

A woman with blonde hair styled in an updo, wearing a vibrant red sleeveless dress and black heels, is walking down a grand, ornate staircase. She is viewed from behind, with her right hand resting on the dark wood railing. The staircase has light-colored steps and a dark wood handrail with decorative balusters. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the woman and the architectural details of the stairs.

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THE LOST SOUL

A 666 PARK AVENUE NOVEL

GABRIELLA PIERCE



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A 666 Park Avenue Novel

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A stylized, cursive logo for William Morrow, consisting of the letters 'wm'.

WILLIAM MORROW

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Chapter One

HER FIRST THOUGHT WAS that the flame was beautiful.

Brighter than bright against the dark, dusty air, it seemed like a living thing. Jane wanted to touch it, hold it in her hand, feel its intentions against her skin. But as she leaned forward, a dark, heavy shape beside her shifted, then jerked, then seemed to grow impossibly large. She didn't see the sharp flashing hooves until one of them glanced across her side, knocking the wind out of her.

Billy? The gentle old horse, her only real friend in this cold, unwelcoming place, had become completely transformed by rage and fear. Air returned to her lungs in a painful rush, and she let out a choked sob. Billy's eyes rolled toward her in panic and he shied again, twisting on his tether and lashing out angrily with his hooves at the wall behind him.

She opened her mouth to calm him down—animals had always listened to her better even than their own masters—but then she realized what he saw. In the few seconds she had been dazed from his kick, her tongue of flame had blossomed into a small tree, and it was still growing. *Too fast. Far too fast.* It reached out to her with hungry hands, spitting a furious heat into the air of the barn. Somewhere behind its shower of sparks, Billy let out a frightened, high-pitched scream, and Jane felt a matching one tear its way out of her own throat. The far walls were catching fire, and she felt the skin on her legs redden and blister as the tendrils of flame crept across the rough planks of the floor.

There had been a door, she remembered dimly. She had come inside, out of the bald daylight and into the dark privacy of the barn to think about her secret. If she had walked in, couldn't she walk back out again? Jane shrank back from the pressing flames, her fingers scraping against the unfinished wood of the wall. She felt her way along it, ignoring the prickling in her fingers and palms as splinters detached and stuck to them. She could pull those out later, but she knew from her last home that fire gave no second chances. She heard a scream, low pitched, a man's, from deep inside the barn. Mr. Waller. Had he been milking the cows on the other side? She couldn't remember now. Faces danced before her in the shifting gold-and-red glow. Her new parents, her new sisters, her new start—unreal now as if she had only ever dreamed it all.

Then her fingers found a beam of wood that stood out from the rest. She held her breath, her lungs straining in surprise. Beyond the beam was empty space. Closing her eyes, she thought the only prayer she knew and rolled her body forward. Cool, fresh air caressed her skin, though she could still feel the menacing oven of the barn breathing onto her neck.

Calloused hands grabbed her by the shoulder, and she blinked her eyes open, bleary from the soot stuck to their lashes. Mrs. Waller was staring down at her, her face contorted in rage. "Where's John?" she shouted, gripping Jane's shirt collar and yanking her off the ground. "Annette, you stupid thing, tell me—is he still inside?" Jane could sense more than see other people approaching from the house

“Tom, check the other side; forget the horse and look for your father. Lucy, run next door and get help.” She turned back to Jane, her deep-set blue eyes boring into hers. She raised her hand, and moved down in slow motion, knocking Jane onto the ground as it connected with her face. Hot fire shot through her cheek and seemed to settle inside her skull. “Devil girl,” Mrs. Waller cried. “We should have never taken you in. You may have just killed my husband.”

Jane’s eyes flew open with a start. She blinked in confusion at the rectangle of orange light above her, struggling for a moment to remember who and where she was. Jane Boyle, her brain volunteered eventually. Lying in bed, staring up at the skylight, in the apartment off Washington Square Park.

Staring at the orange city haze, she felt a brief longing for the open sky in her dream, for a place where streetlights didn’t crowd out the billions of stars. *But those places don’t have Saks or Magnolia Bakery cupcakes, so . . .* They had painful histories and haunting secrets instead: hers, and Annette Doran’s as well, if her recent nightmares were to be believed. Jane had been having these strange dreams ever since her showdown with Annette a week ago . . . dreams that seemed suspiciously like Annette’s memories. But the dreams couldn’t be real, could they?

Jane blinked the sleep out of her eyes and sat up in bed. Annette Doran had spent most of her life in the British foster-care system as Anne Locksley, an amnesiac who was plagued by mysterious fires. It wasn’t until Jane had intervened that Annette learned she was actually the long-lost daughter of one of the richest families in New York . . . and the last in a long line of incredibly powerful witches. Jane had set out to reunite Annette with her mother, Lynne Doran, who also happened to be Jane’s former mother-in-law—and her mortal enemy. Jane thought that by doing Lynne this service, she’d be safe from her magical wrath.

But Jane was horribly mistaken. By the time she learned that Lynne’s plans for her daughter were far more sinister than she could ever have imagined, Lynne had convinced the girl that Jane was the enemy. Annette had attacked before Jane could clear things up, her uncontrolled magic burning down the top three floors of the Dorans’ Park Avenue mansion as she had burned down many buildings before.

Jane glanced up at the skylight; it was too early for signs of daylight, but she felt certain she wouldn’t be able to fall asleep again before it really was morning. She swung her legs over the side of her bed, testing her balance on the edge of the white rug. Her right leg had been pinned under a billiard table during the struggle with Annette and still felt deeply sore. She poked at its bandage, trying to remember the last time she had applied a new poultice.

She eased herself out of bed and padded toward the kitchen, wishing Dee were here to whip up one of her signature breakfast spreads. The two friends had shared this apartment for a brief time, but Jane knew it wasn’t safe for Dee to be around her right now. She’d insisted that Dee stay with the Montague witches, the closest thing Jane had to magical allies. Now she was completely alone in the apartment—and she was sick of hiding.

Coffee. A shower and a massive mug of coffee, she decided. It was a start. Next on the agenda was cornering Annette Doran, and making sure she knew just what type of witch her mother really was.

