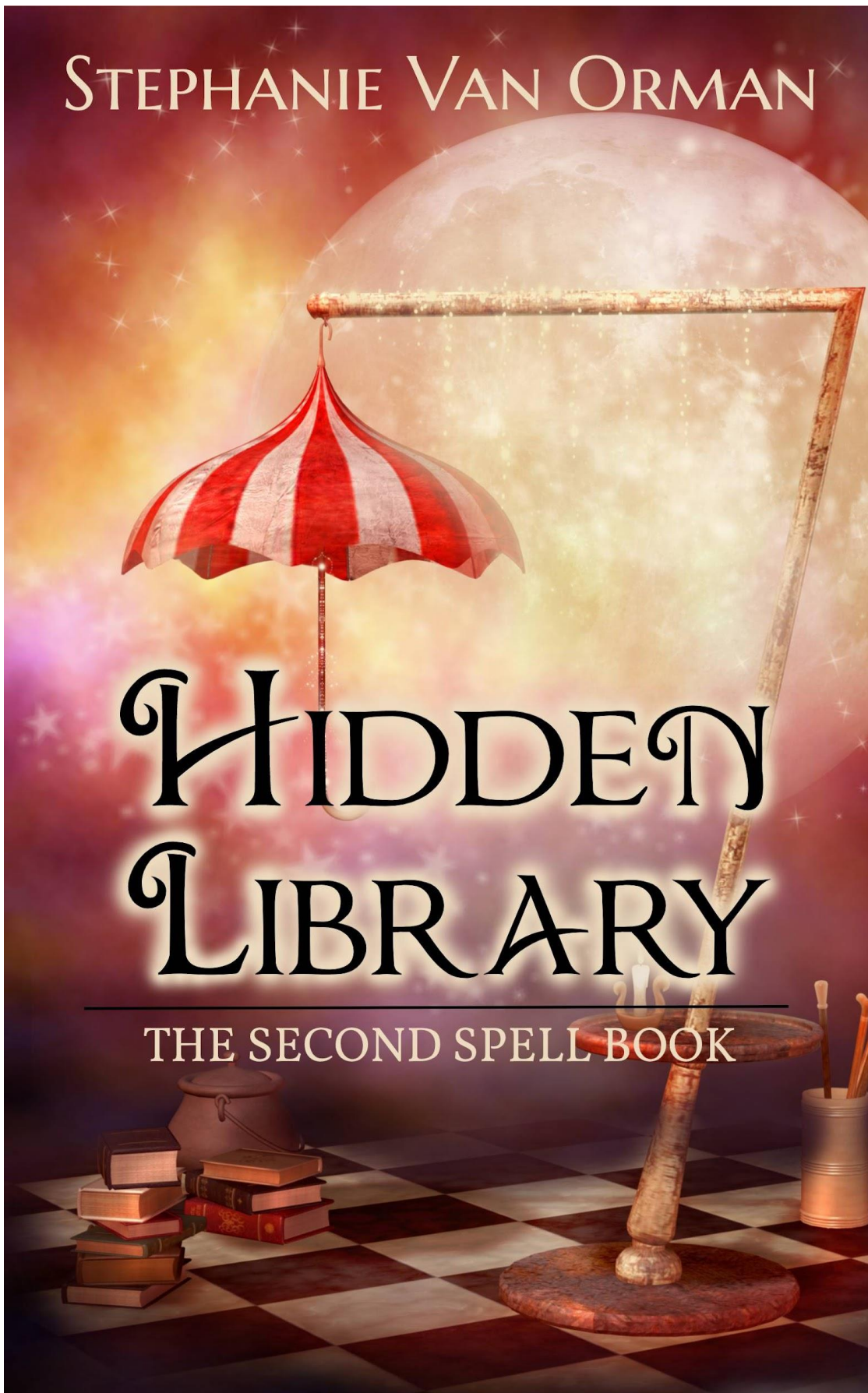


STEPHANIE VAN ORMAN

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THE SECOND SPELL BOOK



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If Diamonds Could Talk (Sequel to *His 16th Face*)
Rose Red
If I Tie U Down

Hidden Library
The Second Spell Book

By Stephanie Van Orman

Dedicated to my friend, Kristy, and the kids and cousins from my hometown.

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Chapter One

Hidden Library

Veda

“You look beautiful when you dance.”

My back straightened when I heard those words from the other side of the practice room. I hadn’t heard Antony enter. If I had, I would have stopped practicing. I glanced at the stereo system in the corner. My music had not been loud, yet the gentle melody had covered the sound of his arrival.

