earth on a mission.”

“And the meat’s nice too.”

He growled. He couldn’t help it. The more Jane argued with him, the more turned on he felt. She was a provocative cross between a feisty wench and an angel. *Enchantress* was too mild a name for this young one.

“Why did your master tell you to shut me down?” Jane licked the edge of her glass.

“I don’t have a master.”

“Your boss, the person who pulls your dragon wings. Why do they care about me?”

Leos leaned back and swallowed the rest of his wine in a gulp. He took a moment before he spoke. “There have been complaints.”

Jane laughed. “People always complain about me. I’m that sort of witch. Never quite right, as my mother would say.”

“This is different. You’ve upset an important person.”

“Me?” Maybe it was the wine. Jane felt way too hot. She pulled off her sweater.

Leos’s mouth dropped. Jane wore a black tank top that fit her like a second skin. She imagined he wondered why she would wear it for a meeting on a mountain with a deadly dragon. But it was comfortable, and it was certainly having

its effect. Leos couldn't concentrate on anything but her. His pulse raced as he looked at her breasts.

The wolf in the distance howled. A second wolf, and then a third joined in. Jane imagined the pack, and that image broke through the sexual haze ensnaring her mind and body. It gave her just enough time to think. She called her sweater and her coat to her body.

Leos's interest in her rolled off him in tsunami-sized waves, pulling her in.

"I want to go home now," said Jane.

Leos raised his hands in supplication. "I didn't mean to frighten you."

"Your dragon demands don't scare me. Let me be absolutely clear. I have no intention of closing Dial Witch because it irks someone special in the dragon world."

Leos's eyes dimmed. "Then, why are you leaving?"

"Let's be honest with each other. If I stay a moment longer, we'll have sex. Either I'll jump you, or you'll jump me. Lots and lots of hot, passionate, wild, forbidden by witch coven's, inter-specie sex will just happen."

Leos stared at her as if she had lost her mind.

"Come on. You know it's true. Within minutes both of us would be naked and incapable of talking. We're just lucky there were wolves around."

"Damn the wolves."

Vix jumped into Jane's arms, and they vanished into the night.

"Mon trésor," Leos said to the empty space where she had stood a moment before. Mon trésor. You are too good for this world.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



"Here be dragons." ~ a medieval mapmaker's notation.

Leos paced for an hour, but he didn't feel any better for it. The memory of Jane haunted him. Her entrancing scent seduced the man in him, but it was more than that. The way she stood up for herself against him, walloped him. She had a strength of character rarely seen, integrity, and refreshing honesty. Jane Black was like no other. She was beautiful inside and out. His hopes rose when his cell phone buzzed, but it wasn't the enchantress. It was his brother.

"Sol," he said.

"Leos."

Silence.

"Talk to me, Leos. What's happening."

"Not much."

"Bro ...?"

"It's complicated."

Sol chuckled. "Are you bewitched?"

"I don't know." Leos had never understood the word so well as he did at that moment. His tongue-tied into a million tiny knots.

Sol cleared his throat. "You need to finish your mission and come home."

No and no, he thought. "I'm on it," he said.

"Top or bottom, bro." Sol chuckled. "It doesn't matter, as long as you get it done. The mission that is."

"Don't be crude. Jane Black is a lady."

"Oh, you have it bad."

"It's not that," he lied. "I want to finesse the situation so no one is hurt and the objective is reached."

"Right. Enjoy the finesse."

"Seriously, Jane isn't causing any real trouble. There's no need for me to burn her to the ground or do anything drastic." Leos closed his eyes. He so wanted to do something drastic.

"Leos? You still there?"

"Yeah. I just haven't figured out all the details. I'm going to talk to Taupe Halliday."

Silence.

"What?"

"You did research the dragoness, didn't you?"

"Why would I research her?"

"The woman is a nutcase. Spoiled, privileged, coddled; however, you want to say it, she isn't like the rest of us. Everywhere she goes, she makes demands and lets no one rest until they are met. It was her family's idea that she try the climate on earth. They want her to live as far away from

them as possible."

"Well, maybe it's time she didn't get what she wants."

"Want to know what she did the last time someone crossed her?"

Leos closed his eyes. "Probably not."

"Halliday wanted a certain handsome shifter for a paramour, but he, being half her age and in love with someone else, wasn't interested. She whined to everyone who would listen, and when nothing got done about his lack of interest, she burned his whole town down, murdering not only him but his whole pack."

"So, Jane's in danger." Leos's spine straightened.

"The dragoness has an unpredictable, mean streak in her. That's all I'm saying."

"We have places for psycho-dragons. Why wasn't Halliday put in one of them?"

"My guess is she has dirt on some of the elders. There's nothing more powerful than secrets in our realm."

Leos groaned.

"Yeah, buddy, you're in deep, a lot deeper than you thought."

"Thanks for the intel." He had to protect Jane. "Signing off."

"Leos, take care of yourself."

Leos stared at the fire. There had to be a way out of this, but all his heart cared about was saving Jane.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



"Families are like fudge ... mostly sweet, with lots of nuts." ~
Rachel Spann.

Jane landed back in her apartment a second later. Thoughts of having time to reflect on her meeting with Leos vanished the moment she opened her eyes.

Vix ran for her hidey spot under the bed, with the other cat familiars on her tail.

Facing her was her family. The warlocks stood in a fighting stance while the witches looked ready to explode.

"Am I having a party I forgot to tell myself about?" Jane asked.

Donovan sniffed. "Dragon."

"Yup. Definitely dragon." Sanjay's nostrils flared.

Merlina's chin lifted. "Have you no sense?"

Jane raised her hand. "I get it. We're playing traveling party, and it's my turn to host. I'll break out the booze."

Merlina hissed through a clenched jaw. "Don't make fun of this situation. You have some explaining to do."

Jane shot a look at Donovan. Had he betrayed her? He shook his head.

"Okay. So, you found out I took Mom's amber pendant. It's only a borrow. I swear I will return it as soon as I figure out a way to create the potion without it."

Suddenly Jane's scalp itched, as in really, really itched. She started scratching. "Knock it off, Merlina."

Sanjay chuckled. "I love it when witch's fight."

Donovan grinned. "It's not at all like when we fight."

"Hell no," said Sanjay.

Merlina glared at them. "Enough from the penis gallery."

Jane didn't want to tangle with her big sister, her being pregnant and all, but Merlina had asked for it. Jane zapped her with a spell.

"Ow!" screeched Merlina clenching her fists. She opened her hands and looked at smoldering pink palms.

"I'll stop the heat if you stop the itch," said Jane.

Cassie sighed. "Jane, just tell us what you were doing with the dragon."

Jane's scalp felt as if a million ants had landed on it and started nibbling. She couldn't stop scratching. "It was nothing."

Merlina cried as she looked at her palms. "Jane, stop your spell."

"You first," countered Jane.

Donovan looked at Sanjay, and they nodded in unison. A cloud of grey mist enveloped the two witches.

"It smells like a sewer in here. Let me out," said Merlina.

"Not until you release your itching spell on Jane," said Donovan.

"Okay," Merlina mumbled.

"And Jane, you have to stop your spell on your sister," said Sanjay.

"Hmm," mumbled Jane.

"What's that. I can't hear you," said Donovan.

The putrid smell of animal waste intensified, and Jane gagged. "Alright. Alright. It's done."

The mist disappeared, and they all stood staring at each other.

"I'm going to put the kettle on," said Cassie. "We all need to calm down and try this encounter again."

"Encounter? Great. I always enjoy a good encounter," said Jane.

They took seats in Jane's cozy living room space. They looked like a family on a reality TV show, ready for battle.

"How could you be so stupid?" said Merlina with her chin angled to the right.

"Okay, stop there. Right there. I'm not a little girl, Merlina. I'm a grown woman, and if I chose to spend time with a man, any man, that's my decision, not yours."

"He's a dragon. All the scouts are talking about it." Merlina complained.

"And you met on top of a mountain," added Cassie from the kitchen. "A mountain! May the goddess spare me." The tone of her voice made it sound like the most sinful place in the universe. Cassie truly was beginning to sound like their mother.

Jane sighed. "It was interesting."

Cassie groaned. "As in hubba-hubba-wink-wink interesting?" The whistle of the kettle interrupted her. "Just how big is a dragon man?" she said as she poured the hot water into two large teapots.

"Hubba-what? Wink? Who talks like that? And, there's nothing wrong with a mountain." Would this night ever end?

Sanjay shifted in his seat. "Do I need to be here?"

Donovan tilted his head. "I have to admit, I'm curious." The warlocks looked at each other, grinned, and fist-bumped.

"You guys are no help," said Jane rocking her chair.

Cassie brought out the tea tray and placed it on the coffee table.

The warlocks looked at it for a second, grinned at each other, and snapped their fingers. Chilled beer bottles landed in their hands.

Cassie poured a cup of tea, put three sugars, and a dollop of milk in it, and handed it to Jane. "Talk," she said.

"I don't want to burden you with my problems."

"Talk," said Merlina.

"I can handle the dragon."

"Talk," said the warlocks in unison. They clinked their bottles together.

"Okay. Yes, dragon men are large."

The warlocks chuckled.

"Guys, I'm not talking about his bits. I mean, he's tall and well built. It wasn't that kind of meeting." She sipped her tea. "At least it wasn't supposed to be."

Merlina's chin quivered.

"It seems I've upset a dragoness." Jane looked around at her family. No snide comments. That was probably a good sign.

"Anyway, this person complained, and the result is ..." Jane hesitated, knowing they were really going to hate the next part. "The Dragon Federation of the ninth sent an enforcer to close my shop down."

Sanjay jumped to his feet, "The ninth?" He drew his sword

and held it out as if the entire realm had arrived in Jane's tiny apartment.

Donovan groaned, "And, you agreed to do as he asked. Right?"

Silence.

"Jane," said Sanjay.

"No, I certainly did not agree. There's no way some little old bitty is going to shut me down."

Cassie drank her tea. Her eyes focused on her cup.

Jane recognized the weary expression in her sister's eyes. While Cassie looked calm on the outside, a storm of thoughts battled within her.

Merlina thrust her pointy finger at Jane. "I could not be prouder of how accomplished you are, dear." She waited a moment, choosing her words and adding a flourish of drama she so liked to yield. "But sometimes, you have to stand down to greater power."

"Fuck that."

"Language," said Merlina.

The guys smiled.

"I've done nothing wrong," said Jane. Yet, at any rate. "All I want to do is help people and help the town." Anger boiled in her gut. She was so tired of having to explain herself.

"Did you tell your dragon that?" asked Sanjay, sheathing his sword.

"His name is Leos Daragon, and yes, I told him that."

"And he said ...?" prodded Donovan.

Jane tilted her head. "It was cold on top of the mountain."

Donovan narrowed his eyes. "You had sex? Sex with a man you hardly know? Sex with a dragon-shifter?"

"You dared inter-specie sex with a dragon?" Merlina wiped her brow.

Cassie shook her head. "No, she didn't, but I'd bet a bottle of wine she thought about it."

"Hello! I really hate it when you guys talk about me as if I'm not in the room. And, I also hate it when you talk about me as if I'm a teenager."

Merlina looked at her pointy finger, which still hung in the air, and retracted it. "Okay. Let me get this straight. A dragon-enforcer from the ninth summoned you to the top of a mountain. Because you are young and stupidly think you can handle any man, you went. Alone. He demanded you, close Dial Witch. You refused. He was shocked. And you left."

"Sort of. Let me start from the beginning. Leos came to my shop two days ago and gave me a week to close down. He came again this afternoon to complain that I wasn't closing down. Imagine a dragon in my store! He's a giant of a man. Power flows off of him like lava out of a volcano. The humans literally shook in his presence. Since it clearly wasn't the place for us to discuss business, he asked me to meet him on the top of Mount Chaos, where he has a temporary lair."

"And you went." Donovan scrubbed his face with his hands.

Jane gave them all a mean look. "I went because I don't want him in my shop again."

"Is he hot?" asked Cassie eyeing her suspiciously.

"Hell, yeah," said Jane before she could help herself. "Dragon hot."

Merlina shook her head. "You're in way over your head, little sister."

Jane rolled her eyes. "Like you never take risks?" She looked at Donovan.

"As your big brother, I think I should negotiate with the dragon on your behalf," said Sanjay.

Donovan chuckled. "I remember the last time you negotiated with a dragon. Do you really want to do it again?"

"Do you have a better idea?" Sanjay said.

Donovan pinched the top of his nose. "Yeah. Let Jane take

care of it. She may be the youngest of us, but she has great power and some wisdom."

"But, she's facing a dragon, and she's my little sister," said Merlina, shooting dagger-eyes at her husband.

Donovan shrugged. "If he wanted her dead, she would already be dead. I'm guessing he wants her very much alive. Jane is an enchantress. She can handle men."

Cassie and Merlina looked at each other. Jane could only guess what ran through their minds, but they both gave a subtle shrug.

"Can I go to bed now?" asked Jane.

Sanjay stood and looked at Cassie. "We should go. I want to look into this dragon-enforcer."

Jane looked at Donovan, who simply smiled. "I'll help you with that."

"Just one more thing," said Cassie.

Jane swore under her breath. Why did there always have to be one more thing? "What?"

"Have you checked in with your therapist lately?"

Jane pretended she didn't hear her as she headed towards her bedroom and quietly closed the door behind her. Sisters!

As she slid between the covers, she heard a lone wolf howl in the distance. She pulled the comforter closer to her body.

Tomorrow would be a better day.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



“Dragons are fire made flesh.” ~ George R.R. Martin.

A vibrant red line of shimmering pre-dawn light cloaked the horizon promising another grand summer day. Jane, lying in her bed, noticed the approaching dawn but pulled the covers over her head. It was way too early for her to see the light.

Her radio alarm blared something about UV warnings as she crawled out of it an hour later. Some days were better spent in bed, and she wondered if this was one of them.

As she stood, she lengthened her body into a standing yoga pose and tried to stretch herself awake. Whatever the dragons put in the Sianen wine, it delivered sluggish muscles the next day.

Vixen opened one eye. "Suck it up, Buttercup."

Jane threw a pillow at her.

Twenty minutes later, they descended the stairs together. Brilliant sunshine flooded through the shop's front window, and a rainbow of colored light shone through the stained-glass window on the side. The day really did look promising.

Jane threw on an apron and started work on the HD potion.

"I still think you need a sexier name," muttered Vix as she watched Jane put her mother's amber pendant around her neck.

The wind chimes by the side window tinkled a warning. Someone had invaded the perimeter of Jane's wards. Clicking her security app on her phone, she checked her video cameras. The front, side, and back areas all appeared clear. But there was a basket sitting on the front step. She put the uncut herbs she held in her fingers down on the table, wiped her hands on her apron, and headed for the door.

"At least it's not a Molotov cocktail," Jane said as she opened the door.

Scanning the area with all her witch powers, Jane sensed no one. She sniffed the air. "Daragon," The mixture of mountain air, leather, and magic were unmistakable.

"The big lizard strikes," said Vix. Her tail swished in the air.

The wicker basket overflowed with delicate, blue, and white alpine flowers. Jane picked it up and brought it inside. The scent of the wildflowers warmed her heart. She placed the basket on her desk and opened the folded note tucked inside. It read: "Thank you for last night."

Jane stared at the sentence. "That's all?"

"What do you want, a poem? He's a dragon, not a bard."

"I don't know. I wasn't expecting anything really, but this seems so"

"Deviously light."

Jane grumbled.

Vix jumped on her desk and sat beside the basket. "The guy's been around. He probably thinks he's placed a hook in you, and he's pulling you in slowly. Like a big, floppy salmon."

"Gee, thanks. I love being compared to a fish."

"Hey, in my world, that's a high compliment."

"You eat them."

"Yeah, but I love them first." Vix licked her lips.

Jane put the flowers in a small vase and placed them on her filing cabinet. The note got slammed inside a drawer. She had work to do. Vixen was probably right. The dragon knew how to reel in a woman.

Despite her common sense, she felt all gooey inside, like a school girl reacting to her first Valentine's Day card from a crush. Damn the dragon.

She headed back to her cauldron.

By five minutes to nine o'clock, she had five boxes filled with twenty-five bottles of potion. She labeled them HD potion #1, HD potion #2, and so on to #5.

Vix shook her head. "Numbered one to five, eh. How imaginative. I'm sure they'll woo the crowds."

"Give me a break. I can't think of five names off the top of my head."

Vix rolled her eyes. "You never listen to me."

The line-up outside grew, and so did Jane's anxiety. She needed to get things right, at least at the beginning. People would forgive mistakes later after she had established a solid reputation, but not now. She slow-brewed a cup of mushroom coffee and organized her desk. Her pad of yellow-lined legal-size paper sat in the middle, and three sharpened pencils lay beside it. She opened her top drawer, pulled out a small pad of pink sticky notes, and put it beside her pencils.

Em knocked quietly at the back door that led to the alley. Jane let her in.

The teenager's face glowed with health. All traces of the acne that had been there the day before were gone. Em threw her arms around Jane and gave her a quick hug. She stepped back as if embarrassed that she had done it. "I've got a system for you."

"Tell me more."

The teenager opened her bag and revealed a machine the size of her bear's head. "I call it *The Boss*. I scavenged the parts from the dump."

Jane felt her brows rise as Em demonstrated how her machine worked. When Em turned the rotating arm, it moved a crank, and tickets spit out. Each ticket had a number on it.

Jane murmured her approval. "Simple and efficient."

"Yeah," said Em. "It's exactly what you need for Dial Witch."

Jane looked at the younger woman. "I've read dozens of business books, but you, my friend, have a wisdom about such things that's way better than any of the big theories."

"Theories?"

"Yeah. The books are filled with insufferable sayings, like, the customer is always right."

"Like hell, they are," said the teenager. "Tell me another."

"Business opportunities are like buses. There's always another one coming.' That's a Richard Branson quote."

Em squinted. "Says the guy who calls his business Virgin. Good ideas come rarely."

"I like the way your mind works."

Someone pounded on the door, and Jane looked at the clock. "Showtime."

"Magic time," said Em grinning from ear to ear. "Let me handle the crowd. You go sit on your thrown."

Jane watched her set up 'The Boss' and grinned. In less than a week, her customer base had grown astronomically, and an assistant had joined her. Were these signs the universe was supporting her?

In all the hours she had spent thinking about her business, her plans never included other people. She had thought the shop would work on its own, but that had been short-sighted. Having a regular teenager as a sidekick could help her relate better with the non-magical people in town.

"Yup," said Vix.

As Em reached the door, Jane said, "Sometime today, I'd like to officially hire you. You know with regular pay."

With her hand on the doorknob, Em turned to face her. "Seriously?"

"Yeah, absolutely. Seriously. I'd like you to write down on paper the number of hours you can work and what you think would be a fair salary."