Chapter Two

SEVEN HOURS AND AN unwise amount of caffeine later, Jane squinted resentfully at the pale spring sun. As far as she could tell it had gone from inching torturously toward its highest point to refusing to move at all, and her watch seemed equally reluctant to move. She lowered her eyes and pressed her oversized sunglasses more securely onto the bridge of her nose. The banded wooden doors of Park Avenue Presbyterian seemed to be smirking at her.

“Open,” she whispered fiercely, twisting her right foot uncomfortably in its sensible-but-still-painful kitten heel. The heavy double doors began to swing forward, and Jane flinched, hoping she hadn’t sent out her magic without realizing it. But then a stocky, impeccably dressed man stepped out, turning back to help an elderly woman in Chanel across the threshold. “Finally,” Jane muttered, watching the trickle of congregants intently.

Since the spectacularly destructive end of Annette Doran’s welcome-home party the weekend before, her mother had been doing nonstop damage control. For Lynne Doran, socialite extraordinaire, that meant appearing in public—flawlessly turned out—as often as possible, in a wide variety of PR-friendly activities. Jane had even found a photo of her and Annette at an ASPCA adoption event, holding an undeniably photogenic puppy up to their smiling faces. Jane suspected that the pair would be conspicuously attending church as well, and so she had staked out a position in the shadows of an alley across the street, hoping to catch a glimpse of them.

A tall woman with dirty-blond hair stepped through the double doors and Jane inhaled sharply, but upon closer inspection the stranger was at least ten years older than Annette. *Not that Lynne would have let her out of the house in espadrilles, anyway.* A breeze curled around the side of the building she was leaning against, but to Jane it felt hot and angry, like the air in her dream from the night before.

Jane knew it was dangerous to get near Annette, and especially to try to reason with her, but she seemed like her only hope. If she could just make Annette hear the truth—the whole truth—she stood a chance at rescuing her from Lynne’s clutches. Right now, Annette believed that Jane’s family had been plotting against her for her whole life. And while it was true that Jane’s own grandmother had helped abduct four-year-old Annette and erase her memory of her childhood, she only did so to keep her safe from Lynne. Jane’s grandmother had known all along what Jane had only recently discovered: that the person known as Lynne Doran was actually Hasina, one of the world’s original witches. She had survived over the millennia by taking over the bodies of her female relatives, leapfrogging from one generation to the next each time her current shell grew old. “Lynne Doran” had been so anxious to reunite with her long-lost daughter not because she missed her, but because she needed a new body to inhabit. Now Jane had to somehow convey all this to Annette and convince her that she needed to go

to safety. Malcolm, Annette's older brother and Jane's ex-husband, was already in hiding from his psychotic mother; Jane knew he would be eager for Annette to join him.

When Annette finally appeared in the doorway of the church, Lynne was stuck to her side as firm as ever. The women made a striking pair. Their coloring was different and Annette's frame was a bit more solid than her willowy mother's, but the way they carried themselves in their demure Sunday suits marked them unmistakably as family. *Financially and genetically blessed family*, Jane thought ruefully, pressing herself back a little into the narrow alley. Fellow churchgoers flocked about the two women like butterflies around rare, impressive flowers, and Lynne greeted all of them with gracious nods and calibrated smiles. Annette carefully mimicked her mother's gestures and expressions, though she seemed a little uncomfortable to Jane's skeptical eye.

Finally, Lynne reached discreetly into her purse, no doubt sending a text message to summon the driver. *I thought they'd leave on foot*. They were only a few blocks from the mansion, and it hadn't occurred to Jane that they might be going somewhere else after the service. Park Avenue was wide with a tree-lined divider down the center that would shield her somewhat from view, but she hesitated. Was it worth the risk to step out into the open and hail a cab?

As she wavered, a strong arm grabbed her from behind and pulled her backward into the shadow. When the grip on her arm released suddenly, she stumbled for a few steps, her injured leg buckling underneath her, and fell to the ground. Jane threw her hands up instinctively to protect her face and felt the magic in her blood spring up, whipping the debris around her into a brief, frenzied tornado.

But instead of falling back to the concrete, the debris paused in midair, then parted abruptly to slam against the brick walls on either side. An older woman stood there in the silence, looking at Jane. She was all gray hair, cold pewter eyes, and sharp angles, and Jane felt a certain fleeting satisfaction at the sight of the thick white bandage peeking out beneath the sleeve of her cardigan. Annette's fire had at least gotten a piece of one of her aunts, Jane thought grimly. It was Cora McCarroll, she was almost sure, and not Cora's grumpier, more taciturn twin. Jane pulled her magic into a steady, more orderly shape around her body.

"You shouldn't be here," Cora snarled, and Jane felt the static charge of her magic pressing angrily against Jane's own.

"You're blocking the way out," Jane said between clenched teeth, rubbing at her aching leg and sending a tendril of magic to explore the shadows of the alley behind her. In a moment it found something solid but not too heavy. She held her breath and launched it forward.

Cora waved, almost contemptuously, as the garbage can that Jane had lobbed at her glanced off one of the brick walls with an empty, useless clang. "There's more than one way for you to leave here," she snarled, and the static charge pressed closer, taking on a sharper, more hostile feel.

Jane pushed back against it blindly. Malcolm and her gran had both told her that she was an extremely powerful witch, but the fact remained that she hadn't learned about her magic until very recently. Against a witch like Cora, who had been spell-casting for decades, raw power only mattered so much. "You told Lynne that you wanted to be left alone," Cora continued, almost conversationally. "You didn't mention that you intended to keep sticking your nose where it didn't belong. I can't imagine what you're still doing in this hemisphere, but if you knew what was best for you, you'd stay

away.”

“You didn’t mind me being around when you thought you could use me,” Jane pointed out.

Cora laughed sharply. “You had something we needed. But not anymore. We have Annette now, and *she* doesn’t need some stalker following her around and filling her head with paranoid nonsense. She is heir to something more important than you could possibly understand, and your interference is entirely unwelcome.”

What they had needed was magic, and Lynne’s blood. Jane had one of the two, and Lynne had maneuvered her into marrying her son in the hope that the couple would produce a daughter who had both. Jane had run away on her wedding day, after learning the awful truth about her in-laws. It wasn’t until she discovered Annette—who, of course, fit the bill perfectly—that she realized returning Lynne’s long-lost daughter could gain her her own freedom. “You guys really are just the picture of a close, loving family,” she spat back. “I suppose Annette should consider herself lucky.”

