

## Chapter 1

By nine o'clock on Halloween night, I had decided that something was definitely off with the witches of Boulder.

If I hadn't been leaning against a wall watching the crowd, I probably wouldn't have noticed it, or maybe I would have written it off as their discomfort with my presence. Hazel Pellar, the witch leader of all of Colorado, had invited me to her farm to attend her clan's Samhain festivities—a cocktail party followed by some kind of outdoor ceremony—as a PR move, to prove to the other witches that I wasn't really as scary as my abilities might imply.

It was a nice thought, I guess, but the night was turning into a minor disaster. The other witches didn't want anything to do with me, since my magic deals exclusively with the boundary between life and death. In their defense, witches with my bloodline have been accused of some pretty horrific things over the years: child sacrifices, raising armies of the dead, killing people with our minds. Not to mention fairly large chapters of the Inquisition. I wish I could say it was all slander, but really, that list was probably just what boundary witches had gotten *caught* doing.

As for me, well, I had only found out about all of this a couple of months ago, but that didn't seem to matter to the women chatting in tight clusters on the other side of Hazel Pellar's living room. If anything, my ignorance only made me *more* dangerous in their eyes. I did have a couple of allies in Clan Pellar, but Hazel's son Simon was still at home recovering from injuries he'd sustained while helping me, and his sister Lily had been pressed into service as co-host: putting away coats, checking on refreshments, that kind of thing.

So I stood alone, nursing a glass of white wine and trying to keep my own social anxiety off my face. All the isolation gave me plenty of time to notice a certain uneasiness in the air, a

miasma that seemed to spread from person to person like an airborne electric shock. It wasn't just my presence, because the witches arriving at the party seemed ill at ease before they even spotted me.

I reached out and snagged Lily as she rushed through the room with a stack of napkins. "Hey, Lex!" she said brightly, wheeling around to face me. Lily was dressed like most of the women at the party, in a long skirt and knit top with little holes punched through the sleeves for her thumbs, a modest silver nose ring in one nostril. On everyone else, the look seemed like an amusingly outdated attempt at hippie chic. But with her flawless dark skin and inherent grace, Lily could have just stepped off a bohemian runway. "Sorry I haven't been by yet. I want to hear all about your trip." I winced, not really ready to discuss the unfortunate few days I'd spent in Los Angeles. Luckily Lily trailed off, looking around me with annoyance. "No one's talking to you?" she demanded.

"No, but—"

Her pretty face clouded over with irritation. "Goddamn witches," she spat. "They shouldn't be ostracizing you; acceptance is supposed to be their whole thing." She set a fistful of napkins down on a nearby table and turned around to face the room. "Let me just have a word with a few of these nice . . . *ladies*."

"Whoa." I grabbed her elbow as she stepped forward, steering her back to me with her own momentum. "Leave it, Lily. Yelling at them isn't going to get me anywhere."

"But they're treating you like a leper because of your frickin' *blood*," she protested, getting worked up. "This is such archaic bullshit! Not to mention total hypocrisy—"

"Maybe," I interrupted her, keeping my own voice low. "But the last time these people

saw me, I was drunk on magic and about to flick your mother into the next county. Give them some time.” Lily’s face softened a little, and I pressed my advantage. “Time in which I appear to be calm, normal, and harmless. Not like a kid throwing a tantrum because she can’t make friends.”

She held up her hands. “Okay, okay. I’ll play nice.”

“Thank you.” I took a deep breath. “Listen, is something else going on tonight?”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s a weird vibe here. At first I thought it was just . . . you know, *me*, but everyone seems really antsy.”

Lily frowned and looked around, her gaze taking in the tight body language of the guests. Then she squeezed her eyes shut, a look of fierce concentration on her face. When she opened them again, she surveyed the crowd critically, and I knew she had tuned in to the magical spectrum to check their auras. I couldn’t do that. Nor could I access most of the other magic available to these witches. I could tune into a magical spectrum of my own, but it was pretty much limited to seeing life essences, the spirits or souls that inhabited living creatures. “You’re right,” she murmured. “Their auras are weird, like they’re churning or something. Well, not *yours*, of course—”

“Lily,” said a steely voice behind us. I turned and saw Hazel Pellar approaching. She was a Caucasian woman in her mid-fifties, dressed in simple black slacks and a bronze-colored sweater that set off the silver in her long braid. She looked stern, but to be fair I don’t think I’d ever seen Hazel when she *didn’t* look stern. “Where are those napkins? That wine spill is starting to set.”

“Mom, are you seeing these auras?” Lily asked. “They’re all shifty tonight.”

I watched Hazel’s reaction carefully. I knew from experience that unlike most witches, Hazel Pellar couldn’t turn off her view of the magical plane. She saw auras all the time, which was why she’d thrown me into the side of my own car the first time we met. Boundary witches have very telling black auras, a fact I’d learned when I regained consciousness.