“I didn’t hear you come in,” I said, lowering my heels so they touched the mat under my feet.

“Your pirouette is really coming along. Four turns now?”

My skin burned. I had secretly mastered doing four turns, but I hadn’t done it that day. How long had he been watching me, and for how many days?

“You might announce yourself before coming in,” I said coldly.

“You would stop dancing if I did that,” Antony said, standing behind me, so we could see ourselves together in the practice mirror.

The sight was very nostalgic for me. Once, we had been children in the same dance class. He had stopped dancing in his late boyhood, declaring it hurt his masculinity to prance. As he stood behind me in the present, he regretted the decision because it meant he could not dance with me.

I, on the other hand, rejoiced. When he quit, Antony had not known how, one day, he would fumble and grasp for opportunities to interact with me. His regrets about quitting ballet were unfounded. No contact, no closeness would ever draw me to accept a romance with him.

His reflection in the mirror showed his features and his mood. The light in his eyes showed boiling lust, bubbling, and overflowing. For that moment, he could not conceal his feelings. That indescribable feeling of wanting what he could not have might have meant something wonderful to me on another’s man’s face. On Antony’s features, half of which mirrored mine, it was horrifying. He could have been my brother instead of my cousin.

His blue eyes settled on my brown ones in the mirror as he placed his forefinger on his temple and cradled his elbow in his other hand.

The sight of his hands on himself and not loose or poised to touch me helped me relax ever so slightly. “What are you doing here, Antony? I thought you only came to the school to play chess and that’s over until the fall.”

“You know the school feels like home to me,” he said.

I didn’t know that. The school was like an extension of home for *me*, but that had never been true for him. The truth was that he knew I would be practicing my ballet and he came deliberately to see me.

His hands remained where I could see them, but I could have sworn I felt something brush up against my thigh. He was standing apart from me. He couldn’t have brushed up against me accidentally. Nor could he have touched me with his hands where I could see them, but the contact continued like two fingers moving up the side of my thigh to my hip.

“Don’t touch me,” I hissed with a glare.

“I’m not touching you,” he insisted, holding his hands out where I could see them.

The feeling did not stop, and I felt a whole hand grasp my waist.

“I have to go,” I said, sweeping the air around me to brush off the invisible fingers. The feeling dispersed as I moved away from the mirror. I grabbed my bag, which was sitting just inside the door.

He rushed after me. “Wait. Why are you angry?”

“You know what you did. Trying your magic on me.”

He stopped and gazed innocently at me. “I didn’t do any magic.”

“You’re better at magic than you are at lying,” I said, moving past him.

He called after me, but the blood pounding in my ears prevented me from hearing him.

The doors fell shut between us and I stopped in the atrium of the school and contemplated wearing my ballet slippers outdoors just so I wouldn't have to pause to remove them. I hated the idea of ruining them on the concrete outside. I commanded myself to calm down and sit on the stairs. Slowly I worked my way out of my slippers. I had other shoes in my bag.

Alone, with the air echoing around me, I told myself a story like I was casting a spell. I reminded myself that Antony was my cousin. I had played with him as a child. I had to be misinterpreting his signals. He couldn't be dangerous. He had never hurt me, not even in a game, and I had known him all my life. I told myself a story about him letting me win at chess, even though he was so good at chess that he rarely lost. He never beat me. Not because he couldn't, but because he wouldn't. When I was around, he was like a tiger with no roar, no bite, and no empty stomach to fill.

That was, until recently.

The story, like a spell, almost worked, but the calmness was interrupted by the contrast of his more recent attitude. Something had broken inside him. It was almost as if he had realized he no longer needed my consent. He looked at me, felt something catch fire inside him, and proceeded without asking for permission. Our interaction in the practice room was a sample of the way he had begun making my skin crawl. I rubbed my thigh. My skin wouldn't stop crawling.

In our world, there was a grand minority of men who could work magic. Antony was desirable based on scarcity. He never had to be on his best behavior, because he was handsome and his magic was rare as a blue moon. He thought all witches suffered, waiting for the moment they could pair up with a mage because that was the only way any of them could partake in a romantic adventure that wasn't doomed to end. After all, how much fun could it be to date an ordinary young man when there was a boy who could build a fairy tale around you, make you a princess, and give you your happily-ever-after?

My family made magic spell books, where if a reader opened the cover, they would be drawn into a world of magic and starlight. Inside the book, you could be a knight single-handedly fighting an army and as long as you didn't drop your sword, you would win. It could be a romance that left the reader breathless, and slightly insane because the love was levels above what could happen in real life. The story could let you play a game or solve a puzzle or have an adventure. Anything.