"You healed my face."

Jane shrugged. "That was nothing but a simple spell. Now I know how you responded to the magic, I can make you a killer, night cream that will keep your skin healthy."

Tension slid from the teenager's face.

Jane took her place on her throne. She liked that name. When she gave the nod, Em opened the door.

Four women and one man took tickets and waited inside the shop for their turn. More stood outside in an orderly line. She guessed there were thirty in total. The ones inside the shop were all regulars.

By noon, Jane had chatted with fifty clients. Fifty! Most wanted HD potion. She would need to produce more for the next day.

Em put a *Closed for Lunch* sign on the door as the city clock struck twelve. Jane noticed that no one was left in the

shop, but a long line-up remained outside. Em was really efficient.

All of a sudden, the 'work' part of working became clear in her head. Dial Witch would take long hours of counseling, casting spells, and developing potions.

"I'm heading to the doughnut shop. Do you want me to get you anything?" Em asked.

A staff of five witches, Jane thought. "No, thanks. I'm good."

As Em opened the front door, a messenger handed her a basket. "That would be for her," Em said, pointing to Jane. "You can go in."

Jarek, a twenty-something young fae who was *the* messenger in town, wandered inside, looking at all the walls. He delivered everything from Amazon packages to hamburgers. As he handed her the basket, his yellow eyes twinkled with mischief.

"Thanks," said Jane standing.

The young man sniffed. "The gift smells like a dragon. Should I warn my people?"

Jane shook her head. "He's just a friend."

Jarek sauntered off, calling "Later" over his shoulder.

This wicker basket overflowed with bundles of herbs, all neatly tied. The note, again handwritten, was signed Leos. Who takes the time to handwrite these days?

"An ancient dragon," murmured Vix from her cushion.

Jane read the note. "Today is a beautiful day, made more beautiful by you. I hope you like the herbs I collected."

Jane inhaled the scents and sat down with a thud. Leos had found rare herbs. Like them? Holey tomoley, she loved them. They were rare. so rare that she would have had to barter her teeth for them the witch's market. This gift for a witch was the equivalent of a diamond bracelet for a princess. Jane couldn't get enough of its smell.

What a thoughtful gift. What a kind man.

Vix sashayed up to her. "But what does the dragon-man want?"

She sniffed the herbs again and sighed. "To shut me down."

"Mm-hmm."

"What?"

"He's a dragon. If he just wanted to close your shop down, he would burn it down. It probably would take all of five minutes."

Jane shrugged. "He's a nice dragon. He wants to convince me to do it myself."

Vix chuckled. "Shake your broom, and mark my words. Helios Daragon wants to light your fire."

Jane narrowed her eyes at her cat. "Mmmaybe."

"You've already lit his."

"Maybe. But ..."

"What?"

"He's not the sort of man to play with."

Vix chuckled. "Too hot to handle?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



“Create. Work. Inspire.” ~ Pacwired.

Jane ran upstairs to make herself lunch. She wasn't a cook, but she enjoyed the coziness of her kitchen, which was a comfortable throwback to the nineties. It had white-laminate countertops stained with burns, cupboards recently painted white, and a small fridge and stove. Jane had added a colorful Mexican rug, a French coffee press, and an Italian espresso machine. She placed a rye cracker on a plate and slathered it with peanut butter and slices of ripe banana. By one o'clock, she returned to her desk with her third mug of coffee.

Em handed her two pieces of paper stapled together. “I think I'm worth this.”

Jane read the sheets. "A contract!"

"I figured if we're going to do this, we should do it right." Em cracked her gum.

Jane nodded. "I'll read it between customers and get back to you at the end of the day."

She scanned it quickly as her first appointment walked towards her desk. It started with a job description, "Assistant Manager – receiving clients, website design, social media, and odd-jobs." That sounded good. Jane hadn't even thought about a website. Did she want to go that big?

A middle-aged woman with brown hair pulled into a tight bun on the top of her head walked forward and sat in the client's chair.

Jane took a few seconds to read a bit more. "Summer Hours, 9 – 5, one hour for lunch. Having Em to help her get going for the summer would be awesome. Winter hours – to be determined."

She read on. "Pay – unlimited face potion, credit for website and all graphic designs. Plus \$10 an hour."

Jane gave her client a friendly smile and held up her index finger. "Just a minute."

She leaned back in her chair to consider the contract. So far, everyone who came through her door either wanted to shut her down—Merlina, Cassie, Leos, Halliday—or wanted an HD variant. If all the men in town used her formula, would anyone bother to come back? She would have some work refilling the potion bottles, but was that enough? Clearly, Em wasn't asking for as much money as she deserved, but could Jane afford more?

She pursed her lips. Whether she liked it or not, she had to witch where no witch had witched before. Jane tapped her pencil. Her business was totally unique. There were no books on opening sorcery stores.

Hell yeah, she would sign a contract with Em and tell her the wages would go up as business improved.

Jane looked at her new client and put down the contract. "Hello."

The woman looked like the kind who would sell plastic kitchen containers at parties. The woman shifting in the chair. "It's about my husband."

"I don't think I've met you."

"Oh, sorry. How silly of me. I guess ... I guess, I'm nervous. That's all. My name is Matilda Mezz."

"Welcome, Matilda. I hope you like my store." Jane waved her hand around the space, but the woman's eyes stayed on her.

Matilda shivered. "I want to fix my man, like Elly."

"Have you considered couple counseling?"

The woman's brown eyes met Jane's. "Been there, honey. Done that. No tee-shirt, but a shitload of arguments. He's a guy, and he has no intention of changing his ways. I need your help. I really need your help."

"What is the problem. Exactly." Jane picked up her pencil.

"Thomas, my husband, whistles. All day, all night, he whistles. I thought it was because there's a gap in his front teeth, but when I suggested that to our dentist, Dr. Ridge, he laughed in my face. He said it was probably a nervous tick, and I'd be better off consulting with a psychiatrist."

"Did you?"

"We can't afford a shrink."

"But you can afford a witch."

She leaned in and took a furtive look around her to make sure no one was within hearing range. "It is just money you want. Right?"

"We stopped asking for first-born child years ago."

The woman blinked.

Jane lifted her right brow and waited.

Slowly the woman rose and exited the store without another word.

Jane shrugged.

"She'll be back," said Vix in her head. "No matter how dangerous she thinks you are, she'll be back. The seduction of magic is too powerful for the likes of her."

That was how Jane's afternoon started. First-timers took an average of fifteen minutes to process. Second timers, five. Only three left terrified.

At four o'clock, Em sent the tail end of the line home so that they could close their door at five.

When everyone was gone and the front door officially locked, Em and Jane sat down to finalize the contract. Jane started, "It looks good."

Jarek, the messenger, knocked on the front door. Jane answered and accepted the third gift basket. It contained a finely woven, blue scarf that felt softer than any fiber Jane had ever touched. Leos's note read: "The color of this scarf reminds me of your bewitching eyes. I hope you wear it for me tonight. Mount Chaos, at ten."

"You are popular," said Em with a smile.

Jane smirked. "I'm not sure being popular with a dragon is a good thing."

"A dragon?"

"Yeah."

"A real, live, fire-breathing dragon?"

"Yeah, he smolders. So anyway, I like the contract. It works perfectly as long as I'm busy. To be honest, I don't know how long this rush will last. How would you feel about renegotiating the contract every month? I would also like to pay you more, but I need to see some cash flowing in first."

Em tilted her head. "A dragon. Are you crazy?"

“Possibly. What about the contract?”

“Yes, a monthly review sounds good.” Em squinted. “Is he a nice dragon?”

“He’s a smoldering hot dragon,” Jane sighed. “And, I’m not sure I can handle his flame.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



“If the sky could dream, it would dream of dragons.” ~ Lifepic quotes.

At precisely ten o'clock, Jane teleported into Leos's lair. He welcomed her with three kisses like people do in Europe, one cheek, the other cheek, and then the first cheek again. Heat flared within Jane the moment his lips touched her. His touch felt like a lick of flame, and its heat didn't leave. It swirled through every part of her body and pooled in her lower belly. Pure liquid heat.

She lifted her chin and looked around.

Leos had added a sofa to his domain, made of roughly

hewn timber and covered in pillows. As Jane sank into a cushion, she smiled. "Very nice."

Vix spoke in her head, "A perfect place for smooching, not that you haven't already imagined other uses."

"It beats sitting on rocks," said Leos.

He had placed two wooden cutting boards on a round coffee table, one for sliced meats and the other for cheeses. An assortment of bowls held crackers and slices of baguette, pickles, and what looked like chicken wings. "Dragon appetizers?" Jane mused.

"Yeah, and the full course includes you," added Vix in her head.

Leos, looking even more handsome than the last time she saw him, smiled. "I thought you would like them. I want you to be comfortable. Are you warm enough?"

"It's a little chilly."

Leos threw chunks of wood on the fire and blew flames at their base. The fire roared.

Holy crap. Jane's heart skipped a beat. "That breath of yours comes in handy."

"M-hmm."

Vix chuckled as she settled into a pillow by the fire.

"Thank you for the gift baskets. The flowers and scarf are gorgeous, and the herbs, as you know, are rare and extremely helpful for sorcery. I'd gladly reciprocate with a spell or potion."

Leos looked deep into her eyes and sighed. "You're welcome."

"Is there anything I can help you with?"

"You know what I want." He filled her glass with Sianen and handed it to her.

Jane looked at her wine. "I can make lotions to soothe tired scales."

He frowned. "Jane, let's not play around. I want you to

close your shop." He put up his hand to fend her off. "And you, my dear enchantress, have been clear in your response that you have no intention of doing that."

Jane took a sip of her wine. "So, where does that leave us?"

Mischief twinkled in his extraordinary eyes. "Instead of talking about all of that, tell me about yourself. You fascinate me."

His words thrummed through her consciousness, setting off all her alarms. Jane took another sip. "Delicious," she said.

He chuckled. "Just what I was thinking."

The old adage that knowledge is power is true, and even more true in the world of magic, so Jane struggled with what she should reveal to him. If he knew her secrets, he could use them against her. Even though dragons were not known for being sly, she doubted they were above it if it helped them get what they wanted. She put her wine glass down. "Let's see. I'm the youngest of six witches."

"I heard your mother, Mercy Alexandria Black, is a grand enchantress, said to be more beautiful than Helen of Troy. And your father, Gredor, is a powerful, reclusive wizard feared for his ability to wield dark magic. You have quite the pedigree."

She nodded. "You seem to know a lot about me. So, what is it you want to know?" She picked up her glass and swirled it.

"Tell me something that isn't in the records. Something that you would tell a friend."

"Okay, my dad isn't reclusive or evil. At least not by choice. He's on the autism spectrum. Sights, sounds, and people jar him in the way a horde of mosquitoes bother the rest of us. He spends his time perfecting spells and potions to cure the Nixel virus."

"The one that kills first-born male mages?"

"Yes. The people who describe my dad as arrogant, aloof, and unsociable don't understand him. He is the gentlest, kindest man I know." She felt her cheeks heat. "And yes, he does use black magic, but only if he thinks it's necessary. He once told me to ignore what people say about him. At his level of craft, the difference between dark and light magic is fractional.

"Fractional?" Leos's brows rose.

"In the sense that anything that helps others is good magic."

Leos nodded slowly. "It's sad that people turn on each other so easily. Mages are quick to condemn gifted peers."

"Exactly. My dad, Gredor, is truly gifted. Though I have to tell you, many, even within my own family, do not agree with the things he does. He's made mistakes along the way, and when a powerful wizard messes up, the results can be ..."

Leos chuckled. "Impressive?"

"On the scale of a nuclear blast." Jane laughed. How did Leos make it so easy to talk about things like this? Things that really mattered to her. Was he charming her? She couldn't sense any spells.

"I did read something about a winter on Iradian, where all the mages smelled like hogs for a week."

Jane nodded. "Yup, that was him. One of his potions, which accidentally got into the drinking water, didn't work as well as he planned. He angered a lot of people, but it was a temporary problem."

"Your father sounds quite amazing to me. It's not easy to be a genius." Leos took a gulp of his wine. "Tell me about your childhood."

"Uh, uh. That's not how this is going to work. I've told you something about myself, now you tell me something about you."

A wolfish grin spread across his rugged face, and he wiggled his bushy brows. "This sounds like strip poker."

"If you say so." She sat back with her wine to listen.

As he leaned closer to her, his musky dragon scent overwhelmed her senses, and she dragged in a deep breath to calm herself.

Leos closed his eyes for a second. "I'm three hundred years old."

"Is that a lot for dragons?"

"Nah. In dragon years, that's not many."

"Are you married?" How could she not ask?

'*M*on trésor.' Leos's heart spoke to him. Her floral scent unnerved him, and he got lost looking in her blue eyes. After a few seconds, he found his voice. "Not at the moment."

"Don't dragons mate?"

He laughed. "Oh, we mate. Often." Jane might be a powerful enchantress, but with him, she could not hide her feelings. He liked the way her cheeks flamed red when she felt embarrassed. Or was that a charm? He had to be careful. His experience with witches in the past had taught him that.

Jane rolled her eyes. "I mean don't you have partner contracts of some form?"

"Yeah, we do, and we take them seriously. We don't marry and divorce on a whim. Dragons believe in fate, and that limits the number of times they formally match-up."

"Match?" Jane sipped her wine. Her tongue stretched out to lick her bottom lip.

Leos stopped himself from groaning. "We know when we meet our match."

"How do you know?"

“Our heart tells us. Enough about me. Now it’s your turn. Tell me about your sisters.”

“There’s a lot of them, and as different as we all are, I love them.”

He nodded. “That’s how I feel about my three brothers. We fight a lot, even draw blood sometimes, but we always, always have each other’s backs.”

“Exactly.”

“And two of your sisters live in town.”

“Yes, Cassie came here first. She inherited The Perfect Brew coffee house from our great-aunt Ophelia.”

“The spellbinder who created the magic sanctuary in town.”

“You are well-informed.”

“Always, young one.”

“Of course. You are an enforcer. You would have excellent intel.” She pushed her hair behind her shoulders, and the light of the fire reflected on her red tresses. He stifled a groan.

Jane put her wine glass down. “Merlina is my oldest sister. She recently moved to town. Because she arrived first on this planet, she thinks she’s the wisest.”

“I have a brother like that. His name is Sol.” Leos took a gulp of his wine. “Unfortunately, he usually is the smartest in the room.”

Jane laughed. “I never thought I’d have anything in common with a dragon.”

“And you have warlocks in your family. Tell me about them.”

*J*ane took another sip of her wine and could feel her guards slipping. The heat flowing in waves through her body was becoming impossible to

ignore. She put her wine glass down and looked at it. "I'm talking too much."

His other-worldly eyes swept her face. "I could listen to you all night."

"Do you eat tacos?"

Leos nodded. "Of course. Who doesn't like tacos?"

Jane swallowed the nervousness rising in her throat. "Helios Daragon, I formally extend to you an invitation to join our family dinner tomorrow night. It's taco night."

The black inner lids shut over his eyes, and a muscle in his chin ticked. "You want me to meet your people?"

"Yes." She couldn't believe she was inviting a dragon home for dinner, but she could not think of a better test of his interest in her. "You said you wanted to get to know me. There isn't a better way."

His black lids lifted, and colorful light flowed over her face. "I'll bring Sianen."

"Speaking of which, I think I've had too much."

"You haven't finished a glass."

"Maybe it's the altitude."

A slow smile spread across his rugged face.

Jane shook her head. "I feel too warm, too relaxed, and definitely too pliable for my own good. I'm not at all sure being with you is a good thing. I must say good night."

"But ..."

Jane vanished into the night with Vix spelled to follow her.

CHAPTER THIRTY



“Some call it chaos; we call it family.” ~ Anon.

Jane arrived for taco night earlier than usual. Sanjay greeted her with a questioning stare. “Is there a problem?”

“No,” lied Jane flicking her hair behind her shoulders. She wore freshly washed jeans, a blue halter top, and her favorite flip-flops.

He looked at his watch and back at Jane. “You never arrive early.”

She shrugged. “I love tacos.”

Merlina, Donovan, and Gabriel shimmered into view. Family hugs and kisses followed.

Donovan looked at Sanjay. Sanjay shrugged. "She says she loves tacos."

Merlina's chin jutted out. "What's up, Jane?"

"Business is good. I put in a full day at work and was eager to be somewhere else," said Jane.

Donovan pinched the top of his nose. "Why does my gut say you're lying?"

Cassie walked into the room with baby Luna in her arms. "Remember our rule. Eat first, talk later." She gave Jane a squinty look.

They all sat in their regular places. Silence fell as they cast side-glances at Jane, waiting for her to say something.

Gong ... Gong ... Gong.

Sanjay looked at Cassie. "Are we expecting anyone?"

Cassie and Merlina looked at Jane. "Are we?"

"I'll get it," said Jane.

Donovan stood. "I smell dragon."

Sanjay's nostrils flared. "Drrragon."

Ignoring her brothers, Jane made her way to the door. Three over-protective warlocks with their dander ruffled did not make a good greeting team, but they followed her as if they were a football team playing defense.

Leos stood on the doorstep with flowers in one hand and two bottles of wine in the other. He wore black dress pants and a blue silk shirt, handsome enough for any gentleman's magazine cover. His hair was pulled back into a braid, and he had shaved his face. Still, no refinement hid his powerful dragon essence.

"Come in. Come in. Let me introduce you to everyone," said Jane.

She turned to walk him into the dining room, but everyone was already standing behind her, a wall of family. Sheesh. The number of magical guards settling into place

was suffocating. "Oh, for goodness sake, put the devilry away. This is my friend."

Sanjay's right brow rose slowly, and Jane wondered, not for the first time if he should apply for a job in Hollywood. Merlina's chin jutted out a fraction further than usual. Donovan pinched his nose, and Cassie blinked. Gabriel, who always enjoyed family conflict that didn't involve him, grinned from ear to ear.

"May I introduce Helios Daragon," said Jane. The words came out of her mouth slowly because there was so much magic in the air.

"Please, call me Leos. I assure you, I am here as a friend."

"Welcome," said Cassie pushing the warlocks aside so she could stand in front of the dragon. "I am Cassie Black, the lady of the manor."

Leos handed her the bouquet of flowers and bowed. "En chante, madame."

The warlocks looked at each other and smirked.

"What does a dragon enforcer from the ninth want in our town?" said Donovan.

"Tacos," replied Leos.

Jane laughed and took his hand. The moment their hands touched, the black lids on Leos's eyes slid back, and his colorful irises lit up the room for a second.

"Oh," said Cassie and Merlina in unison.

"Shit," said the warlocks.

Shocked or awed? She wasn't sure how each family member felt, but they dropped their guards and allowed her to take Leos to the table.