Cora’s thin lips twisted upward in a ghostly approximation of a smile. “You have no idea,” the witch purred, her pewter eyes half closing in what Jane could only call rapture. Her mouth fell open in shock. Cora McCarroll *knew* what Annette’s body was intended for, and she thought it was an *honor*.

The edge of the older woman’s magic grew softer for a moment, and Jane instinctively pushed outward against it, clearing a little more breathing space around herself. Cora took a step back and frowned. “This is a family matter,” she snapped, pulling the edges of her magic and her cardigan closer to her body. “You’re out, so stay out.” She spun dramatically and stormed out of the alley, leaving little eddies of trash and newspaper spinning around in her wake.

Jane made no move to follow; she was sure that Lynne had already whisked Annette away to the next photo op. Instead she found a clear space on the concrete ground and leaned her back against the cold brick wall, closing her eyes and trying to trace the currents of her magic as it returned to her body. Jane had put a lot of work into learning to harness and control her power during the previous few months, and knowing that she had held off Cora so steadily and still had some reserves left brought a grim, tired smile to her lips.

“*Family*,” she murmured thoughtfully, turning the word over in her mouth. Technically, witches were all one big family: they could all trace their ancestry back to one of the legendary Ambika’s seven daughters. In the more modern sense, Jane was out of the family . . . but that didn’t mean Annette was entirely without loving, concerned relatives.

Jane snapped her faux-lizard wristlet open and slid her cell phone out. The screen flared to life, displaying what she had self-consciously been looking at over and over throughout the previous week: the last of the fake “junk” e-mails that Malcolm had sent her, so that she would know how to contact him. She scrolled to the bottom and tapped the number tacked on to the end of the e-mail.

The line beeped in a measured, foreign-sounding way, and Jane waited patiently. Finally she heard what sounded like a voice-mail tone, followed by an expectant, staticky silence.

“It’s me,” she said shortly. “I wanted to wait until I could tell you that everything was safe again. Mostly is—for you, I mean. But Annette’s alive, and she’s in danger, and I don’t really know where to go from here. Malcolm, I think it’s time for you to come home.”

She cut off the call and slid the phone back into her purse as she stood up, brushing dust off her

clothes and stepping out of the alley.

Chapter Three

THE LOWELL HOTEL HAD CHANGED since Jane had stayed there. She paused across the street from the stately building, taking in the three upper floors whose windows were dark and cracked. She took a deep breath and crossed the street, heading for the hotel's gold-rimmed doors. Inside, the smartly dressed staff looked oddly subdued, and a steady stream of workers in heavy-duty breathing masks passed through the marble-floored lobby.

Jane peered through her oversized sunglasses, inexplicably nervous that the woman at the front desk would recognize her. *I'm wearing a different face and body*, she reminded herself; the last time she was here, she had been Ella Medeiros, an heiress of vague origins. She had performed a complex spell to change her appearance and hidden under a new identity to protect herself from Lynne Doran. Crossing the lobby as quickly and quietly as possible, Jane headed straight for the bar, breathing an audible sigh of relief when she saw that the one person she had been hoping to see was still right where he belonged.

"My enemy," André Dalcaşcu rasped, his Romanian accent thicker than she remembered. He raised a cut-crystal tumbler full of dark amber liquid toward her in a toast, but as he did Jane realized that even he was different: his half-mocking smile, which had become so familiar over the past months, seemed somehow skewed.

Jane pulled off her sunglasses, blinking as her eyes adjusted to the softer lighting of the lobby bar. Now she was close enough to see the long, angry scar running along André's right cheek, curling toward the corner of his mouth. It added a perverse hint of mystery to his already-handsome face, and Jane had a feeling that once it faded it would look positively rakish. At the moment, though, it still looked painful. She felt the impulse to reach out and stroke his damaged skin.

Instead she took another minute to collect herself, glancing around for André's sister, Katrin, as she arranged her Badgley Mischka hobo bag on one of the empty armchairs. The chain of its strap slithered down the red leather with a small sigh, and Jane echoed it as she sank into a second chair. "You were hunting me," she reminded him. He caught her staring at his scar, and she tried not to blush. "Annette did that to you," she said softly.

"She came up to my suite—my former suite," he confirmed, his words coming a little more slowly and carefully than Jane remembered. He winced a little. "She was already angry that I had helped you. Katrin was there, but Anne—" He shuddered, and shook his head.

"Annette's much stronger than Katrin," she finished.

André's thick lips twitched. "We tried everything to convince her that we were only trying to protect her, to do what was best . . ."

The Dalcaşcus were one of the less powerful magical families, and in order to survive, they had

always been opportunistic. Many years ago, André and Katrin's parents had helped Gran whisk Annette away from Lynne and put her in hiding overseas, hoping to end Hasina's unnaturally long life—and her reign of power—by taking away her last healthy, young female blood relative. Once Annette was safely contained in British foster care, the Dalcașcus sent André and Katrin, then just children themselves, to keep track of her, posing as her closest—and eventually her only—friend. Their attention had meant everything to the lonely young woman, although hers had meant significantly less to them. To the Dalcașcus, Annette was a time bomb, a hostage, and a deep, dark secret all rolled into one. They had only kept her alive to secure Celine Boyle's continued cooperation. But they hadn't bothered to make sure Annette was *happy*: as long as she had a pulse and didn't run into any Dorans on the street, the Dalcașcus had fulfilled their side of the bargain, as far as they were concerned. "She didn't believe you," Jane interpreted when he fell silent, and André sighed in agreement.

"Katrin lifted the block from my mind, so that she could see," he began. Witches could read minds, including those of the men in magical families—the males carried magical blood, but wielded no power of their own. Most witches protected their male kin with spells that blocked others from learning their family secrets. "I wanted her to know that she was in danger, and that we wanted to help her. But she saw . . . everything." His black eyes closed, this time from pain that had nothing to do with his burns.

"Annette saw that your parents and my grandmother stole her from Lynne when she was little," Jane filled in, a bitter note creeping into her voice. "She saw that she was only an obligation to you, never a friend. She saw that you knew where her family was all along, and that you could have protected her from all those terrible fires if you had really wanted to. She figured out that she was once ever a chess piece to everyone."