I wanted to write the spell books treasured by the Fastille and Borage families. They were kept in the hidden library in our family's school. The Borage School for Deportment was not a school where classes in magic were held. It was a finishing school for the children of the rich who were not as elegant as their parents had hoped. A small number of houses in the neighborhood belonged to my family. Most of my aunts taught at the school and there were handfuls of extended family members everywhere. They taught classes in table manners, coaching students to eat navel oranges with a knife and fork. There were lessons in wine, lessons in dancing, music, and elocution. Anything was available for someone who wanted to smooth the edges of a rough child. I taught there too, as a tutor. On its face, it was a school, but under the skin of it, it was our church, and it had its holy places.

For me, the holiest place was the hidden library.

It was in plain view. When visitors toured the school, June would smile and introduce the room by explaining that she was about to show them something spectacular. Then, she would open the door and beckon the curious visitors in.

The room was nothing short of breathtaking. Perched within the high, mirrored walls were three giant trees. Made of white stone and studded with shining, golden leaves, the three trees appeared to dance in a circle on their twisted, exposed roots. A half-moon skylight in the circular room let in the sunshine and set the gold and milky stone aglow. This heavenly sight seduced many patrons, practically guaranteeing enrollment in the school.

If you were to duck under the blue velvet rope that encircled the magnificent trees and stand between the tree trunks, you would discover the truth. Each tree was actually a cabinet. Inside were five shelves and each shelf could hold seven to eight books. The library did not hold books that had been published by the world for money. They were spell books.

These lustrous trees and several of the magical books within them were created by none other than my shunned witch cousin, Emi.

Emi was my second cousin, and as a little girl, there was no one I looked up to more than her. Sometimes, she had lived at my house with June and me, because we lived across the street from her studio space at the school. She had worn black and since she was working with white stone, she would come home dusted in it. She was my guide for what kind of witch I wanted to be, growing my hair long, and eventually also choosing to wear all black, exactly like her.

Emi made everything, but her best creations were her spell books. She was the one who taught me about them.

She showed me how some of them recorded what you did when you were inside them, and could be experienced only once. With that one experience, whatever the author originally wrote would be replaced with the thoughts, actions, and words of the person who read it. When the book was complete, it almost became a journal, except more private, because the reader didn't control what was written about them. The magic wrote the story, so the reader couldn't filter or edit what was recorded. Most of them have been burned.

Other spell books could be read over and over.

She let the children read one of the spell books she made. It was about a tea kettle who was trying to steal your teacup in a giant world of a never-ending tea party. It was more real than real life, but pure magic. You had to steal the tea cozy and the kettle would promise to leave you alone if you gave it back. Then you drank your tea in peace before you got booted out of the book. It was completely charming, like Emi.

Because I loved Emi more than the others, losing her crushed my heart like nothing else. I had already lost so much, losing her felt like the end of the world.

I was eleven when she was banished from our coven. She did not sneak away in the night. She packed her belongings, sat on her suitcase in the yard, and waited for her fiancé to retrieve her. Her parents circled her, threatening her, crying, throwing spells, and moaning. Emi's face was so clear of distress, I wondered if she could hear them. It was like she had blocked her ears and put blinders on her eyes so she could only see the life she would have with him. His name was Vincent Chaney. He pulled up in his car and when he stepped from the vehicle, I was astounded. I didn't know men were made that attractive. He was like a modern fairy-tale. Yes, he was handsome, but that was not the thing that I remembered most about him. It was the love all over him, more obvious than a glamor spell. It was love that had nothing to do with magic. I had never seen such a thing before. I remembered all of it. How he looked as he rushed from the driver's side of the car, the eagerness in his arms as he reached for her, the relief when he felt her forehead on his cheek, and at last, the disappointment as he regarded her parents. Emi placed a finger on her lips and shook her head. There was nothing he could say or do that would change their feelings about her marrying a man with no magical talent. He put her luggage in the back of his car and guided her to the passenger seat.

Emi waved goodbye to her family like it wasn't forever, but rather like she was going on holiday, and they would all be together soon. I never forgot the look on her face, because to us, she was forever dead and could never return. She looked calm, easy, happy even.

The banishment was permanent and no one's anger cooled in the years that followed. It didn't even cool when her mother died, and then her father. The remainder of her close relatives slowly moved away. She never bid them farewell, and they refused to tell her when they moved away. Once they were gone, it was hard to tell who was keeping the grudge going. Were we such a strong witch coven that we could afford to forgo the talents of a brilliant witch, no matter who she chose to marry?