As Leos passed Sanjay, he handed him the Sianen

Merlina followed with her chin. "You must tell us all about yourself," she said to Leos.

"Of course," Leos said, but his black lids slid back in place.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



"Well, that escalated quickly," is our family motto. ~ Anon.

Sanjay sat in his usual place at the head of the oval table. Leos took the guest's spot at the other end. On Sanjay's right sat Cassie. Next to her, Luna wiggled and giggled in her high chair as she twirled magic from her fingertips to make the tablecloth rise and fall.

Donovan, Merlina, and Gabriel sat on Sanjay's left.

Jane sat on Leos's right. She leaned towards him. "The family rule is we eat first and talk later."

Leos nodded. "Our family has a similar rule, not because we are civilized, but because if we didn't, we would never get to eat. Dragons like to eat."

Gabriel snickered. Donovan shot him a look.

Platters of tortillas, followed by meat, beans, and all the trimmings passed from person to person.

Jane turned to Leos. "Even though we have a talk later rule, we normally chat about light stuff while we eat." Not that the Black family ever did normal well. She added lettuce to her plate. "I have to say Dial Witch is rocking."

Donovan pinched the bridge of his nose. Sanjay closed his eyes. Merlina looked at the ceiling, and Cassie gave Jane a weak smile. Leos looked around. "Hmm. It seems I'm not the only one who wants you to close the shop."

"That would be a no," said Sanjay, who poured a small amount of the Sianen in his wine glass, swirled it, studied it, and tasted it. "Very nice. Thank you."

"You're most welcome. I'll have a case delivered to you tomorrow."

Sanjay lowered his head. "What is it you want from us?"

Leos shrugged. "Tacos."

When no one responded

"And good company."

Polite laughter filled the room, but it felt as welcoming as shards of broken glass.

"And Jane?" Donovan nailed the dragon with his warlock stare. "What do you want from my little sister?"

Leos stood. The three warlocks stood.

"I assure you, my intentions are honorable," said Leos.

Jane wanted to melt into her chair, but she stood to face the men.

They, intent on eye-balling each other like a pack of baboons, ignored her.

"How dare you talk about me as if I'm not here, as if I were ..."

"Invisible?" said Cassie raising her glass to her younger sister.

"A piece of family property," said Merlina raising her glass.

"Yes, invisible and a piece of property."

The men looked at Jane as if she had lost her mind. Baboons, she thought. Men are no better than wild primates.

Donovan took one look at his wife's face and winced. "My apologies, Jane." He sat down. Gabriel followed his lead.

Sanjay folded his arms and remained standing.

Leos quirked a bushy brow. "Warlock?"

"I'm not used to having a sister. But she is mine, and I'll protect her to my dying breath."

Leos nodded, but the tension in the room did not ease.

Sanjay motioned to the door. "Maybe we should just take this outside."

"No!" said the witches.

Cassie grabbed Sanjay's hand and pulled on it. "Jane would never speak to you again."

The royal warlock grumbled and sat. Cassie filled his wine glass.

"Anyway," said Jane, "as I was saying, I had a good day. I saw thirty customers; my potions are flying off the shelves, and I have an assistant."

The others started eating as if she had said nothing.

"Her name is Emerald James. Em for short. She's really helpful."

Merlina put her taco down. "What kind of potions are you selling?"

"I've had a run on my first elixer. I call it HD. I've perfected five variations of it to address different needs. Vix thinks I should give each of them funky names, but I haven't had time to think of any, so I call them HD potion number one to five."

Donovan's Irish blue eyes clouded over. "All your clients want the same thing?"

"So far. You see, the first woman who came in my store had such success with it, she told a friend, who told a friend, and now they line up outside my door. Em set up a ticket system to keep things orderly. She calls it, The Boss."

"Like the butcher shop," said Gabriel, smirking.

"Exactly. I'm as busy as a butcher, and I'm not killing animals."

Sanjay's eyes narrowed. "Let me get this straight. You're brewing a potion with five variations for the non-magical women in town."

"It smells like fermented toads," said Leos.

"They love it," said Jane.

"What does it do?" asked Gabriel.

"Well," Jane stopped. Crap, she had put her foot into her cauldron again. She was so proud of her accomplishment she had blathered and said more than she should have.

"That's a good question," said Cassie. "What could possibly be bothering all the women in town?"

Silence fell for a moment. The warlocks looked at each other.

"Men."

The warlocks took a long pull on their wine glasses. Leos looked at his plate.

Merlina locked Jane with her laser stare. "And you called it HD?"

Could she ever get anything past her oldest sister? "Uh, yeah. As I said, I couldn't think of a good name."

Sanjay started laughing first, then Donovan, Gabriel, and finally Leos.

The witches looked at them as if they were crazy.

Cassie elbowed Sanjay. "Out with it."

Sanjay said, "HD. Don't you get it?"

As understanding hit her sisters, their faces turned bright red. "You're making an aphrodisiac for men?"

Jane glanced at Leos. His lips firmly squished together, so he wouldn't laugh.

"Okay. The potion corrects erectile dysfunction."

The men chuckled. Clearly, talking about their weewillies at the table tickled them pink.

"It stimulates a loving mood..." Jane continued.

They laughed harder. Sanjay's eyes filled with tears. How old were these boys?

"And you know what else it does..."

Silence.

Leos leaned towards her. "Tell us, young one."

"Forget it. You guys are making fun of me," Jane leaned back and folded her arms.

Gabriel winked at Jane. "What happens when something goes wrong? Do the guys have uh problems?"

"Nothing goes wrong. It's a simple herbal potion spiced with a tiny spell or two. There's nothing toxic in it."

"I may be the youngest at the table," said Gabriel with a smirk, "but I know magic is never that sure a thing, especially when it's applied to relationships."

The brat.

Donovan looked at his son. "Well, listen to you."

"Don't ask," he said.

"Oh, we're asking," said Merlina sitting up straighter.

"Okay. I had this thing with a girl at Brambles." Gabriel paled.

Thank the heavens, thought Jane. The subject was no longer all about her.

Donovan clapped his son's shoulders. "Say no more. I understand."

Luna puckered her lips and mumbled some incantation Jane couldn't understand. Lightening bugs circled her high chair. She laughed and cheered until Sanjay snapped his fingers, and they disappeared.

The food and dragon wine continued circulating until everyone had had their fill. When everyone had pushed their plates away from them, Sanjay cleared the table with a swoosh of his hands.

"We have serious things to talk about tonight," said Donovan.

Leos spoke, "Should I leave?"

Donovan shook his head. "No, you may stay. Jane trusts you, and that says a lot. I would like your take on our problem."

Jane leaned towards him. "A bounty has been set on warlock babies in our realm. We're trying to find out who set the bounty and stop them."

"Kill them," mumbled Leos. He stood and thumped his chest. His black inner-eye lids lifted and colored light radiated from his eyes, flooding the room with a kaleidoscope of colors. He spoke in a solemn tone. "I pledge my allegiance to your family on this matter. No one should harm children." Especiallay if they are related to Jane.

The warlocks, all three of them, nodded. Three nods at once. That was a dragon-sized approval.

As Leos took his seat, Jane squeezed his hand. A current of heat spiraled up her arm and landed with a plunk in her heart.

"Too fast," said Vix in her head. "Way, too fast."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



“The bigger your family, the bigger your problems.” ~ Anon.

Donovan stood to address the family. “I wish I had better news.”

He looked at Leos. “The last time we talked about the bounty, Jane had a vision of a warrior by the name of Kai Letalis who told her to ‘beware of the Kryg.’ My posse has been looking into this information for the last week. The witches have been doing their thing to enhance the vision.”

Jane spoke up. “We suspect Kai Letalis was Ophelia’s secret love.”

Luna twirled her index finger, and the parmesan cheese container turned upside down. Cassie set it right.

Donovan spoke. "Our sources told us he is a Zigara, an exceptionally gifted and highly trained warrior for The Council in the first realm. His adventures are legendary, but his location is always a mystery. They say he pledged his soul to one witch, who we think was Ophelia. He's warning us because we are family."

"And the Kryg? What more did you learn about them?" asked Sanjay.

"They are the scum of the multiverse. They developed an army of genetically engineered, vampire-cyborg mutants—killing machines—that have vanquished many armies."

"What about the bounty?" asked Merlina rubbing her baby bump.

Donovan sat and took her hand. "News of the bounty is spreading by word of mouth, as well as through cyber networks, throughout the realms. Its origin is still unknown."

"It's only a matter of time before a bounty hunter arrives on our doorstep," said Cassie.

"If the Kryg enjoy their badass reputation so much, why aren't they claiming credit for setting the bounty?" asked Gabriel.

Leos spoke up. "I can think of two reasons for them to not reveal themselves. First, many people are afraid to do business with them because they don't honor contracts unless it is in their favor. If they want to get this done, they don't want people to know they are behind it. Second, even the evil Kryg don't want to be known as baby-killers. It's a step too far that would isolate them from the worlds of decent people."

"So, the Kryg want our children dead," said Gabriel.

Leos shook his head. "Not necessarily dead."

Everyone looked at him.

"Think about it. The Kryg scientists are experts at creating mutant species."

Sanjay frowned. "You think the warlock DNA extracted from the babies would be useful to their breeding program."

"I'm sure there would be a market for warlock hybrids," said Leos.

"Shit," said Donovan and Gabriel.

"So, what now?" asked Jane. She looked at Donovan.

"You Jane ar our best link to Kai Letalis. He communicated with you in your vision. Keep trying to telepathically reach out to him. See if he knows more and if he can help us."

"Done," said Jane.

Cassie settled the acrobatic Luna back into her high chair for the third time. "I'll call a meeting for the covens in the area, and we'll lend our strength to Jane."

"I'll contact the Dragon Federation of the ninth and ask for intel," said Leos.

"I'll go back to the Warlock Brotherhood and ask for their assistance in gaining more information," said Sanjay. "We already have their full support. I'm sure there are studies on our DNA."

Donovan spoke next. "I'll manage the local posse. We won't let anything happen to our children."

"My friends and I have been patrolling the perimeter of the town. We'll add more shifts," said Gabriel.

"I can help with the patrols," said Merlina.

"No," said everyone else in unison.

"It's too dangerous," said Donovan.

Merlina's chin quivered, but she said nothing.

"I think that's all for tonight," said Donovan. He turned to Sanjay and Cassie. "Thank you for hosting. I promise as soon as we finish our new house, we'll share the load."

Sanjay stood to shake hands. "It's not a burden. It's a pleasure. Our home is yours, brother."

Cassie grabbed Luna mid-air as she lunged out of her high chair in an attempt to fly without a broom. "I'll just say a

quick goodbye to you all. This one has been up way past her bedtime. She turned towards the dragon shifter. "It has been a pleasure to meet you, Leos." With that, she headed towards the grand stairway with Luna giggling in her arms.

Donovan and Sanjay exchanged a look. Sanjay walked up to Leos. "I'd like your opinion on something."

Jane wondered what the warlocks were up to. Jane looked at Donovan, who gave her a smile that reminded her of a cat stalking its prey.

Gently, Donovan grabbed her arm. "A word, sister." He pulled her aside in the opposite direction of the other men. She followed his lead into a small alcove that had been a coat room decades ago.

Once alone, Donovan spoke. "Do you know what you're doing?"

Jane exhaled slowly. "Always."

"He's a fire-breather."

"He's also a man, an attractive, intelligent, and witty man."

"He's a dragon."

Jane sighed. "I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself. You should know that by now."

"He's a fucking dragon."

"He treats me as a mature woman, which is more than some men I know."

Donovan pinched the top of his nose and looked at the floor. "You know what he wants."

"Yeah. The dragon wants me to close my shop."

Donovan shook his head and inhaled. "Everyone wants you to close the damn shop. I mean ... besides that."

Jane smiled. "Oh, you mean *that*?"

"Yes. *That*."

"Well, tell me how he's any different from any other man I've met. I am attractive, you know."

"I know, and that's the problem. Men are drawn to you like gargoyles to cement."

"So why are we talking about this now?"

"Trust me, being with Leos would be very different."

Jane blinked. "Are you sure?"

His Irish blue eyes locked with hers with the intensity of a super-charged magnet. "Yes, little sister. I'm older than you, and I know things. I am sure."

Jane looked over to where Leos waited patiently for her by the door. "He's so hot."

"Inter-specie sex is frowned upon by witches for a reason."

Jane smirked. "Old people just want to keep their bloodlines pure. If two people want to tango, it's no one else's business."

"When it's my sister, it's my business. I know you're not a virgin, but you have only played with boys. He is centuries older than you. He has had sex with many women in many realms. He would be more experienced than you can ever imagine. Donovan grunted. His erotic tastes may range from exotic to dangerous. And, he's powerful."

Jane shrugged. "Imagine what I could learn."

"Jane."

"Donovan."

"Don't do it."

Jane rolled her eyes. "Exactly what are you referring to? A kiss? An embrace? A little lick?"

Through gritted teeth, the formidable warlock hissed, "None of it. Don't do any of it. In fact, stop holding his damn hand."

Stepping closer, Jane took the supernatural sheriff's face in her hands. "Dear brother, I love you, but let me be clear. I will do what I want to do."

With that, she rejoined Leos, who stood by the door. They finished their goodbyes to everyone and headed outside into a perfect starlit night.

Jane put her hand into the crook of Leos's arm. "Want to come back to my place?"

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



"Beyond this place, there be dragons." ~ Anon.

With a flick of her wrist and a softly whispered spell, Jane created a flaming portal. Holding hands, she and Leos stepped through it and landed in her living room. The space had always seemed small, though she preferred to call it cozy. With a dragon shifter in the middle of it, it felt like a cupboard.

"I'm not sure you'll fit in my furniture," Jane said as she looked around at her second-hand sofa and two comfy chairs.

Leos scanned the room with interest, no doubt noticing

her unfolded laundry piled in the corner chair. "Are you nervous?" he said.

"I just want you to be comfortable."

"I am always comfortable around you. It's one of your bewitching qualities."

"No magic," she said. The words tumbled out of her mouth.

His bushy brows rose.

"Agreed. As we said the other night, it would be best we got to know one another without using sorcery." His gaze raked her for a brief moment, sending a wave of heat through her system.

"Thank you for coming to dinner. I know my family can be ..."

"Protective. A woman like you deserves to be safeguarded. I cannot blame them for that. I actually enjoyed meeting them."

"Enjoyed?" Jane snickered.

He shrugged. "As they say, they are good people."

"And thank you for offering your help searching for the bounty hunters."

"Of course. As a dragon enforcer I could do no less. We have a code of honor to protect all children."

Leos sat on one end of the sofa and patted the spot beside him. She inhaled his dragon scent as she settled in. He traced her face with his fingers sending currents of warmth through her body.

"Dragon families are just as crazy," he said.

"Tell me."

"Where do I start?" He pushed her hair behind her shoulders. "My beloved mother is a hoarder, and my father takes the term 'alpha with an anal complex' to a whole new realm." Leos's amazing eyes buzzed with pride as he spoke. "I have an aunt who eats nothing but raw lizards and swears the entire

multiverse belongs to our family. We think she fell on her head when she was young."

"Everyone has a crazy aunt."

"But my three brothers are the best."

"The best?"

"Absolutely. Mostly, they are my best friends, but they have also been my best enemies at times. Over three hundred years, one learns how close love and hate can be, and how carefully one must tread when a sibling's heart is at risk."

"Do you fight often?"

"All the time. They're my favorite sparring partners."

"You said the oldest is called Sol."

"Yes, Sol is the oldest and the wisest. He's also the most aggravating because he knows it. He's well-aligned politically and is an expert strategist. Then there's me, then Adrian the map-maker, and Kurick, the poet."

She touched his hand. His body ran so hot. It was no wonder the room was getting warm. "I'm trying to imagine four male dragons playing tag above a mountain."

Leos chuckled. "When we play, we need a whole mountain range." He gave her a sidelong glance. "You need to see me in my dragon form before you'll understand."

Jane bit her tongue. "I can barely manage to be around you, in your human form. I'm not sure I can handle you as a dragon."

"You do not need to fear me, in any form, Jane Black. Consider me your devoted servant."

Did she just jump into a fairy-tale? It was all too much to take in. "If you say so," she said.

"Enchantress, it is your turn. Tell me more about yourself."

"I am the sixth sister of the sixth sister,"

"Is that why you are so powerful at such a tender age?"

“That’s what they tell me. The only element I command is fire.”

Leos took her hand. “Perfect.”

She laughed. “We do have the command of fire in common.”

“Have you played with your fire?” he asked.

Jane blinked. “One doesn’t play with fire.”

“Dragons do.”

“But it’s so dangerous.”

The way his lips trembled, she figured he was having difficulty not laughing.

“What?”

“Fire can be many things. I will teach you all of them. You should know how to truly command the flame.”

“I fear your mission will get in the way.”

“Hmmm.” He took her hand and kissed it.

Jane touched his arm. “Tell me more about the complaint against me. I’ll fix the problem for both of us.”

“Enforcers don’t discuss mission details.”

“But, I am your mission.”

His eyes met hers, and the temperature in the room spiked. Heat pooled in her abdomen.

The fire of their attraction crackled and simmered, but neither of them moved. “Taupe Halliday,” he said.

“I’ve met her.”

“I know. You have to understand Dame Halliday is a powerful, well-connected dragoness.”

Jane blinked. “She had a burned sugar smell about her that worried me.”

Leos chuckled.

“She already asked me to close down.”

“You should have listened to her.”

“She called me reckless and immature.”

Leos let that statement hang. “You need to see things from

her eyes, Jane. You are centuries younger than her, and while your intentions are pure, your behavior threatens her world."

"The secret world of magic."

"Exactly."

"I get that, but I don't care if I upset the way things have always been done. It's time for a change. It's time for magic to be fully released into the world. What good does hiding it in the shadows do when it can help others."

Leos's eyes widened, and she could practically hear the wheels of his mind turning. "Let's look at this another way," he said.

Jane tilted her head.

"Let's talk about the people in your town. The regulars for their whole lives suspected supernaturals exist. They told stories about them, bought garlic, and even pretended to have powers themselves on Halloween night."

Jane nodded.

"Now they know we exist." He lifted his hand to stop her from interrupting. "Instead of calling them 'regulars,' let's call them the have-nots, as in those who have-not magic."

Jane's felt her brows rise. "The have-nots?"

"How do you think the 'have-nots' feel about those that 'have' magic?"

Jane thought about that for a minute. "Some are terrified. And maybe some of them are a little angry no one told them sooner."

"And?"

"Jealous. Yeah, I imagine some may be jealous."

"Exactly. Their first reaction was fear. All people are run by fear if they're not careful. Now we, the supernaturals, and our magic tops their list of fears. To make matters worse, the other emotions, jealousy, and rage, stew in their hearts and cause resentment. If they didn't hate us before, they would grow to hate us soon."