André nodded. "We tried so hard to protect her from Hasina, and now look where she is."

"I'm still trying to protect Annette," Jane admitted. "I want to stop Hasina from taking over her body. The spell takes a month to cast; there's still time to stop her from completing the transfer. But there's so much I don't know about Hasina, and how her magic works. I need all the help I can get. Yours and Katrin's. Where is she, anyway?"

"My sister has recently discovered the health club," he replied, with a small twinkle in his black eyes. "The poor rowing machine may never recover. So that's what you're here for, then—recruiting."

"Look, no one's asking you to go in on matching sweatshirts," she told him peevishly. The Romanian siblings were lifelong mercenaries. As Ella Medeiros, her interests and André's had lined up for a short while—in more ways than one—but, as she found out, he had been hunting Jane Boyle all the while. "But your family has invested a lot—a *lot*—in trying to keep Hasina from inhabiting a new body. And the last time she saw you, Annette did a nasty number on the side of your face and took out a few floors of this hotel as collateral damage. I'm not asking you to be altruistic; I'm *telling* you that we're on the same side. Whether we like it or not."

"You've made that claim before," he said mischievously, and Jane vividly recalled the feel of his hands on the smooth skin of her thighs. *No*, she reminded herself strictly. *Ella's thighs*.

She cleared her throat, ducking her head to hide how flustered she suddenly felt, but she was su

André's keen black eyes didn't miss a thing. She snapped her head back up. "You know, I'm not that great with fire—yet." She saw André flinch ever so slightly, and studiously ignored it. "But my friends would probably say that I just need some practice. I could go back over you limb by limb—you appreciate that kind of attention to detail, as I recall—and get all that skin Annette missed."

André stared at her for a long moment, and Jane tried to remember if she had ever seen him speechless before. She had no intention of torturing him for information, of course; the thought alone made her feel light-headed. But she didn't want to fall into some "nice and therefore harmless" category in his mind, either. He was still looking at her carefully when Katrin stepped into view. Her sharp angles and long, flat planes looked somehow less dangerous in workout gear than they had in cocktail attire, but the look on her face was unmistakably deadly. Something flashed at the edge of Jane's vision—the glitter of glass, headed in her direction.

"Stop it," Jane snapped as her own magic sprang into immediate action.

In less than a heartbeat, Katrin was pinned down in a free armchair, the jagged edge of a shattered champagne flute pressed to her windpipe. The rest of the glasses fell to the floor, as lifeless as the chairs had been before. Jane glanced around cautiously, but there was no one else in the dimly lit bar to notice what had just transpired.

"I come in peace," she told Katrin more levelly, "and your brother and I were managing just fine. You can stay if you want, but you'll have to behave yourself."

Katrin nodded carefully, so as not to cut herself on the glass, and Jane let it fall to the floor with a pretty tinkling sound.

André watched her with amusement for a few seconds, then flicked his eyes back to Jane. "Lynne didn't have the full measure of you," he said approvingly, and the skin on the back of her neck crawled a little.

Lynne had once told Jane that she reminded her of herself when she had been younger, and Malcolm's father had echoed the same sentiment. *Is this what being a witch means? Getting pushed and pursued and tricked and trapped until everything really is kill or be killed?* Of course, she reasoned to herself, back when Lynne had been Jane's age, she had only been Lynne. Doubtless Hasina's daughters were born with a bit of a mean streak, and being raised by their immortal ancestress couldn't help. But if Lynne had stayed Lynne, she would have at least had a chance to grow into the sort of woman Jane hoped to be. *Just like Annette deserves*, she thought fervently. *That's the whole point: to give her the chance to be who she is.*

"Anne is a mess," André told her bluntly, and Jane blinked rapidly at him. She waited, sensing that he was ready to tell her some, if not all, of what he knew. "She was always an angry girl. She would latch on to people, build them up in her mind as her saviors, and then they would do something to upset her and she would act as if they had deliberately tricked her into loving them just so that they could let her down. I know you don't think much of our guardianship of her"—he twisted a wry smile at his sister, who huffed and looked away—"but considering how long we managed to be in her life without setting the little pyromaniac off, I make no apologies."

"She had no control over that," Jane protested, the heat and fear of her recent dreams pressing in on her again. There was a charred, ashy quality to the air in the lobby that she hadn't noticed at first, but

now it was all she could taste. She brushed a few strands of blond hair off her face. “Don’t you understand how magic works, when no one’s taught you to use it?”

As if to punctuate her plaintive question, the lights in the bar area flared to brightness, and the clerks behind the main desk looked up curiously. Jane swallowed against the dryness of her throat, searching out her stray tendrils of power and containing them, and the lighting returned to normal. As a child, secluded in the French countryside with her austere, reclusive grandmother, Jane had always thought she was simply cursed when it came to electronics. It was only when she became aware of her magical abilities that she learned lights and computers responded to the flares in her magic—and the real reason Gran had fought to keep her hidden away from the world all those years.

“You understand,” Katrin purred in her clipped English. “We know your grandmother told you nothing. But tell me, did the lights go off when you were reading a book, or had a song stuck in your head, or even when you stubbed your toe?” Jane started to answer, but Katrin cut her off. “No. Your magic got loose when you were angry, or frightened . . . when you were out of control. Our Anne was plagued by fires in every home because she was *extremely* out of control.”

“She was a *child*,” Jane argued, but Katrin’s words had effectively sown doubt. Jane had caused plenty of electrical trouble growing up, but the damage was minor: radio static, burned-out bulbs, constant computer restarts. The real light shows hadn’t happened until her life had been turned completely upside down. *How angry did Annette have to be for the fire to trap a family of four inside their house?* Jane wondered with a sudden all-over shudder. Her next fire was a month later, and even more fatal. Annette hadn’t been starting small fires in wastebaskets or making the room uncomfortably hot: she had set off major blazes as a child and was still doing it now.

“She’s all grown up,” André replied softly. “But that makes it easier, doesn’t it? That she’s so unstable?”

Jane frowned, uncertain of what he meant. His olive-skinned fingers caressed the cut crystal of her tumbler in a thoroughly distracting way. “Easier—how?”