Later, when June showed visitors the hidden library, she would tell them that one of the school's alumni had made it. Her name was Emi Borage before she was married, and now she worked at the art gallery downtown.

With Emi gone, her books sat with the others in the hidden library. Most of the books were forbidden

to children under eighteen. They were not books you could drop if they offended you and many of them were not safe. I wanted to read all the books, no matter what horrors lurked between their covers. I had to wait, as I still had a month until the birthday that would turn me into an adult. The only spell book I had ever been allowed to read was the one Emi made about the tea kettle. New books were extremely rare. Emi had been the last one to contribute a book to the library and that was ten years ago.

This is where Salinger Meriwa enters the story.

In my coven, there weren't many men. In all our houses that surrounded the school, there were only four. One was my cousin, Antony. The second was his father. The third was my cousin Pearl's father. The fourth was my great uncle Lester who lost his mind years ago, but he still had good legs, so he wandered the neighborhood in a loop. Finding men for me and my four female cousins was going to be tricky.

The only other magical family we had a decent relationship with was the Meriwa family that lived in Whitehorse. Since they were so far away from Edmonton, I had never met any of them, but my girl cousins wrote emails and texted the three boys of the family constantly. They wrote, hoping to catch the eye of the oldest brother, Salinger.

I wouldn't write to Salinger or his brothers. I didn't need him to live the life I had laid out for myself.

I was a princess in black lace with black curls and black smudges on my fingertips from where I used charcoal that morning. In my free time, instead of fighting with a pack of beautiful (but evil) cousins, I tried to write a spell book. Like Emi, I was going to write books and fill that library. Let Salinger be hanged along with Antony.

Except, of course, he wouldn't be hanged. Instead, he was the first person in ten years to complete a spell book that was magical enough to add to our library. He was coming to show us his work and see if we were worthy of housing his creation.

The cousins were a flurry of excitement and in truth... so was I.

Chapter Two

The Eligible Mage

Veda

From my rain-spattered living room window, I watched Salinger's arrival at the school. He was dropped off in a van from the airport. He didn't have an umbrella and his near-black hair was dampened as he gathered his luggage and started up the steps.

Though I would not have liked to admit it, I was rather impressed with his clothing. He wore a chunky black turtleneck sweater under his black coat. My sense of textiles said the coat was cashmere and the laced boots on his feet were leather. I liked natural fibers. I also liked the way his hair curled slightly away from his ears.

I would have liked to postpone meeting Salinger for a day or two. The delay would give my catty cousins their chance to impress him, romance him, and perhaps even seduce him, but I had a tutoring session at the school and I couldn't be late. It was Saturday and I had a full day ahead of me. I hoped he would miss seeing me.

I gave him ten minutes to get to the inner offices where he would meet up with June. She was the school's librarian and arranged everything for the open library on the first floor and the hidden library on the second.

I had hoped he would be out of sight when I came in, but he had been accosted by all four of my crazy girl cousins before he even made it to the office. He was looking from one face to another, obviously enjoying the attention.

There was my cousin, Clementine. She was a year older than me, nineteen, and evil. Her hair was dyed as light a blonde as you could get in a salon. She was fair with light blue eyes and extremely white skin. She was also bigger than the other cousins, tall and athletic with muscles like a cheetah. She wore all white (and transparent) clothing. Her blue and purple tattoos rippled through the sheer of her shirt sleeves. I always thought she looked like she had been brutally beaten the night before and the bruises showed through.

Then there was my cousin, Intarsia. She was a redhead only because she dyed her hair tomato red, but she grew it long and curled it impeccably. She was the prettiest of the four, except for one thing. She wore green. Green should have complimented the red of her hair and the green of her eyes, but one thing ruined it. The green hue of her lips made her look like a science experiment gone wrong. I suspected she was evil too, though I had never seen much evidence of it.

My cousin, Fair Isle, had black hair like me that she kept cut short in a long-banged pixie. She was close to my weight and height and she had also chosen black as her color. She and I should have resembled each other more than any of the other cousins, except she had a thing for piercings. Her tongue was pierced in three different places. She had pierced both her dimples, her eyebrow, her nose and if it hadn't been my business, I would have lost count of how many times she'd pierced her ears. Most of the time she covered one ear with an ear cuff. The fact that she looked more evil than the others didn't mean she was.

The runt of the cousin litter was Pearl. Not that she was much of a runt, she was the same size as the rest of us. It was just that she was the youngest in our cluster of cousins. She was one of those girls who can't seem to get her straggly hair out of her face. She had not yet chosen a color and, instead, wore stripes. The baby card was always played in her defense whenever she did something evil which I believed was more often than we knew.