Jane's gut clenched. "Which is why I —"

"So," Leos interrupted her again. They were going to have to talk about his mansplaining habits soon.

"So," he continued, "while you think sharing your magic will help them."

One thing she didn't need in her life was another person lecturing her. Maybe she should slap him.

"Slap a dragon," Vix's voice echoed in her head.

Leos grimaced as if he read her mind. "So, it is not wise to meddle in their lives with magic."

"Are you done yet?"

"I understand you want to help them, but in the long run, your meddling will turn them against us. And worse, using your magic openly, exposing our power, the one secret we hold most dear, our trump card, our very essence, is not wise. Magic by its very nature has always been secret and must remain so."

"You don't give regulars enough credit. They are more like us than you know."

"You're stoking their jealous natures, you're building their fears, you're making them feel less than whole. Jealousy is an ugly emotion. It makes people do things they shouldn't."

"These are kind, nice people."

"Yes, but they are only human. How do you feel when you meet someone with more power than you? Honestly. How do you feel when they flaunt it? Imagine those feelings multiplied a hundred-fold."

"But I will be helping them."

He shook his head. "No, Jane. By showing your magic, you will turn nice, regular humans into silent enemies seething with jealousy and malicious intent. The more they learn about sorcery, the more they will hate us for it. Jealousy will run in their blood and eat away at their good natures."

Jane frowned. His argument may be cogent, but he was

wrong. She knew in her heart he was wrong. "People aren't that maligned."

"Get real, Jane. Human nature isn't pretty."

"Is this what Taupe Halliday thinks or what you think?"

"It's what we all think."

Jane leaped off the sofa. "I can understand such archaic thinking coming from Taupe Halliday, but not from you. Have you no faith in me? Have you no faith in the goodness of human nature?"

Bang. Bang. Bang. Someone pounded on the shop's front door.

"Witch. I need you. Witch come out. Witch ..." screamed a woman.

Was that Elly Biggins's voice?

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



"If you can't take the heat, don't tickle the dragon." ~ Anon.

Leos reached the door before Jane, but he waited for her to be beside him before he opened it. On her threshold stood Elly Briggins, red-faced and fuming. "You've ruined my life."

Leos sniffed the air. He gave the intruder a once over and looked at Jane. "Later," he said.

Jane exhaled slowly. "Elly, please, come in."

Trying not to hate the woman for interrupting her time with Leos, though she felt more like slapping him at the moment, she walked her client over to her desk. "Take a seat and tell me what the problem is."

"Magic is evil. I should have listened to my mother and stayed away from you. You're evil."

"No, magic isn't, and I'm not," said Jane.

Elly glared at her.

"Magic itself is neutral. Whether it's used for good or bad depends on the intent of the user." Good grief, she sounded more like her crazy father every day.

"Then explain to me why Butch is screwing his way through all the women in town."

Jane steepled her fingers. She hadn't seen that one coming. "Are you sure? You told me he wasn't the roving type."

Elly wiped at the tears flowing down her face. "Yes, I'm sure. Look at this." She pulled a tiny leopard print thong out of a tote bag and threw it on Jane's desk."

Jane looked. "I take it, it's not yours."

"And this ..." Elly pulled out a large pair of white cotton granny panties and threw it on top.

"Hmm."

"And this ..." A vibrant green polka-dot bikini bottom came next.

Jane firmed her lips so she wouldn't laugh at the odd collection.

"And these ..." Elly reached in the fourth time and threw down a pile of panties. There had to be at least another ten.

"Maybe Butch has been shopping?" Jane could hope.

"He admitted to me these are his trophies."

Oh, hell.

Elly sobbed. "He says women call him the love machine. He says they can't get enough of him. He says he's considering charging for his service, but he's enjoying the variety too much."

Jane picked up her pencil and tapped it. Love machine? Variety? Good goddess, no. What had she done?

"Your magic is ruining my life."

Nausea rose in Jane's throat. "I'll tweak the potion and add herbs that will make him faithful." Making a male lover better was a trickier endeavor than she had first thought. She must make him more amorous for sure, but also, and perhaps more importantly, more faithful if that was what the buyer wanted. A few herbs came to mind and her aunt's spell for fidelity.

"I take it his feet don't smell," said Jane wanting to narrow down the additions she needed to make.

Elly waved her hand in the air. "I haven't noticed."

"So, your life's been hot and happy at home?"

"Butch became my dream husband until I found these." She pointed to the pile of lingerie that stood between them.

"Yeah. Okay. I know exactly what to do. Come in tomorrow morning, and I will give you a new and improved version of the HD potion." Jane looked at the underwear on her desk and winced.

"Will the new potion fix him? If not, I want the old Butch back."

"Yes, it will fix him. And as a bonus, I'll give you a little something to help you sleep tonight."

A couple minutes later, Elly Briggins left with a crystal in one hand and a calming potion in the other.

Jane looked at the lingerie pile and shook her head. What were the odds Butch Briggins would be the only man who took the wandering path after he took her potion?

Vix chuckled. "How many HD potion vials have you sold?"

"At least a hundred."

"Let me try my math. If the one-hundred men hyped up on HD each had one affair, that would affect"

"I never liked math."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



“The moon made me do it.” ~ Anon.

By the time Em opened the front door of the Dial Witch shop the following day, the customer line-up had snaked down the block and around the corner. Most of the clients were repeats looking for more brew, but some were new.

Jane looked wearily at the line she had once dreamed of seeing outside her door. She had spent most of the night improving the HD potion. Now it was time to face what she had done and appease any angry clients.

One by one, the customers took their turn in the bewitched client’s chair. The first twenty had no complaints and came for refills. Not wanting more panty piles on her

desk, she gave them a bottle of the new and improved brew.

Then came the complainers. HD was making some of the men so randy, they literally couldn't keep it in their pants. Their wives were sore, and the men were becoming less and less concerned about who they shared their bounty with. Yup, Elly was just the beginning. Calmly Jane gave each of the complainers sympathy, an apology, and a bottle of the new and improved potion for free. She also gave them calming drops.

As she spoke with them, Jane tallied how many men had started cheating on their partners.

Hopefully, that would improve the situation. Jane winced. One of the ingredients she added was a touch of Canadian thistle, which would make the skin turn red on parts of the body that were over-used. She also added stern berry root to improve truthfulness. And, of course, her aunty's fidelity spell.

When Em closed and locked the front door at the end of the day, Jane leaned back in her chair and sighed.

Em made her way back to the desk and sat in the client's chair. "We got a problem."

"Just one?"

"The women in line are talking, and it ain't pretty." She cracked her gum.

Jane picked up her pencil.

"Myra Delamont, you know the hairdresser with the fried black hair, said she understood why witches were burned in the past. Her words were bad enough. But the others didn't laugh."

"Oh, broom-sticks." Jane put down her pencil and put her feet on her desk.

"They're turning nasty. A lot of them."

"I made a mistake, Em."

"Ya think." Em cracked her gum.

"My first potion made some men"

"Screw everything in sight. I heard the stories." She cracked her gum again.

"Trust me, the new and improved potion will fix everything."

Em shrugged. "I hope you're not in danger. I thought I should warn you."

"Don't worry about me. I'm a witch. I can take care of myself."

Jane's phone vibrated, and she checked her messages. Merlina wrote, "Tonight, spaghetti at the manor. Fire-breather welcome."

The last line intrigued her. Since when had any of Jane's boyfriends been welcomed? Hell, they seemed to like him better than she did.



CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



"Darling, you're already in my veins." Anon.

The sound of Sanjay's front doorbell reverberated through the halls of the manor, stopping all conversation at the family dinner. Jane, with her fork halfway to her mouth, put it down. She looked at Cassie. Cassie shrugged. "I didn't invite anyone?"

The warlocks and Leos stood. Testosterone hummed in the air, but before they could move, the visitor manifested before them.

"Good eeeevening, everyone," said Alessandro in his fake vampire drawl. Mr. tall, dark, and fanged walked towards them with a swagger as if he owned the entire manor. His

mahogany brown hair fell loose to his shoulders, framing a narrow face shaded with just the right amount of scruff. No man deserved to be so handsome, especially a dead one. His dark chocolate eyes softened when they touched upon Cassie's. The smell of blood singed the air, and the unmistakable feeling of a cold hand squeezing Jane's heart followed. The vampire knew how to make an entrance. He grinned.

A vampire's smile is not a welcomed sight in anyone's dining room. Jane wanted to sink into the floor. It wasn't just because he was so drop-dead handsome, though his good looks never failed to have their effect on her. It was because she didn't want the family to know they had been chatting behind everyone's backs. "Welcome, Alessandro," she said.

The others looked at her with narrowed gazes.

"What?" Jane shook her head. "I didn't ask him."

Their stares continued to bore into her. Leos smirked.

"Hey, guys, take a breath. Alessandro is my ex-brother-in-law and a trusted ally. He wouldn't be here if he didn't have something important to tell us." Or so she hoped.

Sanjay exhaled loud enough to start a gale-force wind. "Vampire," he muttered through a clenched jaw.

Alessandro nodded in his direction and turned to look directly at Donovan.

The sheriff's shoulder muscles relaxed. "Alessandro." They both did their man-nod thing.

The vampire turned next to glare at Leos. His nostrils flared. "A dragon sits at your table?"

"Corpse man." Leos's eyes blazed.

"Scaly lizard," countered Alessandro with a snarl.

"Bloodsucker." Leos made a sucking noise.

"Serpent." The vampire hissed. He sniffed the air and turned his gaze to Jane. "I expected more of you, sister."

Oh, holy fudge, Alessandro could smell Leos on her.

Leos stepped closer to the vampire. "Leave. Her. Alone."

Since when did the dragon's voice echo?

Alessandro squared his shoulders to Leos. "Hmm." He turned back to nail Jane with a deadly look. "I know some nice vampires I could introduce you to, my dear. You don't need to associate with a fire-breather."

"You want to come closer and say that?" asked Leos, whose body hadn't relaxed a smidgen.

The vampire's eyes darkened.

"Alessandro," Cassie said in her no-nonsense voice. "Leave him be. He is my guest."

A grim grin spread across the night stalker's handsome face. "For you, my dear one—anything." He gave Leos a withering look that all but said, 'Later.'

Merlina rubbed her baby bump. "Spit it out, popsicle man. Why are you here?"

Alessandro made a gallant bow. "I have come with news."

Jane grinned. Alessandro always came through. "You know something?" she asked, trying to speed up the immortal's agonizingly slow speech. They really didn't have any sense of time.

"I have a lead on the warlock bounty issue."

Sanjay glanced at Cassie.

She shook her head.

Sanjay asked, "As much as we have appreciated your alliance in the past, I thought I made it clear, things are different now. I protect my family. This is a warlock problem." His face hardened to a warrior's mask.

Jane swallowed hard.

Alessandro shrugged. "Calm down, Sanjay. Cassie didn't tell me anything. I hear things. Many things." He sniffed the air as if the supernatural scents swirling among them had shifted, but Jane couldn't detect any change. The vampire had a nose for trouble. "For starters, the assholes from Kryg are involved."

Donovan widened his stance, leaned back, and folded his arms. "We know this. What else?"

Alessandro's right brow rose slowly. "You know about the Kryg's elite force?"

"We not only know about them, but two of us have also fought them in the past," said Leos, who took Jane's hand in his and tried to pull her behind him.

She didn't budge.

Alessandro nodded. "Then you understand how dangerous this threat is."

"What else?" growled Sanjay.

Alessandro exhaled slowly. "Because the Kryg warriors are part vampire, they have an allegiance with our Federation."

"You are buddies with cyborg hybrids?" asked Jane.

"I wouldn't go that far. Our relationship is cool." The vampire chuckled at his own joke. "Even for fellow predators."

"Has the bounty on warlock babies been discussed at the Federation?" said Sanjay.

"No. The Vampire federation would never condone the hunting of children." He cocked his head to the right. "At least not in this century, and never openly. It's despicable to prey on the young, and it reduces the number of possible adults."

"Would the Federation help us?" asked Donovan. "Or would that be considered an act against one of their own?"

Alessandro made a guttural sound only a night-stalker can make. "I'm not a politician. So, I won't personally take this matter up with them. And, I would advise against the Warlock Brotherhood intervening at that level. Like all supervising bodies, our Federation functions as a world of its own. Political intrigues run deep and dark in the swill. The representatives from the seven different vampire clans are merely marionette-puppets for powerful vampire clans."

Jane blinked. Who puts the word dangerous in front of vampire?

Alessandro looked at her briefly and refocused on Sanjay. "At the end of the night, the right and wrong of something do not matter to the Vampire Federation. The only thing that matters is whose fangs come out on top."

A chill ran up Jane's spine.

"I have friends," said Alessandro, "who I rely on for information. I only mentioned the Federation, so you understand that the Kryg regime is trying to legitimize their elite warrior force, and I find that fact," he paused dramatically, "unsettling."

"Very," said Donovan.

Alessandro's nostrils flared again. "Is that Sianen dragon wine I smell?"

Jane conjured a glass for his right hand while Cassie teleported a bottle to his left. Alessandro smiled. "I haven't had a glass of wine from the ninth for many years. Thank you." He took a sip and sighed. "Well, sister Jane, maybe your dalliance with a dragon isn't all bad."

Leos hissed.

Alessandro glared at Leos. "Be warned, dragon. If you, ever so much as singe a hair on Jane's neck, I'll suck you dry." His chocolate brown eyes blazed. "Slowly," he added. "And fry your scales for fun."

"I don't know about the rest of you," said Leos looking around, "but I'm tired of the bloodsucker's sideshow." He folded his arms.

Testerone all but shimmered in the room.

Leos continued, "Vampire, stay the hell away from Jane. She is a mature enchantress and not your concern."

Jane spoke. "I can take care of myself, Leos. Stand down."

Alessandro chuckled and sipped his wine.

Flames rippled up and down Sanjay's arms.

Cassie stepped forward. "Alessandro, please."

"Oh, fair one. How I miss your sweet voice. Your ..."

The three warlocks growled in unison.

Alessandro grunted. "All right then. Let me finish telling you the information I came to share. I have befriended one of the Kryg warriors. I will not divulge his name, but I trust him. He is less cyborg than the others. The thought of hunting children, even if they are warlocks, disgusts him."

The warlocks hissed. Leos grunted. Cassie's eyes softened.

"My new friend has sworn an oath to tell me when and how the Kryg elite plan to attack your family."

Merlina's chin jutted out. "Why would he do this? It would put him in great danger."

"Let's just say I made him an offer he couldn't refuse."

"Are the Kryg hunting elsewhere?" asked Jane.

"Not yet. The Kryg plan to attack your family first." Alessandro drank down the rest of his wine with a single gulp. "You need to look at your enemies, my friends."

"Agreed," said Donovan. "It's personal."

"Let's call the Kryg informant Deep Fang," said Jane.

They all looked at her. "You know Deep Throat—Deep Fang. Whatever."

Leos squeezed her hand. Merlina rolled her eyes. The others said nothing.

Alessandro grinned and bowed slightly. "I'll be back when I know more." His eyes locked on Cassie for a moment, and Jane felt the passion in his heart. Then, before anyone could move, the night stalker vanished.

All that remained of him was the smell of blood.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



“Meddle not in the affairs of dragons, for you are crunchy and good with ketchup.” ~ Anon.

Later that night, Leos greeted Jane at the mouth of his cave with open arms. “Welcome, young one.”

Jane changed after dinner. Gone was the loose sweater and frayed jeans. On went her push-up bra, lucky thong, silk dress, and high-heeled boots. All of her efforts lay hidden beneath her thick parka, which she hoped would be thrown aside quickly. She had wanted Leos from the moment she met him, and the way he had been protective of her at dinner made her want him all the more.

Not that she needed protection. She just liked the sentiment.

Leos escorted her inside his lair. As they stood before the blazing fire, he removed her jacket and inhaled deeply. That sound was one she would never forget.

Jane smiled.

As his amazing dragon eyes slid along her curves, a low grumble rumbled in his throat. When he hit the swell of her hips, he exhaled slowly. His eyes lingered for a moment. His right brow rose, and his Adam's apple went up and down. Slowly his gaze slid up to her breasts, peeking out of the plunging neckline of the silk dress. He stopped with an almost audible thud.

"Fuck," he said.

Jane raised her brow.

The dragon groaned. "You're killing me."

"I like the way you handled the vampire," she said.

"You are so beautiful. And so damn young."

Jane's heart trembled. "Not sure what to do with me, old man?"

"Dragon. I am a dragon. That is something you should never forget."

Jane flicked her hair behind her shoulders. "So, everyone tells me." She moved towards his sofa, feeling his presence behind stalking behind her, moving with the smooth agility of a panther. His heartbeat fast for her, and the scent of his dragon lust enveloped them. An erotic scent tinged with mountain air, alpine flowers, and fire sparked a hot response in the pit of her belly. This would be a night she would never forget. Her first dragon!

"This isn't a good idea," said Leos. "I invited you here to get to know you better. But, I think you have more in mind."

Jane sank into the soft cushion of the sofa and raised her chin. "Did I misread your cues?"

"No. You read me well." He cleared his throat. "Perhaps too well." He remained standing.

"What's the problem?"

Leos sighed. "Where do I start?"

"You don't like my breasts?"

He chuckled. "A poet could spend his life writing about your breasts." His eyes roved down to her chest. "So round. So firm. So high." He swallowed. "So luscious." He locked eyes with hers. "I would like nothing more than to hold them in my hands, caress them ... cherish them."

"Just caress?"

"And a lick."

"And?"

"Nibble. I would definitely nibble." His voice grew rougher.

Waves of heat cascaded through Jane's body. No one had mentioned dragons were sweet talkers.

"I'd play with your nipples until you screamed my name."

"You talk a lot."

Leos sat and took her hand. His breath warmed her face as he leaned towards her. "We. Can't."

Jane studied his face. "What would you do after I screamed your name?"

"What?"

"You said you wanted to fondle my breasts until I screamed your name. What then?"

"Then?" He traced her face with his fingers.

Jane's breath hitched.

"Then I would move my attention lower."

"Lower?"

"I would kiss my way down to your sex, memorizing every inch of your lovely body along the way."

"And, then?"

Leos closed his eyes. "I can't. We can't."

"Why not? You want me."

"Oh, I do. I assure you, I do. But we can't."

"Are you afraid you can't please me?"

"Honeysuckle darling, I would introduce you to levels of pleasure you've never experienced. I would arouse every part of your delicious body."

Jane touched his chest. Rock-solid. And hot. So damn hot. "Is it true dragons know things, do things, differently?"

Leos ran his hand through her hair. "I have lived three-hundred years, young one. I have made love to many, many women. So I do know things."

"Mmm."