Katrin clicked her tongue impatiently. “Because my brother thinks that you’ll feel bad about killing Anne, no matter how much better it will make things for all of us. Hasina has plagued witches for far too long, as you know from personal experience. But he”—she jerked a bony thumb toward André—“says that *still* wouldn’t be enough for you, if Anne wasn’t a danger in her own right, as well.” She rolled her eyes in profoundly expressive disgust.

Killing her? Had it really come to that? Gran’s help had been contingent on André and Katrin’s parents keeping Annette alive, and Jane had no intention of striking any other kind of deal. “I want to banish Hasina,” she corrected. “Or if I can’t, then force her into some kind of truce or something where she agrees that her current life will be her last. I don’t want to kill anyone—the whole point of this is that I’m trying to *save* Annette.”

The Romanian siblings looked at each other meaningfully, then back at Jane. “Hasina won’t honor a truce,” André told her. He held up one hand to prevent Jane from interrupting him and leaned forward. “You say you don’t know enough about her, so I’m telling you, all right? She’s lived too long to really be human anymore. Humans act with one eye on the grave, but it’s been thousands of years since Hasina has seen her own lurking in front of her. We’re specks to her, mayflies who live and die in

day. She has no equals, so she will never keep her word.” He shrugged, his muscular shoulders rising and falling. “Banish her if you can, but if you miss your chance, it will be gone. She’ll stalk us, and you, and all our children and grandchildren, if you live long enough to have those. She kills witches you know. That’s why there are so few of you left these days. Whether she does it for fun, or to eliminate rivals, or some inhuman reason of her own, no one knows. All we know is that, with her there can be no truces, no deals, no peace.”

Jane sighed. Deep down she had felt that Hasina wouldn’t be open to any kind of compromise, but that made her task that much harder. “So, banishing. Do you have any idea how I can do that?”

Katrin snorted, fishing an energy bar out of her gym tote and tearing the cellophane viciously. “Kill her vessel, and her sons for good measure. We’ll handle the two of them if you want, but that’s the best offer you’ll get here, *Baroness*.”

“We’re done here,” Jane snapped, standing abruptly. She slung her hobo bag over her right shoulder, glancing around to make sure there was nothing she had missed. “I’ll find a way to get rid of Hasina on my own.” She took a moment to stare each Dalcaşcu in the eyes until both looked away from her steady gaze. “I am going to do whatever I can to protect Annette. But let’s be perfectly clear about this: her brothers—both of them—are under my protection. Touch either one and Hasina won’t be your biggest problem anymore.”

She spun toward the door and strode out, but not before catching the ghost of a smile on André’s face.

Chapter Four

BY THE TIME JANE returned to Washington Square Park, her right leg was throbbing again, and her head felt nearly as wretched. As she climbed the stairs to her apartment, she wondered for the thousandth time if she was insane for turning down the Montagues' offer to stay with them at their Upper East Side brownstone. A little company would be nice right about now. But she knew that wherever she went, danger followed, and beyond that, she wasn't quite sure where they fit into all this—stopping Hasina was good for the whole magical community, but just how involved should the Montagues really be?

“So my fortress of solitude it is,” she muttered to herself, fishing around in her hobo bag for her Christofle key chain. A sound from the other side of the door caught her attention, and she froze. Dee still had a key of her own, but she hadn't been back to the apartment since she went to stay uptown.

Jane felt for her magic, which was as tired and out of sorts as the rest of her. She struggled in vain for a moment to bring it into some semblance of order, but it slipped away maddeningly, dancing around the edges of her control. *Screw it*, she decided abruptly, jamming her key into the lock. Anyone who tried to sneak up on her was in for a nasty surprise of their own.

“Hello?” she demanded, slamming the door shut behind her. “I know you're here.” There was a pause, and then a distinct clang as something fell in the kitchen. She sighed in relief. *Dee*. Cooking up something delicious, she hoped.

“In a minute,” a familiar voice rumbled—but it wasn't Dee's. “I don't want your omelet to burn.”

Jane ran into the galley kitchen so fast that her feet barely seemed to touch the floor. *Malcolm*. He stood over the stove, a broad smile on his handsome, tanned face.

“Forget the omelet.” She grabbed his arm and dragged him into the living room. “I'm just glad you're okay.”

“You're the boss,” he said, sinking down into the buttery leather couch beside her. “I can't cook anyway,” he added, spreading his hands helplessly.

“I know that,” she agreed, wrinkling her nose at the distinct smell of burnt eggs. “It was a nice thought.”

His eyes focused on hers. “You called, and I came,” he said simply. “Bearing gifts.” He held up a small wooden box, pieced together from at least half a dozen different woods that came together to form a five-pointed star on the lid. Although there was a clear break to indicate where it should open, it seemed to be sealed shut.

Jane reached out curiously. A spark ran through her hand and up her arm when she took the box, and she jumped a little. “It's beautiful,” she breathed, although she knew without needing to be told that it was more than just a pretty object.

“It’s a spirit box,” he explained, his dark, liquid eyes watching hers carefully. “It’s for people who have . . . lost someone. The more you are near it, the more the spirits that follow you will infuse the box. It’ll carry their intentions, and their love for you, and it’s a way of keeping them with you. At least, that’s what the witch who traded it to me said.” He frowned, looking uncertain. “She was a real witch, for whatever it’s worth.”

“She was telling the truth,” Jane murmured, closing her hands more tightly around the box. “I can feel it.” She inhaled deeply, then forced herself to set the box down on the driftwood coffee table. As powerful as its presence was already, she could only imagine how difficult it would be to let it go once it had started to “feel” like Gran . . . and maybe a bit like the parents she had lost, when she was too young to even remember. “Where did you get it?”

“Ecuador,” he said shortly, glancing at the box and then away again. “I kept hoping to see you around every corner. It’s been so long.” His hand reached out as if of its own accord to brush a stray lock of hair from her face. Without thinking, she flinched, and his hand quickly dropped back down.

“It’s been so long,” she repeated apologetically. He nodded in understanding, and instead reached out to pick up the spirit box.

“I hope it’s all right,” he offered, gesturing toward it. “I know it can never replace, or make up for what I’ve taken from you. It was just something I thought you should have.”