The thing about these evil cousins of mine was that their evilness was never directed toward me. They had plenty of drama amongst themselves, but no fight ever broke out that involved me. Firstly, if there was a quarrel over a boy, I would back down. I didn't need a boyfriend. Secondly, I was an only child and my mother was rarely in the city. This made me the 'pitiable cousin' and the other four felt it was

their duty not just to be my cousins, but to be my keepers. This was especially the case with Clementine.

I crossed the threshold into the school and expected to see bloodshed among them. Instead, each of them had on their best clothes and their best behavior.

I meant to walk by without saying a word, but Salinger called out to me. "Hi!"

I paused. He couldn't possibly mean me, but I turned at the risk of looking like a fool to see if he really was calling me. It would be ruder to walk on and I couldn't do that in a school for decorum.

He *was* calling to me and I got that close-up look at his face I never could have got through my living room windows. His hair was nearly black, curled slightly, and cut perfectly. The black of his hair and eyelashes made the amber of his eyes all the more startling. He was much paler than I had expected, looking both Asian and Native at the same time. In truth, he had no Asian blood. He was half Inuit and half Caucasian, which lightened his eyes to light brown with black rings. It was the shape of his cheekbones and the upward curve of his lips that reminded me how splendid his bloodlines were. The shapes of his muscles and bones that protruded from under his clothes, spoke of strength and firmness. From head to foot, he was very impressive, the right height and build for a magazine cover. For the first time, I thought that perhaps my cousins had not wasted their time pursuing him.

Knowing he was not just perfect but also exotic, he came toward me with confidence. "You must be June. I'm Salinger."

Pearl cackled while the others exerted more control.

My expression was innocent. "I'm sorry. You have mistaken me for June Borage. Please excuse me," I said coolly, but not too coolly. I remained poised, even though he had mistaken me for a woman forty years older than me who wore her hair in a silver bob. I turned on the heel of my exquisite knee-high boot and continued on my way.

"That's Veda," Clementine explained. "She's younger than me. What made you think she could be June?"

"Where's she going?" Salinger asked.

"Probably to meet her student. She usually has a full day of tutoring on Saturday."

I pumped up the stairs and passed out of earshot.

My student was an eleven-year-old boy who was getting elocution lessons from me. It amounted to a reading lesson. I read a line, pronouncing it properly, and got him to read it back, except his reading was appalling.

That was why I got annoyed when I heard the cousins' shrieking giggles from the classroom below. The school was like that. You couldn't hear what was going on in the classroom next to yours if it had been on fire, but you could hear what was happening in the room above or beneath you. Where was June? Hadn't she met Salinger and separated him from the cousins? I went over to the heating vent to yell some hypocritical words about silence when I overheard what they were saying.

"Does Veda have a boyfriend?" Salinger's unfamiliar voice asked.

"Only Antony!" Intarsia answered with a hoot.

I ground my teeth together. I hated it when they twitted me about Antony. He was their cousin too. Being brought up with the understanding that if we didn't get mage husbands, we wouldn't get husbands at all, none of them even worried about inbreeding. Even so, they hadn't considered Antony as a potential match until his growth spurt. Before that, Antony had been a bony boy with no appeal, until he suddenly put on weight in the form of muscle. He'd grown sideburns that suited him remarkably and turned into a man overnight. I agreed he was very handsome, but for me, it didn't matter, because as he grew better looking, he only looked more like me.

Through the vent, I heard Salinger explain, "I know him, he's my cousin. My mother and his mother are cousins."

"Which means we're not related at all because we're related to him on his father's side?" Intarsia asked.

"Right. But there's someone else I want to meet. My mother's cousin, Emi. Do you know where I

could find her?"

"She's married!" Fair Isle practically screamed.

"I'm not trying to date her. She's probably ten years older than me. She's the one who made your library and she's the last author of a book in your coven, isn't she?"

"Yeah, but we don't see her," Clementine explained. "I suppose you can meet her at the art gallery, but you shouldn't. Neither the Borage nor Fastille family talks to her now."

"Because she married a nobody?" he queried.

"Because she married a nobody."

"I suppose Antony won't let that happen to Veda," Salinger drawled.

"Why do you keep asking about her?" Fair Isle burst. "You might as well know, she doesn't care about Antony or any other guy. I have taken at least four of my boyfriends from her and she has smiled and given them to me."

"Why would she do that?"

Fair Isle smirked, "Because she's smart. She knew they were perverts, druggies, domineering jerks, so she gave them to me with a smile, because she knew she wasn't quitting a good thing."