"I also feel more deeply than other men, and that is why love-making with a dragon is different." He pulled on her hair, lifting her face for him to gaze upon it. "You would feel my desire, my pleasure, my response to your beauty as if it were your own."

Jane waited a couple beats. "And after you kiss your way down to my sex, where would you go?"

"To your clit." His voice was now rock-bottom bare.

"And what would you do there? I've already called your name."

Leos brushed her lips with his. "I would taste you. I so want to taste you. Be intimate with you. Become one with you. Mon trésor."

Jane licked his lips. "Tell me what you would do. I like details."

"I would prepare you."

Jane swallowed. "And how exactly does a dragon prepare a woman?"

"I am rather large."

"I can take it."

"Dragon large."

"Bring it on." Jane leaned in and nibbled his lower lip.

"I. Can't."

Jane pushed away from him. "You've got to be kidding me."

"I'm not. You are my mission. As much as I'd like to have wild sex with you, I can not."

"Is that all I am to you? A mission?"

Leos winced. "No, of course not. But, the mission has to come first. And besides all of that, you are so young."

"I'm old enough to care. Old enough to know you care. And old enough to know, that is all that matters." Jane straddled his lap and took his face in her hands. She leaned in and kissed him deeply.

His manhood pushing against her sex pulsed. He pulled her hips closer to him, nestling their bodies perfectly together as he returned her kiss with dragon passion. His tongue swept deeply inside her.

A stir in the air cooled Jane's witch senses like a bucket of ice water. She jerked away from Leos as a man appeared a few feet away from them.

Leos groaned. "Sol."

Jane pulled herself off Leos and looked at the intruder, a leaner version of Leos. The family resemblance stunned her. Bushy eyebrows loomed over sunken dragon eyes. In the middle of his square jaw, he had a divot just like Leos. He wore a nicely cut jacket over beige chinos, which made him look like an accountant.

"Leos," he said, nodding at his brother. His cold smile and hard-set jaw spoke volumes.

"You must be the enchantress." He glared at her. "Have you bewitched my brother to do your bidding?"

"We were just playing, though that's none of your business."

Sol's dragon eyes blazed with intensity. "I am Leos's older brother. I watch out for him. I warn you"

Leos groaned. "You're exactly ten minutes older than me, Sol. Give it a rest. And if you value your tail, leave Jane alone."

Sol breathed out noisily, and flames shot from his nostrils. "I won't have a witch destroy you, brother."

Jane snapped her fingers and teleported to face Sol. She raised a brow and gave him the darkest of witch looks. "Be careful, dragon. I am a powerful witch. You don't want to cross me."

She turned to face Leos. "Later."

As Jane vanished, she could hear Leos growling.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



"Life itself is the best fairy tale." ~ Hans Christian Anderson

Jane arrived home in a fluster. One dragon on a mountain top was exciting. Two had been way too much.

"Yah think?" said Vix, who had jumped into her arms at just the right moment to teleport with her.

"I have enough family trouble of my own. I don't need to be in the center of theirs."

"And you didn't stop to think dragon sex would bother the dragons as much as it bothers the witches?"

"Shut it."

Vix snickered. "You're falling for the lizard."

Jane's lips tingled from their first kiss. Deep, passionate,

and sensual, it had set off an operatic chorus of delight and a tingling hunger that ran hot through her whole body. If only they had not been disturbed. "He's okay," she said.

"Uh-huh. Remember Donovan's warning about inter-specie relationships," said Vix.

"Nothing that feels so right could be wrong."

"Donovan isn't the kind of mage to warn you off men or sex. Yet he warned you off the dragon."

"He's just not used to being my brother."

"Maybe."

"Leos is so damn hot. I want him."

Vix groaned. "Get a grip on your broom, witch. It was just a kiss."

"The best first kiss I've ever had."

The cat rolled her eyes. "You always say that."

Jane shrugged. She did tend to.

"When your feet land back on earth, you should answer your door."

"My door?"

Jane turned to look, and the familiar sensation of her heart being squeezed by an ice-cold hand caught her breath. Again?

"I need to talk to you." Alessandro's voice announced himself before he shimmered into view.

Jane released her wards. "Twice in one night?"

"What can I say? Once wasn't enough. Women don't usually complain about seconds with me." A sly grin spread across his square jaw.

"I'm sure they don't."

He leaned back into his bad-boy stance and swept his cold eyes over her.

"What?"

"You let the dragon touch you."

"So?"

"Dragons are big and powerful."

Geeze. Would the topic of big ever go away? The image of an enormous penis kept floating in her head. "What do you want, Alessandro?"

He sniffed the air. Jane sniffed the air but could detect nothing.

"First," he said, "I want to assure you that I will never tell your family about our private meetings."

"I appreciate that."

"In return, I expect you to let me know if Cassie's in danger."

"You already know about that. You obviously have good sources, so you don't need me as an informant."

"I have my spies, but they aren't as good as you."

"I'm not going to let you use me."

Alessandro folded his arms.

The slowness of banter with immortals drove her crazy. "Say what you have to say."

"The thing is, I can only tell Cassie is in trouble if there is a sudden crisis that spikes fear in her blood. Something smaller could happen, and I wouldn't know it."

"We can handle small. Trust us to keep Cassie safe. She is well-loved."

He shook his head. "Imagine for a minute that Cassie felt as if she were being followed. I wouldn't feel that. But, she might confide in you. That is the sort of thing I expect you to tell me about. That is the sort of thing that could be a marker for bigger trouble."

"You're really worried."

"I am."

"Alessandro, you need to let her go."

"Never."

"Alessandro ..."

"The Kryg are merciless. Though I expect their attack to

be direct, they will deploy scouts first. If we could interrogate one of them, we might have a chance of stopping the assholes."

Jane nodded.

"I expect you to send me a blaze." That was the vampire term for a supernatural dispatch that arrives in flames.

"I could try." But she wouldn't. If Cassie was in trouble, she would go to Sanjay and Donovan for support, not Cassie's former lover.

Alessandro's lips quirked on one side. The smirk looked ghastly on the vampire. It exuded cold malice that chilled her heart.

"What?" said Jane.

"I am not above blackmail."

"You wouldn't dare."

"I would."

Jane swallowed and thought about all she had to lose. "Okay then, be beastly. Tomorrow I'll let everyone know we meet privately. They'll be pissed, and you'll be blackballed from coming near Cassie. I won't let you use our relationship against me."

He chuckled.

"What?"

"I have something better to blackmail you with."

Oh, no.

"Venice," he said with a grin of satisfaction.

"If you ever truly cared for me, you would not divulge my secret."

"Trust me, Jane, I will only share your secret with others if you don't help me keep Cassie safe."

She glared at him.

"Your secret is safe with me."

Trust a vampire? Jane took a step closer to the night-

stalker. He smelled of blood, death, and determination. "You are a bastard."

"I've been called worse."

"Okay. I will be your spy."

Alessandro nodded. "Would you like to take a blood oath on that?"

Jane's throat went dry. "Do I have to?"

Alessandro gave her his darkest smile. "Not tonight."

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



*“Things aren’t always the fairy tale that you thought they were.” ~
Amy Klogouchar.*

Moonlight filtered through her Venetian blinds as Jane tried to drop into sleep. Even if she only got an hour, it would help her face the next day. But her mind kept wandering from one problem to the next.

Vix put a soft paw on her eye. “Stop turning, already. I need my beauty sleep.”

“My life sucks. Everything’s going wrong.”

“Pretty much.”

“I thought my HD potion was perfect. I thought it would make people happy.”

"Oh, it made people happy."

"Shut it."

After two seconds, Vix spoke, "I told you a sorcery shop is a stupid idea."

"Don't you dare say, 'I told you so.'"

"You're not cut out to be a do-gooder."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Helping people takes diplomacy."

"I suck at that."

"It also takes patience."

"I don't have any of that."

"And, tenacity."

"I have that, Vix. I will stick things out."

"And Leos? Do I have to remind you that you have a dangerous dragon breathing down your neck with an ultimatum?"

"Mmm. I want Leos." Jane felt her face flush.

"You have man trouble."

"That's not new," said Jane.

"This kind is."

"Meh."

"Let me spell it out, witch. You have a dragon heating your female bits, a vampire cooling your wits with blackmail, and a werewolf holding a part of your heart."

Ouch, Vix had actually mentioned Gavin, the one person she didn't want to discuss now, or possibly ever. Jane winced. "I like variety."

"You're stewing in a cauldron of a hot mess."

Jane bit her lip. "I'll sort things out with each of them."

"I'm sure they would love to hear that."

"One, two, three, done."

"Exactly how do you plan to do that?"

"I can't do anything about Gavin. I know you want me to, but I can't. I let him go. End of that story."

"I don't think your heart got that memo, darling."

"Close it. Two, I have to find some dirt on Alessandro, so he'll stop blackmailing me." She scratched her chin. "But to be honest, I don't mind him around. He makes me feel safe."

"Right. A vampire makes you feel comfortable."

"Vix, try to be supportive."

"Where's the fun in that?"

"And Leos ..."

Vix hissed. "You're not falling in love. Don't tell me that."

"I'm definitely falling in lust. Hey, who wouldn't? Aren't you just a little curious about sex with a dragon?"

"No."

Jane shrugged.

Vix lifted her chin. "But, things could be worse."

"How?"

"Alessandro could have shared your secret."

Jane grunted. "How the hell did the popsicle-man find out what happened in Venice?"

Boom.

Jane sat up. An explosion downstairs? Without thinking, she ran down to the store in her nightshirt.

Someone had broken through her wards and blasted her front door open. Shards of glass from the display window lay scattered all over the floor. The air smelled like a barrel of firecrackers had been ignited.

As a tingling sensation crawled along her scalp, the imprint of a powerful supernatural presence caught her breath. She looked around desperately for its source.

But, no one was there.

She walked over the glass to where her front door used to stand, taking in the scene with her witch senses. What magic could this be?

As she stepped out onto the sidewalk, a hand covered her mouth with a wet cloth. Jane lost consciousness immediately.

. . .

The town police arrived within minutes. They found Vixen sitting in the display case window with a forlorn look on her face. The local constable called Donovan. “We got trouble in Mystic. Your kind of trouble.”

“What happened?” said Donovan.

“Dial Witch has been bombed, and Jane Black is not here.”

“On my way.”

CHAPTER FORTY



“I am smiling because you are my brother. I am laughing because there’s nothing you can do about it.” ~ Anon.

“Brother, you need to get your head on straight.” As soon as the enchantress left, Sol pulled a bottle of Whisky out of his backpack.

“Your timing sucks,” answered Leos.

“You’ll thank me tomorrow.” Sol walked over to the bar and pulled out two glasses.

“You better hope so. Right now, I’d like to shove your tail up your ass.”

“She’s bewitched you. Don’t be a fool.” Sol handed him a glass filled with whisky.

"No, you're wrong. Jane's not like that."

Sol swirled his glass, watching light reflecting on the amber color of the Whisky. "It's worse than I thought."

"Worse? Or better? Time will tell." Leos took a gulp of his drink.

Sol groaned. "If I hadn't arrived when I did, you wouldn't have time to decide. Do I have to remind you how the Dragon association feels about their representatives engaging in lap dances with witches?"

"I wasn't going to settle for a dance."

"Your story is getting worse, bro. You're supposed to put her out of business, not mate her."

"Ah, come on. You're not going to tell me that if a sexy sorceress straddled you, that you wouldn't respond."

"Respond? Hell yeah. But I'd think before I did anything about it."

"You should have been a monk."

"Whatever."

The warmth of the whisky flowed through Leos's system. "My trésor," he whispered.

"Fuckin' hell. You did not just say that." Sol thumped his glass to his forehead. "She's a witch!"

"My heart knows she is my treasure."

Sol took a deep breath and released it slowly. "Leos, calm down. If your heart is declaring her as your treasure, it doesn't mean you need to hook up with her."

Leos looked at him as he was crazy.

"Leos, it doesn't work like that. If your heart declares her as treasure, it only means that she will become important in your life."

"I thought..?"

Sol shook his head. "No. Treasure can take many forms. Jane Black is mortal and a witch. She's also more than two centuries younger than you. So she is not—let me repeat that

—not a suitable match for you."

Leos groaned. "But my heart?"

"Wants her in your life. That is all." Sol took a gulp of his drink. "The two of you are destined to have a special relationship. But, I caution you not to mess it up by listening to your dick."

"I hear what you're saying about her being not one of us, but I feel so attracted to her."

"Think with your heart, Leos. It will guide you."

"Hmmm."

Leos's cell phone buzzed. He checked his screen. "It's a text from Donovan O'Reilly, the town's supernatural sheriff."

"What does he want?"

"He's looking for Jane."

Leos typed, "Not here."

"Dial Witch has been bombed, and Jane's missing," replied Donovan.

Sol had moved so he could read Leos's texts.

"On my way," wrote Leos.

"Got your six," said Sol as he followed Leos into the night.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE



“Hope will never be silent.” ~ Harvey Milk

As Jane regained consciousness, she heard a dripping faucet. Where the hex was she? Her eyes felt scratchy. Nausea rose in her throat from the smell of diesel oil and raw fish.

Was she on a boat?

She lay on a cot beside a small sink and stove. Her feet and hands were bound by plastic ties, but she managed to sit up. Oooh, not such a good idea. A throbbing pain struck between her eyes. Was it seasickness, or was she drugged?

Her mouth tasted like a sewer, and she wanted to pee. Badly. The indignity of the moment didn't bother her half as

much as the sheer audacity of the kidnapping event. Who the hell would be stupid enough to abduct an enchantress?

“Hey,” she called out. “Hey. Anybody there?” She yelled louder, “I need to pee.”

The boat rose and fell with a shuddering rhythm that made her stomach roll. No one answered her call.

Jane closed her eyes and summoned her magic. It was hard to create a healing spell when she needed to go to the bathroom so badly, but she had no choice. Anger burned deep inside her. Her kidnapper would pay for this.

Jane stilled her heart, pushing her energy to transport herself out of the boat. She tried again and again, but nothing happened. Next, she tried to create a portal but couldn't. Finally, cursing like a sailor, she lay back into the cushion on her cot. If she couldn't leave, she needed to make the most of being here.

She centered her mind and calmed her breathing. Slowly the queasiness of her stomach eased, and her head cleared enough to sustain a thought. A small success, but it was a start.

The boat shuddered as it hit a wave, and all the queasiness washed over her.

Biting her lip, Jane dug deeper and called on all the powers that be to telegraph a help message to her sisters. Surely one of them would pick it up even if it was weak.

You mess with one witch in the Black family, and you messed with all of them. But all she got was a cold dark silence. Her magic was blocked.

Jane had to escape, no matter the cost, and preferably before she peed all over herself. Slowly she stood up and hopped to the counter. She tried to open the drawer by the sink, hoping to find a knife to release her ties, but it was locked. She tried the next one and the next, but they were all

locked. Next, she yanked on the cupboard doors. They were all locked.

Jane sat back down on the cot. No knife. No sharp edges. What next?

All she could see through the portholes were the rolling, white-capped waves. Her nausea returned. If she managed to break the glass on one of the portholes, she would probably drown. Not the best escape plan.

What time was it? How long had she been under? Would her family miss her yet? Questions poured through her mind. What happened to Vix? Her gut clenched. She had to be all right.

Jane hated relying on other people, but they were her best bet. Surely, they would find her. Jane lay back to conserve energy and concentrated this time on Alessandro. "I need help!!!" She formulated the words in her mind's eye and projected them through the ether over and over again. But it felt like batting a tennis ball against a wall. Outside, the sun glistened on the rolling waves. Even if the vampire heard her, he couldn't come to her until night fell.

Jane laughed at her predicament. It was a bit like being on a game show that offered you phone calls when you got stuck. First, she tried to reach her sisters, and second her blackmailer. Who would be her lucky third?

What if she lit the stove? Would that get the attention of her kidnapper, or would she set herself on fire? She really needed Vix here to bounce ideas around. Maybe the kidnapper wasn't aboard. Maybe there was only a captain tasked to take her somewhere or to dump her into the sea? These thoughts weren't helping.

Jane wiggled her nose, trying to avoid thinking about the obnoxious smells. If she got free, she wouldn't eat fish for a month. Well, at least a week.

If she didn't get some help soon, she would pee her pants.

Squeezing her eyes shut, she focused her mind on sending a third message. Good things happen in threes. The power of three. It had to work.

She swallowed and dug deep, pulling her magic from every cell of her body. This could be her best chance. Should she try her Dad, who was exploring the Amazon jungle looking for a relic to help him with his sorcery? Or Gavin, who was busy learning how to be a werewolf? Or ... No, she couldn't summon Leos. As much as he lit her flame, he was too new in her life. Wasn't he? His face kept coming to her mind. All three men would do anything they could to save her. Of that, she was sure.

After three perfectly executed breaths, she summoned the dragon.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO



“Freedom is the oxygen of the soul.” ~ Moshe Dayan.

The family gathered at Jane’s place.

Cassie held Luna close in her arms as she stood in the center of the store. A tear rolled down her cheek. Who would dare abduct Jane? Who would do such a thing?

Merlina rested her hand on Cassie’s shoulder. “Try not to worry. Jane is our own steel magnolia. This is not her first trial. Beneath her whimsical personality, she has a warrior’s backbone.”

“May the Goddess protect her,” said Cassie.

Magic blazed in Merlina’s eyes as she mumbled a searching spell.

The warlocks prowled around them. Outside, Gabriel and his friends patrolled the area looking for clues. Inside, Donovan paced the floor, waiting for reports from his three squadron leaders. Sanjay studied every nook and cranny of every room in the Dial Witch building, looking for something, anything that could shed light on what had happened.

Pussy Nip, the head of the shifter squadron, arrived first. The werecat had the hard, black eyes of a predator. As usual black spandex covered her lithe body. "Another day in paradise," she said in a flat voice.

A moment later, Hank Henderson, the gargoyle and leader of the warrior group, strode through the door. He stood seven feet tall in his human form and had to duck to get through the doorway. An ugly battle scar ran from the edge of his right eye down his face to his neck. "Who did this?"

Donovan looked at his watch. "I'll wait for the wizard."

As if on cue, Zatara of Xanadu, a sorcerer known for his knowledge of arcane spells, stepped out of a flaming portal. His long, wispy, white hair had been pulled back into a ponytail, revealing a wrinkled face with stormy-blue eyes. He wore traditional, white wizard robes. Waves of energy rolled off of him. "I sense a disturbance in the realm," he said.

Donovan bowed to the old wizard and turned to face his commanders. "As you know from my text, Jane Black was abducted about ten minutes ago."

Pussy winced. "I'll send a team of weres to comb the forest and start my five best trackers looking for scents in town."

Cassie had never cared much for Pussy Nip. Partly because the wereleopard wore spandex so damn well, but mostly because she tended to drape herself on Sanjay every chance she got. But today, Cassie could have kissed her. The woman was all business when she needed to be.