“Thank you,” she replied automatically, her mind spinning. Malcolm and Jane’s relationship had been complicated from the start. Lynne had manipulated her son into killing Jane’s grandmother, who had long ago placed a protective spell on Jane to hide her from other witches who would seek her power. When Gran died and the spell was broken, Malcolm tracked Jane down in Paris, sweeping her up in a whirlwind romance that culminated with their wedding just months later. It was all a lie—least at first. But then Malcolm fell in love with Jane for real. He risked his life to tell her the truth and to try to help her get out of the city and away from his mother’s clutches. Even when she decided to stay behind and hide in plain sight as Ella Medeiros, he had proven incredibly loyal, leaving everything behind and skipping from country to country alone so that the contents of his mind couldn’t be used against her. Still, he’d been wrapped around his mother’s evil finger for thirty-two years before Jane even met him. *He* might well believe that he had changed, but if it came down to Jane or Lynne, which version of Malcolm would he turn out to be? “Tell me about the last two months,” she suggested finally.

Seeming to sense her mood as he had so many times before, Malcolm shifted easily into storytelling mode. He had started in Europe, where he had set up most of the safe houses that he intended to share with her. But after only a couple of weeks he had started feeling the pursuit closing in, seeing familiar shadows around every corner.

“Those were probably Dalcașcus,” Jane supplied helpfully, guessing that Malcolm would recognize the surname of his mother’s shifty so-called allies.

“That makes sense.” He frowned slightly. “Mom always said the Romanians were only good for mercenaries.”

Not that good, Jane thought, frowning a little herself as she thought of all the ways André and his sister, Katrin, had betrayed Lynne. Malcolm went on to tell her how he had stowed away on a series of

cruise ships and wound up in South America. His prep-school Spanish was more hindrance than help there, but the money from his safe houses smoothed over the worst of his communication troubles. He had gotten comfortable enough to start asking hard questions: about himself, his mother, and magic in general, although of course there was only so much he could learn when he had to conceal his reasons for wanting to know.

As Malcolm went on with his narrative, he played idly with the spirit box. The sight of it in her hand suddenly reminded her of the horrible moment when she had entered his memories and seen him kill Gran, and she shuddered. He glanced up in concern, but she didn't know what to say, so instead she just took the box from him and set it gently back down. She had been prepared to trust Malcolm, but if he was hiding anything from her, then maybe she was being just as naïve about him as she had been from the start.

"And the whole time, you never told anyone who you really were or why you were asking?" she prompted. She gathered some exploratory magic and sent it out through her eyes, wondering if she would even be able to see enough of his thoughts to make sense of. "Never," he told her firmly, his eyes wide and unflinching. "I would never have risked putting your life in danger."

Jane nodded. She knew for sure that he really believed what he was saying: his entire being throbbled with sincerity. *I don't even have to read his mind*, she realized, feeling the magic and electricity swirl and eddy in the space between them, drawing them toward each other like a river of tiny magnets. *I just know him*. After a fairy-tale courtship, unsettling engagement, and disastrous marriage, she finally understood Malcolm Doran.

"It had been so long without any real news of what was happening up here, whether you were okay or I was going crazy, not knowing. And then the stories in the papers changed," he went on. "Suddenly you was a drug addict who'd kidnapped you and possibly killed the family driver."

"I actually did that part," Jane said in a rush, realizing just how much they had missed in the time they had been apart. She quickly sketched the scene in the alley when Yuri, Lynne's driver and a personal hit man, had come for her. She shuddered at the memory of the vile things she had seen in his mind after he had lost control and attacked: Lynne had been covering up her pet thug's dirty little secrets for years. "He started choking Dee," she finished, "and I couldn't get there in time. But he had a tire iron, and I had magic, and . . ."

She spread her hands helplessly. Even to defend an innocent woman from a certified sociopath's killing wasn't something she could easily shrug off. She knew that she had done her best under the circumstances, but it was impossible not to wonder about the "what-ifs." With a little more control over her power, she might have just knocked him out . . . but what was done was done. Hot tears stung behind her eyes, and she blinked hard.

Gran didn't tell me enough, she thought bitterly for what felt like the thousandth time. *She died before I even knew what to ask*.

Malcolm's hand inched over to cover hers, and the warmth from it spread quickly up toward her heart. It was the first time since discovering Malcolm's role in Gran's death that Jane had been able to long for both of them at once. A hot tear escaped from her eye to roll slowly down one cheek. Malcolm looked for a moment as if he might lean in to kiss it away, but he hesitated, then brushed

from her skin with one gentle, calloused finger instead. “I promise you: if Yuri attacked you, it was you or him. The same goes for . . . Dee, you said?”

“A friend,” Jane explained wryly, sniffing a little. “She helped make our wedding cake.”

Malcolm swiveled his head toward the door, then back. “She’s the one I met in front of the house, right? On the day of the ceremony?”

Jane laughed out loud at the memory. Dee, knowing that it was too dangerous to attend a wedding full of witches with so many readable secrets in her head, had stopped by early in the day to drop off a couple of “wedding cookies.” For Jane, that had been the only perfect part of Manhattan’s so-called wedding of the century—that, and the knowledge that soon she and Malcolm would vanish in an anonymous safety. Unfortunately, both the sweets and that hope had been all too fleeting.

“She cooks, too,” she told Malcolm more soberly. “In fact, after she had to leave the bakery, she went to work for a catering start-up that was run by Katrin Dalcaşcu.”

Malcolm blinked rapidly, trying to absorb that piece of news. Jane explained how Katrin had seen her with Dee, then lost track of Jane when she transformed into Ella. So Katrin had gotten close to Dee while her brother, André, explored other possible leads . . . not realizing that Jane herself was by his side for most of it. She politely glossed over most of those details, although the rigidity of Malcolm’s neck and shoulders told her that she probably wasn’t being quite as discreet as she’d hoped. *So I killed a guy and slept with the enemy for a while*, she thought crabily. *Like he’s never done anything he regretted?*

The hardest part, it turned out, was telling him about Annette. Malcolm, who had always felt responsible for his little sister’s supposed death—guilt that his mother had encouraged and used to manipulate him—hung raptly on every word of her story. He barely breathed from Jane’s initial accidental vision of “Anne Locksley’s” apartment to their fiery showdown in the Dorans’ billiard room. To her surprise, and relief, he didn’t question a word of it, even when she got to the part about his mother’s true nature.