"So what? Even if they had turned out to be princes, what were you going to do with them? They haven't got the blood."

"True," she gushed.

I felt like vomiting, so I turned around and got back to the lesson. My student sounded worse than ever. I shouldn't have zoned out.

❖ ❖ ❖

After my class, Antony was leaning against the wall waiting for me. He had a three-level Japanese bento box in his arms. I had seen it before. It was beautifully made of black lacquer and inlaid with mother of pearl flowers. We found it at a Goodwill. It was with the jewelry and underneath the glass because the owner of the shop thought it was a jewelry box instead of a fancy lunch box. Antony bought it and now whenever he needed to bring food, he brought it in the bento box. The girls always went wild and I kept where he got it a secret.

"I brought you lunch," he said cheerfully.

"Aw. You shouldn't have," I said, meaning every word. "What is it?"

I walked together with Antony down to the cafeteria. It was an important room in the school, and during the winter, it was used all day long for teaching table manners. The walls were papered blue, elegant like paper boats, with enlarged crown molding at the windows and in the corners. It made every diner feel they were experiencing the big time of what wealth and society had to offer.

Sitting down in the empty room, I gave myself a little neck rub.

"You're stressed," he commented as he tucked my chair in.

"I'm not stressed," I said as I pulled a cloth napkin from the center of the table and placed it in my lap. "I'm annoyed."

Antony narrowed his eyes. "It's Salinger, isn't it?"

"No," I said quickly. "He's probably annoying, but I haven't had time to form that opinion. It's the cousins. They have big mouths." Antony didn't realize I was including him in the fact that I was annoyed with 'the cousins.' He was more annoying than the girls were. They weren't trying to put the moves on me. "Although I am interested in his visit and whether or not he'll choose one of the cousins to be his bride," I drawled sardonically.

"Why?" It was Antony's turn to be annoyed.

"Have you heard their cackling? In the halls of the school no less," I said firmly, diverting him from my true intention. "I thought we were keeping our witchcraft a secret."

Antony frowned. He opened his mouth to say something and then shut it again. He was going to warn

me against getting to know Salinger better, but he thought that if he did, it would make Salinger more interesting. He didn't want to spark my curiosity, so he refrained.

He opened the bento box. The top layer was mini slices of French bread and artichoke dip. The second layer was red grapes and strawberries. The third layer was tiny beef and horseradish sandwiches. It was all stuff from the deli down the street.

"Lovely," I said. "Anything to drink?"

He produced pomegranate and apple sparkling juice. I nearly smiled! It was my favorite drink. "Wow," I gasped, almost sarcastically.

The cafeteria was amply equipped with champagne flutes, so he snatched a few and poured.

I had just accepted my first glass when Salinger strode in. "Am I interrupting?" He came up and shook Antony's hand. He was shorter by at least three inches, but there was nothing shameful in that. Antony was like a tree.

"Would you like to join us?" Antony said as discouragingly as possible, which was completely inviting. He had been trained for years at a school for deportment.

"Just for the drink," Salinger said as he sat down. Antony poured for him. He brought the sparkling beverage to his lips and after one sip asked, "That tastes like what?"

Antony made a show of checking the label. "It's pomegranate and apple."

"That's strange. I don't normally like fruit, but it tastes like magic," he said the last word while looking straight at me. "Sorry for mistaking you this morning."

"Think nothing of it. I know I am not like the other cousins."

"How so?" Salinger pressed.

"Well for starters, I have no tattoos or rebel piercings. I wash my hair regularly and wear a normal shade of lipstick."

"Everyone has tattoos," Salinger said, latching onto the first thing I said. "They symbolize power and identity. Don't they, Antony? How many do you have?"

"Four," Antony admitted.

I glanced at him. As far as I knew, he only had one. It was a star on his shoulder blade, but beyond, I had no idea. He must have had them done recently since he had only been eighteen for a few months.

"What have you got against a little tattoo? You're a witch, you should love them."

I smiled. "I don't want to have my identity cemented. I may never get one done."

"Not to insult you," Salinger said. "But you look very secure in who you are. Look at you."

I picked up my fork, skewered a piece of bread, and dipped it in artichoke dip.

I was gorgeous and I knew it. I wore a black and gray plaid skirt that was perfectly proper by Scottish standards. It was one hundred percent wool. I wore a black linen shirt with a pointed collar and adorable gathers around the wrists. It was covered by a vest that was shiny black in the back and a black woolen weave in the front. My tights had a tiny rectangular pattern on them and my boots came up to my knees. They were beautiful boots. The toes were pointed and the heel spiked. My hair was perfect and hung in excellent thick ringlets down my back because my hair was the first thing I learned to enchant. The makeup I had to do myself, but it wasn't a complex look at all. Brown eyes, black eye makeup, white skin, red lips. I looked stunning, which was why Salinger hadn't been able to let me walk by that morning without commenting and why he couldn't stay away from me now. He had not thought for one second that I was June.