Hank looked at the others. "My team will start with the top of the mountain and work down. We'll coordinate with Nip's stalkers."

Donovan nodded. "Good." He looked at Zatara.

The old man's eyes misted over. "Jane is a powerful enchantress. Unless she doesn't want to be found, it should be easy for us to find her. And yet ... I can't feel her presence."

Cassie's heart fell. "Someone could have stripped her of her abilities to communicate, or ..."

"Or, they could be hiding her in a place that blocks magic," said Sanjay, who walked over to stand beside Cassie.

Cassie held Luna closer.

Merlina stroked her baby bump. "Don't worry. Jane's like a cat. She always lands on her feet. If someone has imprisoned her, I'd worry about them. They don't know what a fighter they have on their hands."

Vixen left her hiding spot under Jane's desk and leaped into Sanjay's arms. She meowed loudly, and the room fell silent for a moment.

Donovan looked at his watch and then at his commanders. "Keep in contact. Good luck, everyone."

Nip transformed into her leopard shape and bounded out of the room with chilling speed, followed by Hank in full Gargoyle form. Zatara simply clicked his fingers and vanished.

That left the family huddled inside.

Sanjay spoke first. "I've contacted the Warlock Brotherhood. A team of warriors will arrive within the hour. I'll head over to The Brew and spread the word. I want everyone in town looking for Jane."

Cassie couldn't stay in the apartment and just worry. "I'm going to call a meeting for the local witches."

Emerald Jones, who walked in as the supernatural

warriors were leaving, listened to the family. Her eyes, the size of saucers, filled with tears. "I want to help. I know all the best gossip places in town. I'll see if anyone knows anything."

Merlina gave her a weak smile. "Thank you."

Donovan and Sanjay gave each other slight nods, the way they always did. Sanjay vanished.

Donovan created a portal, and he and Merlina stepped through it. Merlina's voice lingered in the air. "Stay strong, sister."

As Cassie and Em stepped outside the shop, a warm breeze made Cassie look up. Two dragons glided above them. They must have already heard the news.

Everyone who could help was helping. What more could Cassie do? In her mind, she spoke to her sister, "Hang tight, Jane. We'll find you."

Merlina was right about Jane having the backbone of a warrior, but it wasn't fair that this was happening to her. Jane's greatest fear was to be abducted again. Would she be able to survive a second time?

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE



"Silence isn't empty. It's full of answers." ~ anon

Darkness swelled around Jane, and in less than a breath, she found herself back in the dungeon of her nightmares. Fear swallowing her whole, making it hard to move, making it hard to even breathe. It pressed in on her. "Go away," she said to the darkness. "Go away." Her body trembled and broke into a sweat.

Jane gritted her teeth. This was not the time to be talking to her nightmare, no matter what her shrink would say. She needed to save herself.

In that instant, Jane decided to light the stove. It would draw attention. Of course, it would probably burn her ass, but that just might be the cost of her freedom. Closing her eyes, she struggled to stand inside her hell and pushed outwards.

Why couldn't she have regular problems? Like teeth whitening, or having to choose the color of her next flip-flops, or deciding whether to kiss a dragon?

The darkness within her mind receded, and Jane hopped to the counter. She pulled hard on the cupboard door beneath the sink and broke the lock. Inside, someone had left a pile of rags and a box of matches. Jane sighed. Sometimes a witch had to do what a witch had to do.

While the cold darkness inside her mind had ebbed, it had not disappeared. It was like an unwelcomed guest that refused to go, gnawing at the corners of her mind.

With trembling hands, she pulled the rags out of the cupboard and placed them on the top of the counter. The stove dial clicked as she turned on the front stove element. She said a silent prayer as the smell of gas filled the air.

There was no way she could light a match with her hands tied. Magic would have to do. Pulling all her magic forward, she imagined a flame and threw it onto the stove. It took three attempts to make a single spark.

"Take that, darkness. I refuse to be your slave."

Flames burst to life. She felt both happy and horrified. What had she done?

Whoosh! The flames caught the gas and grew.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR



“No man chooses evil because evil is evil; he only mistakes it for happiness” Mary Wollstonecraft.

Butch Briggins gulped as he faced Talon on the bow of his fish boat, *Bigger Game*. No one had ever considered Butch smart, but he knew there was no way in hell he could take on the mage. The damned witch from hell had eyes that glowed in the night. Briggins fought the bile that rose in his throat.

Talon dressed all in black looked like so many of the other damn mages in town. A wicked smile played across his narrow face and made Butch's insides queasy.

Talon played with a ribbon of blue flames that danced

between his two outstretched hands. He created an infinite circle of fire, heating the space between them.

Sweat poured down Briggins's face. His gut clenched. And, his chest felt like the devil himself sat on it.

The fine muscles of Talon's face tightened. "It's time for you to pay me."

Briggins opened his mouth and closed it again. "I ... I paid you."

Talon glared at him. "Not enough. You wanted me to abduct Jane Black, and I did it. I don't think you realized what a big ask that was, so let me explain it to you."

The fisherman's jaw shook.

"Jane Black is the sixth daughter of the sixth daughter of a powerful witch. Magic runs strong in her blood. She may be young in human years, but her soul is old and wise, and her power is significant." As Talon spoke, the flaming plasma passing between his hands turned red.

"I just thought she was a witch."

"And, Jane comes from a formidable family. The witches of the Magnolia Black coven do not take kindly to anyone tampering with one of their own." The mage turned his flame to yellow.

"I didn't think about her family."

"And that's not all."

Briggins held his breath.

"Jane's sister, Cassie, married Sanjay Kahn, linking the Black clan to a royal warlock family." Talon narrowed his eyes. "And Jane's sister, Merlina, married Donovan O'Reilly, a powerful warlock warrior who runs the supernatural police. He's known throughout all the realms for his battle strategy and prowess."

Briggins rubbed the sweat on his forehead with his arm. "I knew you could handle her."

"But can you?" The mage chuckled. "Do you understand what you've done?"

Briggins shook his head. He had been in tough places before and dealt with his share of assholes. He just had to tough it out. "Listen, man, I paid you. I agreed to a thousand dollars, and I paid you a thousand dollars. That was the deal. A deal is a deal."

Talon chuckled.

"I paid my debt to you."

"By now, all the witches, warlocks, and wizards in town are all looking for you. And more will come."

All the remaining color in the fisherman's face drained.

"By now, the shifters are stalking you like prey. There will be no place on land to hide."

Briggins put his hands on his hips and filled his lungs with sea air. "They won't smell me out here."

"And then there are Jane's two dragon friends. Have you smelled their fire in the wind? Have you noticed their shadows crossing the land?"

"Shit."

Talon chuckled.

Butch swallowed. "What should I do?"

"Make a new deal with me." Talon grinned.

"All I wanted to do was upset the witch."

"You should have thought about that."

"She played with my dick."

"Hell, I'd let her play with mine anytime."

"No, you don't understand. When we made our deal, you didn't want to know why I wanted Jane taken, but you need to know. Then you'll understand. Any man would."

Talon's mouth pinched on one side. "I don't need to understand. I need cash to get away."

"The witch gave my wife a magic potion to fix my marriage. Ever since I took the elixer, I've had a hard-on."

Talon grinned.

"At first, my wife could manage me, but I uh"

"Moved on. Humans are so predictable."

"It wasn't my fault. It was the witch's potion."

"Mmhm."

"I just wanted to scare the witch. Let her know she can't play with a man like me. Let her know that I can fight back. Regulars can fight back. That's all I wanted to do."

"And now you've caused a major supernatural incident."

Butch Briggins rubbed his forehead. "I'll let her go now. Hopefully, they'll all forgive me."

"Not a chance."

"We could put her on a lifeboat. Someone will find her."

Talon shook his head. "No. No. No. Let me tell you what's going to happen." His eyes blazed red, and he took a step forward.

Briggins's bowels loosened.

"First, you will give me all your savings."

Briggins shook his head.

"Oh, trust me, you will. If you want your children to live, you will do my bidding."

"Fuck, no."

"Fuck yes, and that's just for starters."

Briggins paused. "If, if I pay you, will you protect me?"

"First, you pay me."

"And then?"

"Then I kill her. Slowly. My way."

"No. I ... I don't want any part of that plan. I'm not a murderer."

"Too late, Briggins. You started this plan."

"But I only wanted her taken, not dead."

Talon shrugged. "And I wanted eggs for breakfast. Get over it."

"You're talking about a woman's life."

Talon shrugged.

"I can't let you do it."

Talon chuckled. "I love how regulars think they have choices in this life. Trust me, little human, you don't. I will kill her, and then I'll escape with your money to the third, where pirates are welcomed. Killing a witch who is too good to breath will bring me joy, and having vengeance on the Black family a reward, I suppose, but your dollars traded for diamonds will make my life easier."

"And me?"

Talon cocked his head to the right. "You?" He chuckled. "You, I will leave for her family. I'm sure your death will be delicious, but I won't be around to witness it. I'll hear your screams from afar. You'll become yet another story about a regular who dared to challenge a supernatural."

"You can't just leave me."

"I assure you, I can. Imagine what the warlocks will do to you? Or how about a dragon paramour? Not to mention the sister witches. They all have to make an example of you." Talon shifted his brows up and down. "Mmm. I'm sorry I'll miss that part of our story."

"Talon, I'll find you more money. I ... I don't want to die."

"How much more?"

"I have friends and family."

"You could rob the bank."

"That too. I'll do anything, anything you ask of me. Anything."

Talon looked around. "What is that smell?"

Butch looked at the mage's hands. "Your fire."

Talon extinguished the trail of flames dancing between his hands. "I smell gas!"

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE



“The bravest are surely those who have the clearest vision of what is before them, glory and danger alike, and yet notwithstanding, go out to meet it.” ~ Thucydides.

Leos and Sol landed on the beach and shifted to their human forms.

Donovan appeared beside them. “Anything?”

“Nothing,” said Leos. “This is my brother, Sol. Sol, Donovan O’Reilly.”

Donovan nodded at the older dragon. “We appreciate your help. Our shifters are hunting through the forest and mountain areas. Our seekers are trying to get a visual

through crystals. And our witches are doing what witches do.”

“What’s that?” asked Sol.

Donovan rubbed his chin. “Hell, if I know, and I’m mated to one. They chant, burn sage, and mumble, but don’t get me wrong, they get results.”

“But not this time?” asked Leos.

“Merlina has a strong psychic connection with her sister, but she isn’t picking up any traces of her. Cassie has been calling family. We won’t stop trying.”

A chill crawled up Leos’s spine. “Do you think one of their enemies orchestrated this situation to bring the family together to make you an easier target?”

Donovan’s Irish blue eyes turned steely. “We considered that. Warriors are posted around the sisters and baby Luna.”

“Good,” said Sol.

Leos nodded. “I can’t imagine why anyone would want to harm Jane. She is pure of heart. All she wants to do is help people.”

Sol shook his head. “She sounds naïve to me. Wanting to fix the town with magic? Any mage knows you can’t fix all the problems in the world.”

Donovan winced. “I hear you. Many of us feel that way, but Leos is right. Jane is different. Her intentions are disarmingly pure. The family has been watching her closely, hoping she won’t get too hurt as she matures. I wish now I had stopped her.”

“You think *Dial Witch* is the problem,” said Leos.

“Jane doesn’t draw enemies. She draws friends. So, I figure it has to be related to the storefront.”

Donovan’s cell phone chimed. He checked his messages and scowled. “Both shifter teams report they’ve found nothing.”

“It shouldn’t be that hard to track down her clients.

Emerald James organized her appointments, so she should have a list," said Leos.

Sanjay materialized. "Got it," he said, holding up a list. "Elly Briggins was her first."

"The woman she made the HD potion for," said Leos glancing at the piece of paper.

"There are more than a hundred names with 'HD' written beside them," said Donovan.

"Is there anyone who doesn't want a happy dick?" asked Sol.

The men continued reading.

"Taupe Halliday is on the list. I wonder what she wanted," said Donovan.

"She's not behind this," said Leos.

"You say that with great conviction," said Sanjay nailing the dragon with his orange stare.

The brothers looked at each other and shrugged. Leos spoke. "Halliday is a well-connected dragoness. She's the reason I'm here."

"What the fuck," muttered Donovan.

"She hates Dial Witch so much, she complained to our Federation."

"And they sent you." Sanjay finished his sentence. The warlock's eyes blazed with power.

Leos raised his hands. "Look, I didn't mean to get involved with Jane. My mission was to stop Jane. I've been trying to talk her out of continuing with the shop. But, like Donovan, I now wish I had acted sooner."

Donovan took a step closer to him. "Does she know you're on a mission?"

Sol expelled fire from his nose. "We can talk about this later, gentlemen."

"I'm no fucking gentleman. Never have been. And Jane's my sister." Donovan grabbed Leos's shirt and attempted to

pull him forward.

The two supernaturals glared at each other, and fissures of energy collected around them.

Sanjay spoke. "Do you smell that?"

Donovan released Leos. Leos put his hands on the warlock's chest and pushed him back.

"Smoke," said Sol wiggling his nose. "A gas fire."

Cassie clicked off her cell phone. She had called every stem of her family, and no one had any sense of where Jane could be. While she did the calling, Merlina organized the town witches. They created a pentagram and put a picture of Jane in the middle. Vixen sat next to it. Around the pentagram, the witches formed a circle and chanted.

It was great theater, but nothing was happening.

Merlina left the group and joined her sister at Jane's desk. "Maybe we need a new spell."

Em came over to them with two mugs of coffee. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Thank you," said Cassie as she took a cup. "Can you think of anyone who acted particularly odd when they came to Dial Witch?"

Em winced. "This is Mystic Keep. Everyone acts odd."

"Angry, or arrogant or ..." asked Merlina.

"The dragon guy sent chills up my spine. The fae man made my nose twitch. Old Mrs. Halliday gave me the creeps. But no one felt like a kidnapper to me."

Merlina narrowed her eyes. "By your descriptions, I would say you have magic in your blood, my dear. But, we'll deal with that later."

"Maybe it was someone linked to one of the clients," said Cassie.

Em winced again. "We would have to investigate more than a hundred people. I gave Sanjay a list of her customers."

Cassie nodded. "Good work."

Merlina lifted her chin. "What about the werewolves up north? Jane said they sent her away. Do you think one of them could have a grudge against her?"

Cassie shook her head. "Jane doesn't make enemies. I've never met anyone who didn't like her. She's got a Teflon coating when it comes to bad vibes."

Merlina pouted. "That's her true magic."

"We all love her," said Cassie wiping a tear away from her cheek.

The women sipped their coffee in silence for a minute.

"What was that?" said Em pointing to the front window.

A large shadow crossed the road, and a second one followed.

"Dragons," said Cassie and Merlina in unison.

"I feel something," said Belle from the circle. "I sense Jane. She's close by."

Cassie blinked. "She's calling us. I can hear her cries for help."

"I see her," said Merlina, her voice cracking with emotion.

"Where is she?" asked Em.

"She's engulfed in flames."

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX



“Love is the only way to rescue humanity from all ills.” ~ Leo Tolstoy.

Standing in the bow of the fishboat, Briggins and Talon stared at each other.

“You smell gas?” asked the fisherman sniffing the air. “I don’t smell anything.”

“Mages have a keen sense of smell. Trust me it’s gas.”

“I checked the fuel lines this morning,” said Briggins.

“Natural gas,” said Talon.

“The witch wouldn’t set herself on fire.”

Talon ran to the cabin hatch and broke the magic lock on it. Butch followed on his heels.

Dark smoke billowed into the clear morning air as they opened the door. Briggins coughed. "The fire extinguisher is on the wall to the right."

"No time..." muttered Talon as he entered the thick cloud of smoke.

Butch had seen many boat fires in his time. They had minutes, maybe seconds to stop the fire before the whole boat blew. His eyes stung from the rank smelling smoke as he reached around for the fire extinguisher.

Jane covered her mouth with a rag and chanted out an SOS to anyone who could hear her. Hopefully when they opened the cabin door her magic would escape and bring help.

If they opened the hatch.

In her mind's eye she focused her energy on all her sisters, hoping one of them would respond.

The hatch burst open and air rushed in making the flames on top of the stove explode into an inferno. Jane's magic flew into the wind.

Talon blocked her exit. His eyes blazed with fury. "You can't outwit me."

"Let me go."

"Never."

"You have no reason to hurt me."

"Can't you feel his darkness calling us?"

"You're insane."

A man she couldn't see yelled, "Where's the fire?"

"It started on the stove," she said.

"Talon, if you have any mercy in your heart, get her out of here before the cabin explodes," said the man.

"That would be too easy an end for her. I want her to

suffer. I suffered, but she was set free. That's not fair. It's her turn to feel pain."

Briggins couldn't believe the mage was still stuck on revenge. "You're an idiot. We're all going to die. Get out of my way, so I can put the fire out."

Flames danced all around Jane as Talon backed her into the fire.

Hoping she could gather enough energy to teleport Jane squeezed her eyes shut.

Talon grabbed her by the throat. "You're not going anywhere. I have a contract to kill you."

"Who?" Jane choked. "Who?"

"An enemy of your father paid me to kill you."

With a wooshing sound, a wave of water washed over the boat, rocking the hull and flooding the cabin. Butch turned to look outside. "What the hell?"

Another woosh, and another wave. "What's going on out there?" Talon asked.

"Wind and freak waves."

Talon locked eyes with Jane. "I guess you have to die sooner than I planned." His fingers squeezed tighter on her neck.

Leos hovered in his dragon form just off the stern of the boat. Briggins took one look at him and jumped into the ocean. The dragon shrunk into his human form, as he leaped onto the deck, and burst into the cabin. "Mon trésor!"

Jane was on the edge of losing consciousness when she heard his voice. The next thing she knew Talon's hands were ripped away from her neck and she crumpled to the ground.

Talon took a step back and threw plasma balls of fire at Leos. The dragon batted them away and lunged towards Talon. One of the fire balls ignited the back of the cabin.

“I don’t suppose we could talk about this,” said the mage.

“You stole my treasure. No one steals from me. Ever.”

“I have gold and fine jewels.”

“Talon, you are evil, and evil must be vanquished.”

“No ...”

Before Talon could say another word, Leos opened his mouth and breathed fire. Within seconds the Talon assassin mage was reduced to ash.

Leos lifted Jane into his arms and climbed up onto the deck where Sol hovered beside the burning hull. Leos leaped onto Sol’s back, and as they rose into the sky, the boat exploded.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN



“Why does my life never make sense?” ~ Jane Black

Sol, with Leos and Jane on his back, landed on the shores of Mystic Keep. The sound of sirens rang through the air. Leos carefully placed Jane who was still unconscious on the sand.

“Thank you, brother.”