“I’d heard things, growing up,” he admitted. “And once I was in hiding, I realized that I needed to know everything I could about who was hunting me—especially if you were going to join me someday.” Jane was almost sure that he was blushing a little. “I followed every occult trail I could, listened to every so-called witch. Most of what they had to say was nonsense, of course, and most of the rest was useless. But now and then there were hints about the woman whose name is on my mother’s wall, and I kept my head down and listened. It was never really clear, but it was enough to know that—we’re. I’m not exactly surprised to hear that Annette’s in danger.” He lowered his chin a little so that their eyes were level. “I don’t owe my mother anything anymore. Whether she even is my mother, or not, sort of or maybe—whoever is driving that body has been using me for years. This Hasina person is entirely on her own side, as far as I can tell.” His eyes bored into hers. “And I’m on yours.”

“I know,” Jane blurted before she could overthink it. Malcolm squeezed her hand a little harder, and a wave of heat coursed through her body. “I’m glad you’re here,” she added impulsively.

“I missed you,” Malcolm said gently, the corners of his mouth twitching toward a smile. “I would have stayed away for the rest of my life if you hadn’t called me, no matter what the papers said. Nothing else ever would have made me sure enough to risk it, to risk you.” He lowered his eyes, b

his fingers wove their way between hers. “If there’s one thing I know—and there really might only be the one—it’s how to be loyal.”

Jane stretched forward and kissed him lightly on the forehead, feeling the old familiar current crackling between them. “You’ll have plenty of chances coming up to prove that,” she promised. “But for what it’s worth: I already believe it.”

Chapter Five

THE MONTAGUES' STately UPPER East Side brownstone looked even more pleasant than Jane remembered. Its inhabitants were similarly inviting—at least until they saw Malcolm standing behind her on the doorstep.

“He’s here to help,” she announced quickly. Malcolm Doran and Harris Montague had taken a particularly active role in the rivalry between their two families, and there was no love lost between them. Jane had struggled with her magically enhanced crush on the redheaded Harris ever since they first met through his sister, Maeve, her first real friend in New York. But now that he was dating Dee, Jane had firmly pushed those feelings aside.

“Then he is welcome in my house,” said a voice from somewhere behind Harris’s tall, lean frame. He stepped back with automatic deference, leaving Jane to gaze into a pair of bright, lively green eyes.

“I’m Emer,” their tiny, frail-looking owner said, smiling warmly. “You’d be Jane—shame on you for running out before we could meet the last time you were here. But you’ve returned with another charming guest, so you’re both forgiven and invited in for tea.”

Jane heard Harris sputtering at the word *charming* as she passed him, but he clearly had no intention of arguing with Emer. *His grandmother, and Maeve’s*, she reasoned. The elderly woman moved with stately authority, as befitted the matriarch of a family of witches. Jane couldn’t resist mentally comparing her to Lynne Doran as they all settled onto candy-ribbon-striped couches in the sitting room. Both women had an air of unspoken command, and a ramrod-straight posture, noticeable in spite of the almost comical difference in their heights. But the similarities only made Emer’s warmth more apparent, and Jane felt an immediate, instinctive trust in her that she had never felt toward her mother-in-law.

“Harris, darling, fix us a pot of tea,” Emer suggested mildly, and he headed for a swinging door that presumably led toward the kitchen.

“I’ll help,” Dee offered huskily, smiling first toward Malcolm and then, pointedly, at Jane before turning toward the same door.

“I’d rather you stay,” Emer countered in the same gentle tone, and Dee stopped midstride. “Something tells me that Jane has returned to us on witch business,” the elderly woman explained. “And while you may not have the bloodline, Diana, you know more about the craft than many witches do.” She inclined her white-haired head toward Maeve, who looked like she wanted to sink into the couch and disappear.

Maeve had always resented her magical heritage and tried to keep it as far from her life as possible—until she met Jane. Once she saw that her new friend knew absolutely nothing about her abilities and the dangers of the Dorans, Maeve tried to warn her, only to be hit by a taxi courtesy of Lynne who

she realized that Maeve was a threat. To Jane's surprise, Maeve had begun studying magic during her rehab. And even more surprisingly, it turned out that she did have a small spark of magic after all—despite the fact that Maeve's gift had passed to her through her father, which was almost always a magical dead end.

Dee, by contrast, had no magic of her own, but she had been fascinated by it long before she even knew that it was real. She had proven an enormous help when Jane was first attempting to understand and use her power. Dee sat back down obediently beside Maeve, discreetly pressing one of the girl's thin, pale hands with her own for a moment. "Is there any chance you've come here with good news?" she asked lightly, arching a thick black eyebrow at Jane.

"Malcolm's back," Jane offered with a forced smile.

"Good news for me," Emer chimed in, beaming sincerely, and Jane felt her own expression soften. "Handsome young men in my sitting room are always welcome."

Maeve rolled her copper eyes, although she couldn't suppress a smile of her own. "You must be happy your sister is alive," she said to Malcolm.

"I'm very glad about that," he admitted, "but from what Jane tells me it's not entirely good news."

Emer nodded crisply. "Hasina is still alive. I wouldn't have thought such a thing was possible, but frankly it explains quite a bit. I'm sorry to say, young man, that our families have not traditionally been friends, but I never imagined it was because of our affinity to death."

"It's sort of the family specialty," Maeve explained when she saw Jane's quizzical expression. "Séances, speeding the dead, calming angry ghosts."

"A calling that would, of course, make us the natural enemies of a witch who repeatedly escaped her own death," Emer added, as Harris swung open the door to the kitchen with one hand and balanced a cherrywood tray in the other. A fine curl of steam wafted up from a fragile-looking teapot covered in hand-painted yellow pansies. When he brought the tray carefully over to the sofa, Jane gratefully accepted a matching porcelain cup full of warm golden-green liquid. It smelled sweet and astringent all at once, and Jane sipped it so eagerly that she immediately burned the tip of her tongue.

"I've been told that Hasina kills witches," she blurted out. "My, um, source didn't know why, but it sounded like a long-standing, routine thing. He said that's why there are so few of us left today."

"'He'?" Harris repeated sharply, taking an armchair across from his grandmother and jerking his pointed chin in Malcolm's direction. "As in *him*? Because, as reliable sources go . . ."

"It was André Dalcaşcu," Jane admitted, staring into her tea to avoid the tense current swirling around the sitting room. "I saw him yesterday."