"I just don't like being pressured to do what everyone does. I'll do what I want."

He looked intrigued. "Tell me more."

"Have you been up to the library yet?" I asked, changing the topic.

"No," he said briskly.

"Why not? I'm sure any of the cousins would have been willing to take you," Antony put in.

"Everyone has offered to show it to me, but I don't want to go. Not until I decide if I want to..."

"We all know why you're here," Antony said roughly. "We all know that you wrote your stupid book

so you could have your pick of any of the girls, not just here, but in the other covens and you're here to interview them to see which one you'd rather... Why not just be straight about it? Mother of--"

"Pearl," I finished for him. I saw that he still had a lot to learn about profanity and concealing his temper.

He inclined his head to show that he was willing to accept my amendment.

I didn't comment further. Even though I was the very picture of politeness most days, I had another student coming in under forty minutes. From experience, I knew that Antony would leave me to wash the dishes we dirtied and if I didn't hurry, I would get to my next session underfed. It wouldn't do. The next student was a boy I was teaching to ballroom dance. I continued eating at a pace I hoped would not attract attention.

"Who said it was a secret? I just don't know what to call it. You know as well as I do that men don't practice witchcraft with the same zeal as women because of all the social stigmas. They don't want to mix potions because it's too much like cooking. They don't want to make books because then they'd have to write about their feelings. They don't use glamor because it's too much like wearing makeup. But I'm not like them. I like being magical, and I don't feel like it stops me from being a man. It is no secret that I want to be with a woman who is actually a witch. What would *you* call my search?"

"I don't know," Antony said, deflating slightly. "I just don't like the way you're talking to Veda. Why don't you just tell her you want to interview her and ask your questions?"

I was surprised to hear Antony say that. It was a trifle too mature for him. Why would he be willing to share his time with me with Salinger?

"I will." He paused. "Just not with you watching."

That was it. Antony wanted to watch the interview. He wanted to see what Salinger did when he spoke to a prospective date. Antony knew his attempts to win me over were unsuccessful. Perhaps I had made him feel desperate when I walked out on him the day before.

Antony knocked a steak sandwich closer to his cousin. "Well, then eat something, idiot. You're hogging all the juice because you're hungry."

Salinger took one and I used the moment to scrutinize his face. Was he using glamor? After about a minute, I concluded that he was. He had really bad acne scars, but he covered them with immaculate skill. As soon as I realized what he was doing, I could see what he looked like without the magic. His cheeks were a mess, but they did nothing to spoil his looks. He just had that kind of face. Scarred from cheekbone to jaw line, he was still perfectly handsome.

I said nothing and continued eating.

Chapter Three

June Crystals

Veda

My mother had not been home in ages.

Our house was across the street from the school. I lived there with June. Originally, the house had a separate suite on the top floor which June rented from my mother. When my mother went away, went away, and went away, June had a staircase put in so that she and I could meet without having to go outside. Eventually, my mother came home and saw it. She patted the banister fondly, like she knew it would be there.

That evening, after lunch with Antony and Salinger, June sat me down. In the front room, we had a bay window. That was where the crystal ball was kept. During the day, the ball was covered with a tea-cozy to hide its true purpose.

"I'd rather have a tarot reading," I said dully. "Cards seem more dependable than a crystal ball."

"Tarot cards don't have the same flexibility to show your future as a crystal. The cards are set and they can't be reset until the following day. Trust me," June said, "I've seen this go better."

I thought she preferred the crystal ball because she could have a nosy conversation with me and advise me. I liked getting her thoughts whether they came from the ball, the spirits in the air around us, or out of her own head. Her guidance was invaluable in the place of my mother.

She lit up the crystal orb and started by asking me a question. "Have you got a date for graduation?"

"No."

"Would you like me to get you a name for who you should ask?"

I crossed my ankles under the table. "I'm not sure I want a date."

June's face creased in irritation.

I relented. "Okay. Ask."

She gazed into the ball deeply and for the first time in my life, I thought I saw clouds gathering inside the clear crystal. I had to be imagining it. Then I saw a purple spark cross the sphere.

"Is the light underneath shorting out?" I pulled up the table cloth to look underneath. Even though I had lived there all my life, I had never once looked under the table. The light used to illuminate the crystal ball was a yellow and black plastic flashlight taped to the table with duct tape. I chuckled.