Sol nodded. “Always.” He took flight.

The air shifted around them as Jane’s family shimmered into view. Cassie held Vixen in her arms.

Leos said, “She’s alive. Unconscious from the smoke, and from being strangled by Talon on Butch Briggin’s boat, but she will live.”

“How did you know where she was?” asked Merlina.

“We followed the smoke.”

As the family gathered around and held her hands, an ambulance drove down the beach and stopped beside them. Two uniformed medics rushed between the family members. “Move back,” said one of the attendants. “We need to assess her.”

The witches gave each other a meaningful look. Sometimes the medicine of regulars was the best choice.

The police arrived next, and stood by.

The medics put an oxygen mask on Jane and whisked her away on a stretcher. “We’re taking her to the hospital,” the chief medic said over his shoulder.

Merlina looked at the cop. “How did you know to come to the beach?”

A slow smile spread across his wide face. “When the supernatural posse calls, we answer.” He touched the brim of his hat. “O’Reilly, is there anything else you need me to do?”

Donovan gave him a nod. “When Jane gains consciousness I want us to interview her together.”

The chief’s eyes widened. “Together? I thought you’d go first.”

Donovan shook his head. “Together. This incident involves magic and regular folk. I think we should do it together. It’s time we joined forces, and ... it’s what Jane would want.”

Leos gave Donovan a thump on his back. “Later,” he said. He jogged down the beach heading away from town.

The rest of the family teleported to the hospital, as soon as the cops left by car.

Gaining consciousness was like swimming from the bottom of a pool with weights on your feet, thought Jane, as she slowly came to. Her family were on one

side of the bed, a regular doctor with a stethoscope hanging from her neck, on the other. And, the distinct scent of a dragon hanging in the air told her Leos was close by.

What a blessing it was to be alive, and to be so loved. Vix who lay by her side, nudged her with her nose.

The doctor checked her wrist pulse. “She has a nasty bruise on her neck and multiple burns on her body, but she’s going to be fine. These kinds of injuries take time to heal.”

The witches smiled.

As soon as the doc left, the sisters, took hold of Jane’s hands and started a healing chant. The burns on her hands and arms, began to heal, and the tightness in her lungs eased. She closed her eyes, and fell into a deep sleep.

A few hours later, Jane awoke to a touch on her shoulder. Donovan and the human police chief stood at her side. She told them about Talon and Butch, and what had happened on the boat. She told them about how she had harmed Butch, and she told them how twisted a soul Talon had been. Then she fell back to sleep. The healing process her sisters initiated coupled with the medicine from the hospital zapped her strength.

Jane woke the next day to a beautiful orange sunrise. She threw on clothes and checked herself out of the hospital. When she arrived at Dial Witch minutes later, Em greeted her at the door with a warm hug.

“I’ll put the coffee on,” the young woman said.

“Good. I need a lot. I’ve got to work on my HD potion. It’s caused too much trouble, and I have a few ideas of how I can fix it.”

“Coffee first.” Em took Jane by the shoulders and steered her to her chair.

“I could use an IV of it.” Jane laughed.

Vix jumped on top of the desk and swished her tail.

Em looked at the two of them as if they were crazy. “Okay, if you insist on working, you should know that the customers say HD Potion #2 is working.”

“That’s good news. It gives me a place to start from.”

The kettle came to a boil and Em filled the French Press. “You know, they haven’t found Talon’s body.”

Jane not wanting to explain that they probably never would, shrugged. The dust of his essence had washed out to sea.

Em’s eyes narrowed. “Why did that man hate you so much?”

Jane groaned. “Talon was a powerful, dark witch, well-schooled in black magic, and hired out as an assassin.” She could still feel his fingers around her throat.

“But why did he pick on you?”

“He was paid to kill me.” And he hated her for surviving the dungeon experience and choosing a path of goodness afterwards, but she didn’t say that.

Em stared at Jane. “I’m sorry.”

“Hate’s a horrible thing. It starts small and festers. Someone hates my father enough to put a contract on my head. But, he wasn’t alone in his hate. Butch Briggins also paid Talon to use his sorcery to trap me.”

“Elly’s husband?” Em poured coffee into two mugs.

Vix jumped onto Jane’s lap and purred. She had been nothing but loving since Jane’s return.

“Yeah. I really messed up my first potion.”

“I guess Briggins didn’t like his dick being played with,” said Em who perched on the edge of Jane’s desk.

Coffee spurted out of Jane's mouth as she laughed. "Yeah, I should know better than to play with strange dicks."

Em giggled.

"Anyway, the local witches made me pinky-swear-promise to consult my sisters whenever I offer a new potion."

"Uh huh." Em sipped her coffee and let the silence fall like a sledgehammer.

Jane smiled, and said nothing.

"By the way, Butch Briggins arrived back at his house, cold and scared, but otherwise unharmed. He said he saw dragons and sea monsters. When he heard you made it home safely he turned himself into the police."

"And he doesn't know what happened to Talon?"

"Nope. He said the witch was still aboard when he jumped ship."

"Well, I think I've had enough excitement for a while. It's time for me to get to work on my potions."

Vix howled and swished her tail. "Really? You really want to continue with the sorcery store?"

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT



"Families are like fudge, mostly sweet, with a few nuts." ~ Les Dawson.

The Black family's version of Taco Tuesday had always been a spicy affair, but since more of the sisters moved into town, it grew feistier. Jane picked up a decadent chocolate cake at the bakery and arrived at the manor on time for dinner. The dining room smelled heavenly, and Jane took a minute just to enjoy it, noting that everything smelled, tasted, and felt better after she had escaped death.

"Not funny," muttered Vix, who stalked away from her to hang out with the other familiars.

The family gathered around the oval table, and passed

bowls heaping with food. Jane had two empty tacos on her plate when the gong rang.

Everyone's faces turned to Jane.

"What?"

Gabriel chuckled. "It's usually one of your friends that uses the gong." He stuffed half a taco into his mouth.

Sanjay put down his beer. "I'll get it."

George the estate ghost followed. The rest of the family kept their distance but were close enough to watch. On the doorstep stood Sol with flowers and wine. Sanjay welcomed him in with his hand. "What a pleasure it is to see you. Please, come in. We are just having dinner. You are welcome to join us."

They walked into the dining hall together. Cassie thanked him for the flowers and waved him to the guest spot at the table. It had always been a family tradition to keep two empty spots in case of visitors. There were always visitors.

Sol looked at the platters of tortillas, the bowls of ground beef and beans, the grilled vegetable toppings, and lastly the heaping bowls of grated cheese. He bowed to the group and handed the wine to Sanjay. "It would be a pleasure."

"Are you a wine or beer man," asked Donovan who stood to nod.

"With tacos, beer. Definitely beer."

"Where's Leos?" asked Jane.

The black shields on Sol's eyes dropped, and his brilliant irises illuminated the room in bright colors. "My brother..." He shrugged.

What the hex did that mean?

Donovan plunked a bottle of beer in front of him, and Gabriel who sat next to him passed him the tortilla platter.

Sol took a long pull on his beer. "Aaah. Nothing like a cold one at the end of a day." He took three tortillas and passed the platter along.

Jane gave the dragon a withering witch stare. “Sol?”

He heaped the meat filling on all three of his tortillas, and passed the bowl along. Without looking at Jane, he replied, “Yes, Jane.”

“Why are you here?”

“Manners,” barked Merlina, giving her sister a glare that could blister the insides of a heavy-duty cauldron.

Sol chuckled. “One of the things I like most about Jane is her directness.”

“You are welcome here, as my guest, any time,” said Sanjay giving Jane a dirty look.

“Thank you, Sanjay. The next time you come to the ninth you must let me reciprocate your hospitality.” Jane winced. Leos was right, Sol was a diplomat through and through.

“But, I suspect this isn’t just a friendly visit,” said Sanjay.

Thank the goddess, thought Jane. Sanjay had the sense to move the conversation along.

A warm smile cracked Sol’s politician face. “Leos told me your family likes to eat first, and discuss business afterwards. I think that would be best.” He glanced around the table.

An awkward silence followed.

After his fifth taco, Gabriel spoke up. “I had a good time in training today,” he said. “I lifted two-hundred pounds, and completed a six-mile run with Jarod. He’s our best runner.”

“Funny, I heard you gave Sally a whopper of a kiss up at the Lookout,” said Jane knocking back a gulp of wine.

The warlocks looked at Gabriel.

“Yeah, I fit that in.”

Merlina jutted her chin out. “I’m planning on painting a mural on the wall of the nursery. I haven’t decided on the design yet. I favor bunnies, but Donovan said not in his house.”

Everyone laughed.

Cassie spoke. “Luna moved her soother from the top of

the dresser to her hand with a twitch of her nose. I'm afraid of what she will do next. I don't know how mother raised six of us."

Sol smiled. "She must be one hell of a witch."

"I've been summoned by the Brotherhood for a financial audit meeting. I'm not sure there's enough beer in the world to suffer through it. I think I should have stayed a rogue."

Cassie gave him a quirky smile and touched his hand.

"You have all the fun," said Donovan. "I interviewed two new recruits. With some training I think they will do a good job."

Jane listened but said nothing. Anxiety brewed in her gut.

After cake came the after-dinner drinks.

Jane sipped on sherry and waited. Immortals, and near immortals, enjoyed slowing everything down, but her patience could only hold-on for so long. Why the hell had Sol turned up at their family gathering? Were the tacos that good? And where the hex was Leos hiding? She hadn't seen him for three days.

Donovan spoke. "And now we talk, business. I have an update on the bounty hunters, but I think we should let our guest speak first."

Sol wiped his mouth with his napkin and stood. "Thank you, dear friends for welcoming me into your family gathering. As a diplomat I have sat at many dining tables, but none as warm and friendly as yours. Your love for one another is palpable. It lifts the spirit, warms the heart, and ..."

"Stop," said Jane rising from her seat.

Sol turned towards her. His dragon eyes locked with hers. A light stream of steam emanated from his nose.

"Get to the friggen point."

The dragon bowed. "When Leos and I circled above the town looking for Jane we saw many things." He paused dramatically.

Jane rolled her eyes. "The point, Sol."

"We saw one Kryg warrior running through the forest. He took shelter in a cave. Is that clear enough, Mistress Jane?"

Donovan stood. "And you're telling us now?"

"After Jane was safe, I went back and looked for the mutant, but I couldn't see him from the sky. I shifted into human form and tried to track him, but to no avail."

"Did he cover his scent?" said Sanjay.

"Not exactly. I followed his mechanical smell to a cave, and then to a stream, and it stopped."

Donovan plunked his cognac down on the table. "Maybe the rumor's true. The Kryg can mask their scent."

Sol grumbled. More steam rose in the air. "It's worse than that. I think they have the ability to change it all together, on a molecular level."

"Fuck," said Donovan.

Sanjay shook his head. "You said just one Kryg warrior. Right? One."

"Yes, just one. Trust me, I combed the mountain for signs of more. I am deeply sorry for your situation and would do anything I could to help you. But I came up with nothing." Sol sat down.

Sanjay nodded. "Thank you, Sol. Your allegiance means a lot to us, as we face one of the darkest times in our family history. Your report is important."

Cassie wiped a tear from her cheek.

Sanjay turned to Donovan. "What of your news?"

Donovan spoke. "Our shifters thought they caught the Kryg's scent, as well. They had difficulty tracking it. But now we know for sure, one mutant has been spying on us."

Sol's eyes blazed anger. "Hybrid assholes. Consider me and my brother your dragon shifters. We have our own missions to complete in other realms, but when summoned we will fight beside you."

"Where is Leos?" Jane asked.

Sol ignored her. "Should I leave now, so your family can make plans?"

Donovan shook his head. "You, my brother, are always welcome in our homes and in our planning sessions."

Sanjay motioned for the dragon to stay seated. "Tonight, should not be a night to make a battle plan. Tonight, we celebrate the return of Jane, and the blessing of being together as a family, once more." He lifted his cognac, "To Jane,"

"To Jane," everyone repeated with lifted glasses.

Jane felt her cheeks, as well as her heart, warm.

Sol looked to Donovan.

"I'll quickly finish my report. Our shifters are patrolling the town and surrounding area. Tomorrow I'm expecting to hear back from the three scouts we sent to other realms. As you all know, information is key to our success. We will win this battle. We must be patient."

Jane took a sip of her sherry and enjoyed the sweetness on her tongue. She looked at Sol. How many ways could she kill a dragon?

Sol looked at his watch and then at Jane. "Leos, is waiting for you," he said with a mischievous smile.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE



“The vampire is an outsider. He's the perfect metaphor for those things. He's someone who looks human and sounds human, but is not human, so he's always on the margins.” ~ Anne Rice.

Part of Jane wanted to run to Leos that very minute, but another part—the one called a brain—told her not to go to his lair. Since when did a man summon her! The nerve.

If Leos wanted to see her, he could have made that happen. She felt the distance between them growing in her bones.

Fudge this. He may want her to come to him, but that wasn't going to happen. He could damn well dragon up, and

visit her. She took another sip of her glass of sherry and noticed it had been topped up.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow she would face the dragon and sort out whatever it was that lingered between them. Tonight, she would enjoy being alive.

After escaping the inferno and the assassin Talon's spells all Jane wanted was peace. She finished her sherry and headed home.

As she settled under her blankets with Vix cuddled into her side, she sunk into a deep sleep.

It lasted fifteen minutes.

The smell of blood burned her nostrils. Jane groaned as she rubbed her eyes. The last person she wanted to see right now was him. Maybe if she pretended to still be asleep, he would go away.

"I know you're awake, Jane. I can tell by your pulse." Alessandro's graveyard voice sent shivers up her spine. She really needed to find nicer friends.

Jane rolled over to look up at him. "I'm so tired. Can't you just text me like normal people?"

The night stalker cocked his head to the right. "You've had a busy couple of days."

Jane sat up and ran a hand through her hair. "How much do you know?"

"All of it. I have my sources."

"Spies. They're called spies, Alessandro." She would give her collection of newts to find out who they were.

The vampire shrugged. "You survived well, my little witch. I'm proud of you." His sensuous mouth firmed into a straight line. "Except for the dragon part, of course. Beastly bastards, they are."

"You're prejudiced." Jane stood to face him. "He's really quite nice when you get to know him. Even the warlocks like him."

"I, am not a warlock." His dark eyes narrowed, and that distinct charcoal scent of his anger wafted towards her.

"I noticed."

"I have nothing against dragons. I'll have you know, I even have a few dragon friends. I just don't think they suit you."

"Why?"

"Because they dominate their mates. I do not wish to see you, and your beautiful spirit, dominated by anyone. A mortal's life is short, Jane. Do not waste it on a dragon."

Jane blinked. "I can take care of myself."

"Hmmm." The vampire folded his arms.

"What do you want?" Surely, he hadn't disturbed her sleep to give her advice on her crappy love life.

"I'm here to say hello."

"What do you want, Alessandro?"

"Information." His eyes twinkled. "As always."

"I sent you an update by text. I don't know anything more. When I do, I'll share it with you. And just to be clear, I'm not sharing because you're blackmailing me. I'm sharing because I know you have Cassie's wellbeing at heart."

The bloodsucker smiled. "It's my turn to share with you."

A shiver ran up Jane's spine. "What?"

"It is easier to show you, than to explain, my dear." He motioned towards the door. "Follow me."

Jane grabbed her sweatshirt and threw it on as she walked behind the predator, down the stairs to her shop.

With a dramatic flourish, the vampire whisked away a carpet that lay on the floor beside her potion table, revealing a trap door. Neither the rug or the door had existed when Jane last looked.

"What's this?"

"Come," said Alessandro in that deep Dracula voice no

woman wants to hear. Or maybe they do. He opened the trap door and climbed down a ladder.

In for a penny, in for a pound of magic. Not necessarily a good thing with a vampire. Jane followed him.

"I can see in the dark, but you'll need this." Alessandro handed her a flashlight. Scanning the area she discovered they were walking in a narrow dirt tunnel.

The smell of freshly dug earth tickled her nose, and the thought of worms made her cringe. There could be spiders too. "You excavated the ground beneath my shop?"

"Before you flip your broom, let me explain." He spoke slowly, as always.

"No, let me explain. This is my place. You have no right." His right brow rose slowly, but he didn't say a word.

"Okay. I get it. I have no choice. Where the hell does this tunnel lead?"

"That's an interesting question." A slow grin spread across Alessandro's handsome face. "When I was here for the great battle last year, I discovered a network of tunnels and rooms built below the town."

Jane felt her jaw drop. "The whole town?"

"Yes. Some of the tunnels need work, but basically you can travel underground from the harbor to different points of the inner city."

"Who made them?"

"They were made long ago. There are old wine bottles, boots and jackets left behind. My guess is they were used early in the last century by smugglers."

"Smugglers did use the harbor. Do the tunnels put me or the family in danger?"

"I have put a sturdy lock on the doorway to your store, but you might want to spell it as well. And then I think you will be safe enough."

Jane swallowed. "What are you going to use the tunnels for?"

"Now, that's an interesting question. Follow me, my dear."

After ten meters they came to a stone doorway, which groaned as he pushed it open. Inside, lay a rock cavern lit with torches. The air reeked of vampire.

"Your lair."

"When I'm in town this is my living room. My sleeping room is adjacent. It's quite comfortable for a home away from home. Of course, I'll have a workman replace the torches with modern lights and run water lines. But you get the idea."

"You really want this?"

"Cassie is my woman. You are my sister. I cannot leave you unprotected."

Jane blinked. "So, I'm going to have a vampire living beneath me." She said this more to herself than to the night stalker, but she knew he could hear her. "And I'm not supposed to tell anyone."

"Now, you've got it."

And she so wished she didn't.

CHAPTER FIFTY



*“A dragon/s heart burns fiercely, even in the face of evil ~ S. G.
Rogers, Jon Hansen & the Dragon Clan of Yden*

As the vampire disappeared in a cloud of dark laughter and smoke, Jane and Vixen looked at each other. Could things get worse?

“Don’t ask that,” muttered Vix. “Things can always get worse, when you ask that.”

“I can’t sit around and brood about a tall, dark and dead blackmailer. Damn him. I’m going to go see Leos.

“That’s sure to fix things.”

“It might make me feel better.”

Vix crossed her eyes. “I’m staying here.”

“Suit yourself.”

Leos prepared for Jane’s arrival by placing candles all around his lounge area, laying a rug on the rock floor, and uncorking the wine so it could breathe. Looking around, he decided everything was ready. Everything that is, but him. He had to find the words to tell her his truth, but he couldn’t find them.

And where the hell was she? She should have arrived an hour ago.

In the three-hundred years he had travelled the multi-verse at the Federation bidding, he had met many different kinds of women. Some held his interest for a while, and with a few he had found love. He had dabbled in marriage and survived better than most dragons his age. Then came Jane, and his whole world stopped.