"Speaking of 'reliable sources,'" Malcolm added pointedly, raising his dark-gold eyebrows in surprise.

Jane grimaced internally. Fortunately, Emer spoke again, covering the silence.

"I'd always been told that the Dorans were rather predatory," she mused. "We wouldn't have known, I suppose, if it was the same predator wearing different faces."

"That was all he said?" Maeve asked skeptically, dropping a cube of sugar into her tea and sniffing at it. She wrinkled her nose, squeezing its dusting of freckles together, and reached for another cube. "Nothing about how often, or how she picks them, or whether she even *has* a reason?"

“I know that all I’m bringing to the table are puzzle pieces,” Jane admitted frankly. “But the Malcolm showed up, and he had some pieces. Which made me realize: it could be helpful for us to sit down and figure out what, exactly, we know. About Hasina, and how she jumps bodies, and everything.”

Harris stirred and looked like he might speak, but to Jane’s relief Dee jumped in ahead of him. “I’ve spent the last week and a half digging into research. I looked up all the antiaging and resurrection spells that I could find, but most of them seem sketchy at best.”

“They don’t work,” Emer agreed firmly. “Those are for charlatans, and the desperate.”

“That figures,” Jane admitted wryly. “But I think that this spell is something a little more . . . unique. Gran’s diary suggested that Hasina discovered this spell on her own, not that she learned from anyone else. And I highly doubt she would have allowed her invention to make it into book. Gran said it took a month to prepare and was very difficult—and very dangerous.”

Harris chuckled, running a hand through his close-cropped reddish curls. “So that’s that. The limit of what we know. Good meeting, though.” His sister shot him a stern glare, and he flushed a little.

“A twenty-eight-day spell,” Emer mused, as if she hadn’t heard him. “That’s what ‘a month’ would mean to any witch. A precise time frame like that usually means a ritual of some kind on each day. She’ll be using blood, and there might be some darker things. Sacrifices?”

“Wouldn’t there have to be?” Maeve asked. “To balance the scales, or whatever? You can’t make new life out of nothing, not even with magic.”

“But she isn’t, really,” Jane countered thoughtfully. “There’s no new life; if anything, there’s less of it. And maybe the body she leaves *is* a sort of a sacrifice. What happens to those bodies, anyway?” she asked suddenly, turning to Malcolm, who looked taken aback.

“I don’t . . . know,” he mused. “I tried to learn more about my family during my time away, but I guess I haven’t wanted to think about that part too much. Hasina doesn’t completely push the person out, from what I understand; she shares the body, two souls crammed into one. She’s driving, but the other person is still there somewhere, not controlling, but maybe sometimes influencing. Or maybe not even that.”

Emer frowned. “A soul with no body of its own, but stuck inside of one anyway.” She shuddered and clasped her hands together tightly. “It’s an abomination, not meant to be. That soul would be badly damaged from the start, then fade over time to almost nothing.”

Malcolm swallowed, and Jane felt a wave of pity for him. They were, after all, talking about her mother—and his sister, if they didn’t find a way to stop it. “A tarot reader in Cuenca told me that the host is just a collection of habits, a ghost in the back of her own head. I’m not sure there would ever be enough of her left to take her own body back even if Hasina left it voluntarily. Dementia runs pretty thick in my family—among the women, anyway. I never thought to question that before, but it makes sense that it would be the former vessels, left by Hasina and with too little life in them to really come back.”

Jane slid her hand across the smooth fabric of the couch to squeeze his. “Maybe we could inoculate Annette somehow,” she suggested, “and make it impossible for Hasina to get in. Or if we could just convince her to *leave* . . . but so far Lynne hasn’t left her alone for a second that I’ve been able to see

“It might not matter,” Dee told her. Her husky voice was reassuring. “Hasina will have to cross some distance no matter what, to get into her new body. Surely she’s marked her target by now, so don’t think the actual amount of distance would be much of an obstacle when the time comes.”

“Not *much* of one,” Emer murmured, glancing meaningfully at her granddaughter. Maeve looked confused as Jane felt, though, and so the older woman pressed on. “But physical distance is still relevant, because she’ll have to go airborne. There’s no other way.”

“She’s saying it’s not a body switch,” Maeve explained to the others. “Everything in the world takes up some kind of space, even Hasina’s soul. She has to move from one body to the other in order to take it over, which means she has to be out of both bodies for, like, half a second.” She paused, looking pensive. “It’s a point of vulnerability, maybe.”

“A vulnerable half second?” Harris scoffed. “So we could kidnap Lynne and tie her up in our kitchen, and she could still jump bodies when we inevitably blink?”

“No, she couldn’t,” Maeve replied, glancing at her grandmother for approval. Emer nodded for her to go on, her own green eyes glowing with pride. “It’s a difficult and dangerous spell with an exact time limit. The precise moment of the body-switch has already been determined; it was set in stone the moment she started the spell. Which she probably did as soon as she heard that Annette was still alive, so we can narrow it down to one specific evening.”

Jane flashed back to the moment she had told Lynne, during their tête-à-tête in Central Park, that she had found Annette. Lynne had breathed all her magic into her silver athame and handed it over to Jane in exchange for Annette’s whereabouts, vowing to never come after her again. But Lynne had probably rushed straight back home to set the spell in motion, while Jane went off in the other direction thinking that all her problems were over.

“André wanted me to kill Annette,” she said quietly. “He thinks it’s the only way to make us all safe.” She glanced up, looking at each face for a long moment before moving on to the next. “I want you all to be safe. I don’t know if I’ll be able to fight Hasina once she’s in Annette’s body, with all her magic and a whole new life ahead of her. But there’s a week and a half left to prevent that from even happening, so now is the time to stop her. I dragged that poor girl into this mess, and if we can give her a way out, I want—I *need*—to try.”

“Of course you do,” Dee assured her quickly. “And we’ll all help.” She shot a meaningful glare at Harris, who looked like he was biting his tongue.

“Thank you all,” Malcolm told them sincerely. “I know that my family has done nothing to earn your goodwill, so it means a lot to me that you’d even consider helping my sister. I hope that once Hasina is banished from our lives, we can be friends—or at least, not such enemies.” He shot Emer a smile that would have melted marble, and even Harris looked moved.

Jane glanced between them approvingly. *It’s a start.*

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