Could there be a less sophisticated operation?

Over the table, June was spacing out. She didn't usually space out. "I'm seeing letters from two different names. One is familiar. The other is not."

I propped my elbows on the table and rested my chin in my palms. She was spreading it a little thick.

"The familiar letters are bouncing up and down. They are so excited, they can hardly keep still long enough for me to read them. It's Antony. The appearance of Salinger has made him desperate. Before his arrival, he felt sure you would accept his confession. There's no need to ask him to be your date for the ceremony. He will ask you, before the end of the week." She peered into the glass deeper. Her eyes grew enormous and reflective. "The letters of the other name are uncurling. Salinger. Wait, now they're curling back into themselves and breaking apart. If you had wanted to ask him, your opportunity is gone. Extending an invitation to him will have an unfortunate ripple effect. You must not ask him." She blinked and straightened herself.

Since she was finished, I gave her a shrug. "That was an impressive show," I said. "By the way, those are the only guys who the coven would find remotely acceptable. Feels sluggish. Why couldn't you come up with a name I never heard of before and send me on a wild goose chase to find him?"

She wasn't listening to me. She looked away from the light and blinked. "I feel awful," she said sadly. "I gave Emi a reading that felt like that once. She packed her bags and left us for good. Why should asking about your graduation date be so ominous?"

I got up. I didn't know if I believed in crystal balls. "Why don't you let me do a reading for *you*?"

"Do you know how to look into a crystal ball?"

"I'm still a teenager. No one knows how to let their conscious mind go like a teenager. We're all slightly brain-dead."

She got out of the chair with a mild shrug. "I've never thought of it that way before."

When we were done changing places, I centered the chair in front of the orb and frowned. Looking into it felt like looking into the sun. "Can I turn off the light?"

"Do you want me to get you a bowl of water instead?"

I did not laugh, even though it was supposed to be a joke. Instead, I retorted. "Why would I try scrying when this crystal has been lying in the light of the full moon for the past three nights?"

She grumbled. We both thought we were full of it. Fortune telling wasn't the kind of magic we were good at.

I turned off the flashlight, looked into the ball, and let my mind wander. Finally, something started to come clear. "There's something. It's a solitary mark. Not like a letter, but like a... person, a figure wandering alone." I didn't look at June. I had to try to make sense of what I was seeing without letting her expression influence me. I had never once thought of June as a lonely person. She was the most sociable witch in our coven. I felt less concerned when I saw that the person was not her. "It's not you, but she's sort of *like* you. She's lonely and sad."

"Do you see anything else?"

"More marks have appeared. They're not people. They're letters. They're swaying and bending like grass in the wind around her. I can't read them. Ok. I see an I, an H, a T, an E, the letter A, and another T, but that doesn't spell anything." I looked into the orb longer to see if there was any more to the vision. When nothing came, I broke the trance by shaking my head and rubbing my eyes. "I wonder what that could mean."

June scratched the letters on a notepad. "They might not mean anything."

"All the same," I said as I picked up the lined paper. "Don't throw this out for a bit."

Just then, the house phone rang and June picked it up. "Hello. Yes, she is, but you can talk to me. What can I do for you?" Pause. "She returns from school at four-thirty. You may collect her after that... No car? You don't need one. The bus to downtown takes under ten minutes. It would take longer than that to find a parking space... It will probably still be wet on Tuesday." She chuckled. "I don't control the weather. I'll advise her to wear her boots. Good-bye." She hung up.

I waited for her to explain since she was clearly talking about me.

"That was Salinger asking you out on a date," she informed me.

I groaned. "Why wouldn't you let me speak to him?"

"I worried you might turn him down just to be contrary. You have a few days before Antony asks you to grad."

"I plan to refuse him."

"Is he getting on your nerves?"

"Yes."

"Are you planning to refuse Salinger as well?"

I sighed. "If things work out the way I want them to, I won't have to reject him. He said he wanted to speak to me privately, obviously because he's speed dating all of us. His invitation is not special. He's inviting everyone, so I'll allow it. I hope he doesn't choose me. It would make everything so much easier for all of us."

June paused before giving her final thought on the subject. "I accepted the date with Salinger for you as a gift, because I worried you would be too stubborn to even talk to him. I'm relieved you would have gone anyway. I read his book this afternoon. It was adorable. I'll tell you one thing, if I was picturing the perfect man for you, he would have written something like that."

I put my hand to my heart like I was swearing an oath. "I won't feel anything when I read his book. I

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