Like Sol said. He was truly bewitched, but not by magic. By her. By Jane Black.

It was not sorcery that made him feel the way he did. It was her light, her spark in this world. Being with Jane was like being near the sun. Goodness shone from her soul. He had spent time with monks, sages, and priests who impressed him with their spiritual words and practices, but none of them had her connection to the light. His heart sang whenever she entered a room, and when she touched him, fire blazed through his blood.

Fuck, he was a goner. As in gone—head over scaly tail and back again—gone.

Leos knocked back a whisky without even tasting it. The booze burned all the way down to the pit of his stomach. How could he possibly tell her how much she meant to him, how much he loved her even though they hadn’t known each

other for very long, how he believed in his soul she was his treasure. That fate had pulled them together.

How could he say all that, and then say goodbye? He scrubbed his face with his hands. How could he be such a bastard?

Jane winked into place in front of him, looking beautiful as always. Dressed in jeans, a tight shirt that clung to her rounded breasts, and flip flops, she looked ready for a California beach. But that was one of the many enchanting things about this enchantress. She didn't care how she looked. Her beauty didn't come from bottles of makeup or expensive clothing. It shone from her soul. Crystal blue eyes blazed into his with a scorching purity.

"Mon trésur," he said. He felt his cheeks heat.

"Leos. I wasn't going to come tonight, but I found I couldn't help myself. I want to know what the hex is going on with you ... with us." She touched his face lightly.

"I have wine."

With a flick of her wrist she lit the candles.

He poured them each a glass and gave her one. "Come. Let's sit."

Jane followed him to the sofa. "Did something happen?"

"A lot has happened."

"I wondered why you weren't at dinner. You let Sol give us your report."

Leos nodded and sipped his wine. "I thought it best."

Jane leaned back and twirled her wineglass. "Give me the worst part first. I like it better that way."

"No, you deserve a full explanation from the beginning to the end."

"Leos, you don't have to explain anything to me. You saved my life. I owe you." She swirled the wine, watching the colors mingle, giving herself time to find the right words to

express her feelings. "You don't have to make excuses. We are beyond that. Let's be real."

Leos nodded. "No excuses. No made-up stories."

"Okay then. Let us drink and party. We won the day. Tomorrow we can worry about bounties, dragonesses, and cyborg vampires."

Leos grinned. "I wish my life could be that paperclip-neat."

Jane touched his cheek again. "Just tell me."

"You are my treasure. I know we have known each other only for a short time, but I know my heart. I know my soul. You are my treasure."

Jane put her glass down on the table. "Leos."

"Let me speak."

Jane's lips trembled, and he wanted to kiss them and take away all her fears, and misgivings, to take her to a level of passion where she could only think of the two of them, to hear her call his name.

Leos swallowed. "When I am with you, I feel lighter than air. Your laughter fills my ears, your smile warms my heart, your sense of grace humbles me to the bone. You are like a ray of sunlight. You cannot be controlled, or contained. You reflect all that is good in this world."

Tears welled in Jane's eyes. She reached for his hand and their fingers locked. They said nothing for a minute, as their hearts beat together as one.

It was a minute in time he would never forget.

"Jane, I wish this were easier to explain. At first, I thought my feelings were calling me to mate with you."

Jane blinked.

"But I was wrong. You are much younger than me, much purer than me, and mortal. We are not meant to mate."

Tears brimmed in Jane's eyes. "But we want each other."

"I won't deny that. As a man I burn for you, but we can't."

“Yes, we can.”

“No, my young one. If I were to take you, in that way, it would sully what we have – a pure relationship of the heart and soul. I believe I have been tasked by the universe to teach you how to control fire.”

“Leos, I don’t need to be pure.”

“But fate has declared we must remain so. Sometime, I will tell you about dragons and their treasure, but not tonight. Tonight, before I go, I want to enjoy being with you.”

“You’re going?”

“I don’t want to go. You must know that,” he said.

Jane put a finger to his mouth. “No excuses.”

“I have been called back to the ninth. As I am serving a sentence, I cannot refuse. If I did, I would not only bring dishonor to my clan, I would be hunted and punished.”

“How long is your sentence?”

“Thirty more years.” He couldn’t stop steam from escaping through his nostrils. “Nothing for me, half a lifetime for you.”

“Okay. So, we can’t have sex.”

His bushy brows drew together. “I cannot ask you to come with me to my realm, or wait for me in yours.” He grumbled. “And, I will not sully the purity of our relationship with physical passion. What we are to each other is too important in the big picture.”

“Leos, I care for you. I truly do, but humans don’t fall in love as quickly as dragons. I have the hots for you. You have not broken my heart. Please, don’t carry that burden.”

“I understand.”

“Is it possible you will come back to my realm soon?”

“Fate will bring us together again.”

The guttural sound of a night creature clearing his throat made both of them look towards the entrance of the cave. “It

is time. You must come with me,” said a monster of a beast, half-human-half dragon.

Leos turned to Jane, “He’s a Federation Messenger. Like I said, I cannot refuse the summons. I have to go.”

“Now!” said the beast.

Jane stared at Leos.

“Remember,” he said to her, “I will carry the memory of you and your light with me always.”

Men! Jane shook her head and vanished into the night.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE



“She was a story, not an epilogue.” ~ Seanan McGuire.

The sun came up the next day, despite Jane’s bad mood. She had no illusions about her feelings for Leos. She had fallen deeply in lust, not love. And now, she was stuck in a state of unsatisfied lust-hell. Did that make sense? She laughed.

Vixen ignored Jane’s ranting and focused instead on cleaning her coat.

They made their way down to the store just before nine o’clock. Gabriel and his friends had repaired all the damages caused by the explosion with a little magic. Everything looked good in her world.

"Time to get back to normal," she said to Vix who jumped up on top of her desk.

"Normal." She swished her tail.

"Well our version of it," said Jane.

"I told you, *Dial Witch* is a stupid idea." Vix's whiskers twitched.

"Urrgh. Don't start with the I-told-you-soes." Jane handed her a piece of dried smoked salmon.

"Where's the fun in that?" Vix munched on the fish.

Jane leaned back in her office chair and looked at the front door. The shop would open soon. A new day, a new beginning, or so she hoped. Jane looked up at the water stain on her ceiling. "Dial Witch is a good idea, Vix. It just needs time."

The cat licked her lips. "Yesterday you promised you would run new potions by your sisters, but I know those words didn't come from your heart."

"What's your point?" Jane shook her curls behind her shoulders.

"You want to run this sorcery store your own way."

Jane shrugged. "They have places for difficult familiars. That's all I can say. If you don't like the way I roll, we can make adjustments." She tried to look stern.

"Fair enough." Vix licked her paw.

Jane twisted her lips. "Should we talk about our issues for a change?"

"Where's the fun in that?"

"You think I deserted Gavin."

Vix lifted her chin, and said nothing.

"He's still in my heart."

Vix's eyelids slid to half-mast.

"I couldn't take on the whole Northwest werewolf pack," said Jane.

"Maybe."

“What did you expect me to do?”

“For starters ...”

Jane put up her hand. “Stop. I shouldn’t have asked. You don’t get to tell me what to do. I’m the witch, here.”

Vix rolled her eyes. “Then why did you ask?”

Jane tilted her head.

Vixen put a soft paw on her hand. “For what it’s worth. I agree with you taking leave from the wolf pack.”

Jane felt her shoulders relax.

“You couldn’t take them on.”

“No, I couldn’t.”

“What I don’t like is the way you keep pushing Gavin out of your heart.”

“I do not.”

“You do. Everytime his image flickers in your mind, you push it away.”

“Listen. I did what I could for him. I found him werewolves who can help him transition. I had to let him go.”

“He almost died for you.”

“Don’t you dare go there. You know I feel guilty as hell.”

Vix licked her paw. “You have feelings for him.”

“Shush up.”

“You know, I know your feelings as well as your thoughts. He’s a good man, Jane. He may be a regular, but he is a good man.”

“Vix, I can’t talk about this. I feel too ...”

“Muddled.”

The locked door burst opened with a gust of wind and Taupe Halliday appeared. “Good Morning.”

Jane stood. “And a Good Mornin’ to you, too Ms. Halliday.” She bowed. “Is there something I can do for you?”

The regal dragoness glanced around the room. “No. I mean yes.”

Jane waited.

"It seems the young Leos Daragon is quite taken with you."

"Yeah. He's so taken with me, he left the realm." Jane gave her a wry smile.

"He had no choice, dear. Surely you understand dragon matters are more important than ..."

The shifter waved her hand around the room.

Jane shrugged. "It's fine, Ms. Halliday. We hardly know each other."

The older woman's eyes softened. "Yet, young Leos believes you are his treasure."

Good grief. Not again. If she never ever heard the word treasure again in any language, it would be far too soon. "Witches don't give away their hearts easily."

"So, I hear. But that's not why I'm here."

Jane waited.

"Leos convinced me that if I got to know you better, I would like you. He believes that your plans will help the town and that we need to give you a chance."

"That couldn't have been easy."

"Leos can be very convincing."

"He offered you something."

The mighty dragoness blinked. "Perhaps. But You must understand that what happens between dragons, stays between dragons. All that you need to know is that I'm prepared to let you live ... for now."

"Uh, thank you."

"But ..."

Her word hung in the air like the blade of a guillotine. Jane readied her defences.

"Oh settle down witch. I swore I wouldn't hurt you. You don't need to get your broom all twisted."

"Funny." Jane relaxed.

"I have one request."

“And what is that?”

“I want to get to know you better. Leos tells me I need to come into this century and you are the perfect person to help me with that.”

“Okay,” Jane said. So not okay, Jane thought.

“Do you play gin rummy?”

“Uh, I think I played with my grandmother once. It’s with cards, right?”

“It’s settled then. Thursday, tea and rummy in my garden at six o’clock. Don’t be late. You never keep a royal dragoness waiting. At least, not if you want to live.”

Without waiting for a response, Taupe Halliday turned and strode out the door. As it closed quietly behind her, Jane threw her arms up in the air. “I can’t believe my life. I’m letting a dragoness steal my time, a vampire blackmail me, and my sisters meddle in my business.”

Vix laughed. “And your love life sucks. Don’t leave that out.”

“What the hex did I do to cause all of this.”

“You opened a stupid store.”

A Note From Jo-Ann Carson

I hope you enjoyed reading Jane’s story as much as I enjoyed writing it. It truly is my best book so far, and I couldn’t wait to publish it.

I really love how Jane wants to help others, no matter what obstacles the world throws at her. She may be naïve, but she’s also delightful. And, hey, the noble dragon isn’t bad either.

In the second story, *Dial Sorcery*, a supernatural asks Jane to help him break a curse. Of course, she can’t refuse a good challenge, or a handsome man, so she tries her best to fix his problem. I’m having fun with this one. Many of the same

characters reappear. The blurb for the story, the first chapter, and buy links, follow.

If you would like to help me with my journey as a writer, please leave a review for this book on whichever sales platform you purchased it from, and tell your friends about my tales. Good reviews help me sell books.

You can find my social media links, free books, and other information about me on my website, <https://www.jo-anncarson.com>. You can catch my latest news, along with contests, and fun stuff in my monthly newsletter, <https://jo-anncarson.com/free-book-offer/>. If you subscribe to my newsletter you get, *Spellbinder*, the first book for the Mystic Keep World. This origin story is only available to subscribers.

Warmest Regards,

Jo-Ann

p.s. If you fell in love with some of the side characters, here is a quick guide to find books about them:

Alessandro the Vampire – The Perfect Brew Trilogy

Cassie Black and Sanjay Khan – The Perfect Brew Trilogy

Merlina Black and Donovan O'Reilly – Three Reasons to Not Kiss a Warlock

Ophelia Black - Spellbinder

Oscar – A Blind Date for Christmas

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I am truly blessed to have so many talented people in my life.

Please note, that while many people helped me create and polish my story, the errors, are all my own.

DIAL SORCERY BLURB

Dial Sorcery

Trouble brews when a powerful enchantress fights a curse.

When Grig the gargoyle asks the enchantress Jane Black to break a curse, her successful storefront for all-things witchy runs into trouble. Using arcane scripts, Jane casts intricate spells to shatter the web of black magic entrapping him, but as they work through the process together, Jane's sorcery creates unexpected consequences in town.

While the local wizards, shifters and mages turn against her, her usual allies offer their assistance. There is Leos, a smoldering dragon enforcer; Alessandro, a blackmailing vampire with his own agenda; and her loving family of witches and warlocks who take great delight in swishing their brooms and swords in her business whenever they can. Adding to this pandemonium, her snarky familiar, is giving her the silent treatment.

Jane, true to her personal code, is determined to make things better for everyone, or die trying.

Is Jane's magic strong enough to crack the curse, and

DIAL SORCERY BLURB

mend the town's mojo? Will her full-service sorcery, survive this scandal? Read Dial Sorcery to find out.

Dial Sorcery is the second book in the Dial Witch trilogy, set in the Mystic Keep world, which chronologically follows The Perfect Brew trilogy. It can easily be read as a standalone story.

If you like urban fantasy you'll enjoy this new story about Jane and her zany witch store.

Buy Links can be found on my website: <https://joannacarson.com/books-5/dial-witch-trilogy/>

DIAL SORCERY – FIRST CHAPTER

“Thousands of years ago, cats were worshipped as gods. Cats have never forgotten this.” – Anonymous

“Balloons?” Vix the cat rolled her eyes. “Have you lost your mind?”

“I love balloons. They make me happy.” Jane tied one with a long white ribbon, and used her magic to fix it to the ceiling behind the storefront window. The balloon dangled with two others, below a banner, which read, *‘Dial Witch – Your one-stop shop for sorcery.’*

Vix leaped into the air and swatted the balloon with her claws. It made a loud popping sound and deflated pieces of Pepto-pink plastic fell to the floor. “Balloons are stupid.”

Jane shook her head and looked at the ceiling. “You’re being a naughty kitty. Again.”

“Your point?”

“You, my family and all the magic folk in town told me I couldn’t make a success of a magic store, but I did. I’m celebrating our six-month anniversary in style, whether you like it or not.”

“With balloons.” The chubby, orange cat lowered her eyelids to half-mast and swished her tail. “You need more sex.”

Jane laughed. She couldn’t argue that.

The front door opened wide letting in a gust of cold, winter air. Grig, a gargoyle with facial features so grim they would give Dracula nightmares, stood on the threshold blocking the sun.

Jane recognized him at once, as they both belonged to the town’s Mah Jong club.

“Come in. Come in. It’s cold outside,” said Jane.

“I’ve got a problem,” he said.

As he didn’t move, Jane walked over to him and took him by his hand. “That’s why I’m here.” She led him to the client’s chair, which sat opposite her desk at the back of the store. “Have a seat.”

Grig folded his seven-foot body into the chair, which grew to accommodate him, but creaked all the same. “I’m not sure,” he said.

“You’re not sure you have a problem, or not sure you want to tell me about it?”

“Oh, I have a problem.” His breath smelled of mints.

“Then tell me about it. I’m a good listener.” Jane picked up a pencil.

“Hmm.” He folded his hands in his lap and looked at them as if they held the key to the secrets of the universe. “I know you’ve been using your magic to help the regulars in town.” He meant the non-magic folk.

“Yeah, but I’m capable of helping shifters, as well. Hey, I’ll even give you a special deal, because you’re my friend.”

Grig winced as if that was just too much information, and looked around her shop.

Jane squirmed. Not many supernatural beings, other than her family, visited her at work. Having Grig scrutinize her

stuff made her feel exposed. It was like having her underwear drawer checked out. No matter how pretty a thong is, it's still a thong, she thought.

She followed his eyes as he took in the shelves of arcane magic books that lined one wall. Then his attention flowed over to her cauldron, which sat on a work table in front of a stained-glass window. A potion of herbs for good skin brewed on low heat.

Grig's nose twitched as he caught the smell of secrets and magic that tinged the air. "Nice. Your place is nice, Jane."

"Thanks. That's quite a compliment coming from you." Gargoyles were a stone-faced lot who never lied, or wasted time on praise.

As she waited for him to say more, she studied his appearance. He wore a navy-blue parka over a white cashmere sweater and blue jeans. A sailor's, wool toque covered his bald head. But it really didn't really matter what he wore. Nothing could hide the threatening lines of his face, or the magic in his hooded, dark eyes. He was a dangerous sentry, and not someone to mess with.

"They told me I shouldn't talk to you," he said.

"Oh?"

"They said nothing good could come from consulting an enchantress."

She smirked. "Who told you that?"

"Everyone."

"I'll do whatever I can to help you."

"You're my last option."

"I've been called worse." Jane leaned forward. "What's your problem?"

"I've been cursed."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jo-Ann Carson
~A little bit of magic~



Jo-Ann Carson is an award-winning author who loves the magic of storytelling. She creates unique characters, and places them in fast-paced plots, to tell stories about love, friendship, and family.

In her latest trilogy, Dial Witch, the enchantress Jane Black offers spells, potions and tarot card readings to the regular folk in her small town and finds herself in a cauldron of hot water. The cast of characters includes a drool-worthy dragon who wants to light her fire, a blackmailing vampire with his own agenda, two over-protective warlock brothers, and a snarky familiar. Not to mention her meddling sisters, and the fact that none of these characters want her to run a magic and sorcery store.

To date, Jo-Ann Carson has published 24 titles. Her last three series are The Gambling Ghosts, Ghost & Abby Mysteries, and The Perfect Brew. All her books with their buy links can be found on her website.

A firm believer in the magic of our everyday lives, Jo-Ann loves watching sunrises, walking beaches near her home in the Pacific Northwest and reading by a crackling wood fire.

Website / Goodreads / Bookbub



ALSO BY JO-ANN CARSON

All buy links can be found on my website (<https://www.jo-anncarson.com>)

Dial Witch Trilogy (2021)

Dial Witch

Dial Sorcery – in progress

Dial Magic – in progress

The Perfect Brew Paranormal Cozy Mystery Trilogy (2019-2020)

The Perfect Brew

A Double Shot of Magic

A Triple Shot of Trouble

Mystic Cove Universe (2019 -)

A Blind Date for Christmas

Three Reasons Not to Kiss a Warlock

Murder for Christmas (a gothic suspense) (2018)

A Ghost & Abby Series (paranormal mystery) (2017, 2018)

Midnight Magic

I Messed Up Christmas

Death by Seance

Death by Tarot Card

The Gambling Ghosts Series (2016, 2017)

(sweet fantasy, adventure and romance)

A Highland Ghost for Christmas, Novella #1

A Valentine's Ghost for Valentine's Day, Novella # 2

Confessions of a Pirate Ghost, Novella #3

The Biker Ghost Meets His Match, Novella #4

The Vancouver Blues Series

Steamy Romantic Suspense:

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