“It’s been happening for days, on and off,” Hazel said briskly. “I’m sure it’s just the sabbat on everyone’s mind. Napkins, please.”

Lily hesitated, looking like she wanted to argue, but after a moment she just shrugged, shot me an apologetic look, and hurried toward the living room with the napkins in hand.

Hazel turned to face me, and I tried not to squirm. I did *not* like having Hazel Pellar’s full attention. “How has it been going?” she asked, her voice brisk and businesslike. Just to make sure I knew this wasn’t actual small talk. “Is your niece okay? The tattoos are working?”

I nodded, automatically reaching down to rub my forearm under my sweater. “The tattoos are working. Lily’s going to start teaching me about channeling, now that Simon’s doing a little better,” I said. “And Charlie is fine. My brother-in-law had her checked out just to be safe, but the doctor said her health is perfect.”

Hazel nodded and turned to face the room. The witches nearest us were talking in low, frightened tones, their arms wrapped around themselves.

“What’s really going on with them?” I said quietly. “It’s not just the holiday, or me being here, is it?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Hazel admitted. “Word has spread that you’re working for the *vampires* now”—her voice hardened with distaste—“and no one’s happy about it. But they were

like this before you arrived tonight.” I opened my mouth, but she added tiredly, “I don’t know what it is, Lex. I really don’t.”

Whoa—Hazel Pellar was admitting she didn’t know what was happening? I actually considered teasing her for a second, but Hazel looked genuinely troubled, and it occurred to me how much our positions differed: I was still stumbling through all this magic stuff, which meant I was allowed to make mistakes. The other witches may have disliked me, but none of them expected me to know anything. Hazel, on the other hand was supposed to have all the answers. It must have felt pretty awful for her to suddenly have no idea what was going on. “Do *you* feel different?” I asked.

The older witch frowned, and I could see her eyes lose focus as she considered the question. “That’s the interesting part,” she said. “It’s almost . . . power-based.”

“Power-based,” I echoed, just to keep her talking.

“Think of witches as batteries for a moment, with varying degrees of power left in them,” she lectured, and for a moment she sounded exactly like her son, the professor. “In our clan, I would be at the high end, and someone like Tracy”—she nodded toward a petite Asian woman in the corner, Simon’s long-term girlfriend—“would be at the low end. But look at her.”

Tracy was huddled with her arms wrapped around herself, rocking back and forth on her heels just a bit. She was trying to listen to the woman in front of her, but her eyes kept jerking around like she was being hunted. “That could be anything,” I pointed out. “A bad day at work, an argument with family. Maybe she has a cold.”

“True. But you yourself noticed how many people seem affected. Something just seems a bit unsettled, that’s all.” She shrugged, then seemed to remember who she was talking to. “Wait,

are *you* feeling different?” Hazel demanded. My powers could be dangerous, and she was already more or less convinced that I was going to go off the deep end at any moment.

In her defense, she had already seen me do it once.

So I thought about her question carefully, using the techniques Simon had taught me in my training to examine my own feelings and mood. I was definitely uncomfortable, but I didn't think it had anything to do with magic, just being at this party. It was unusual for me to be in a room with this many people who weren't my own family, and like many veterans, crowds made me nervous. Especially borderline-hostile crowds of judgmental witches.

It didn't seem like a great idea to say any of that to Hazel, though. “Nah,” I said finally. “Nothing out of the ordinary. Lily seemed okay, too.”

“And Lily's more powerful than most of them,” she muttered, but I didn't think she was talking to me. I had been the one to point out the weird mood in the air, but now I found myself not wanting to discuss it. I just wanted to get out of there.

Hazel saw my discomfort and glanced at the clock on the wall. “Lex, I appreciate you coming here tonight, that you're trying,” she said, without looking at me. “But we're about to start our sabbat rituals, and they're agitated enough without adding a—” her voice faltered for a moment, and I could almost see her effort to avoid the term *boundary witch*, “—new person,” she finished instead. “It's up to you, but it might be best if you ducked out before we begin the ceremony.”

I set my wineglass down on the nearest hard surface. Didn't have to tell me twice.

To my surprise, Hazel abruptly stepped forward and enveloped me in a warm hug. “It was great that you could join us,” she said brightly, which is when I realized we were putting on

a show. "Take care, now." I hugged her back, forcing myself to smile.

I reminded myself that I should be grateful to Hazel for making an effort to assimilate me into her clan at all. Boundary witches had a reputation for being truly evil, an aberration. Judging by the looks we were getting, there were plenty of members who'd just as soon have me burnt at a stake, like so many of my ancestors. But while I didn't entirely blame them, I didn't have to stand there and take it, either. As soon as Hazel stepped away, I practically sprinted for my car.