

# Chapter 1

“Come on, Lily,” I urged. “You can hit me harder than that.”

My best friend glowered at me, the light boxing gloves looking absurdly large on her slim wrists, but she tried again, poking her right fist into the palm I held up for her. When I worked with her brother Simon, I put on defensive gloves to protect my wrists, but it wasn't really necessary with Lily. She may have been a fairly powerful witch, but her physical interests leaned toward yoga and Pilates, not violence.

Violence was more my thing.

We were in the basement of my little cabin just outside Boulder, Colorado, which I'd turned into a reasonably sophisticated home gym. It was after nine on a Tuesday in May, but Lily was a night owl and I was pretty much nocturnal these days. That's what happens when your boyfriend and your boss are both vampires.

“That was an okay jab,” I said, trying to sound encouraging. “But if you really want to hurt someone, you've got to get your shoulder behind it.” I turned around so I was lined up next to her, demonstrating with my own right arm. “See how I'm putting the whole weight of my body behind the punch?”

I resumed my previous position, and she made another flailing attempt at my hands. “Better,” I lied. “Why don't you go work on the heavy bag for a while?”

Lily trudged to the corner and began smacking the heavy bag I'd attached to the exposed rafter, looking tired and frustrated but determined. Behind her, my eye caught a flicker of smoky light, but I forced myself to look away. Ghosts fade over time, and this one was so ancient it was no more than a little flare of death magic. I was actually lucky that this was the only part of my house that seemed to be haunted.

Or at least that's what I kept telling myself.

While Lily beat ineffectively on the heavy bag, I picked up a jump rope from a weight bench and began skipping rope, calling out occasional words of encouragement that had little effect on Lily's form. Lily had an inherent grace thanks to childhood ballet and lots of yoga, but that grace didn't seem to translate to

coordination. I tried not to wince as I watched her throw weak punch after weak punch.

The previous fall, Lily's life had been threatened—by her own older sister, of all people—and she'd had to use combat magic to escape. Lily had done everything right, but the whole experience of using powerful apex magic to hurt someone had really scared her. Moreover, Morgan had gotten into her little sister's head. Her taunts about Lily's flightiness and naiveté to the real world had created wormy little holes in my friend's self-confidence.

I hadn't understood how much it was bothering her until a few weeks after Morgan's banishment, when Lily turned up on my doorstep and begged me for lessons in physical defense: shooting, fighting, the whole deal. Teaching Lily seemed only fair—she and her brother had been giving me magic lessons since I'd first found out I was a witch back in September.

Despite five months of training, Lily hadn't made much progress, but then, I knew that this wasn't really about being able to handle herself. It was about feeling like she could handle herself.

After a few minutes, Lily paused, panting, and turned to glare at me. "I'm sweating like Ted Striker, and you're not even breathing hard," she grumbled.

I managed to laugh without letting it break my rhythm. I mostly preferred older movies, while Lily watched all the new stuff, but we'd found common ground in our love of *Airplane!*

I put down the jump rope, taking pity on her. "Speaking of movies, how about we stretch and then go upstairs?" I suggested. "I got more of that popcorn you like." Lily and Simon's magic lessons had petered out recently—there was only so much they could teach me, a boundary witch—so the siblings had taken it upon themselves to start teaching me the history of magic instead. For Simon, this involved lectures and the occasional assigned reading. Whenever it looked like my attention was wandering, he would bark at me to use my magic, trying to improve my reflexes.

For Lily, though, it meant watching her favorite movies that contained witchcraft so she could critique them for accuracy. I strongly suspected the whole thing was a ploy to eat popcorn and trash movie witches.

Lily's face broke out in a broad grin. "I really think you're gonna like tonight's pick," she said, unstrapping her gloves.

"As long as it's not fucking Suspiria again," I warned, not really kidding.

"Hey, it was just a little gore," Lily protested. She hesitated for a moment, rubbing her hands where the tape had been. "Any word from John?"

"No."

A month ago, I'd finally gotten up the nerve to tell my brother-in-law about the Old World.

It was probably the hardest conversation of my life. I'd had to explain that his only daughter was a null, a coveted asset in the supernatural world, which would put her in danger for more or less her entire life. Nulls negate all the supernatural power in a given area, which makes them terribly useful to vampires, witches, and werewolves, for a number of different reasons that range from innocent to atrocious. Theoretically, Charlie would now be protected until adulthood, thanks to my deal with the state's cardinal vampire, Maven, but there would always be some risk. She would always be vulnerable.

John had not taken this news well. In fact, when I finally convinced him that I wasn't schizophrenic, he had pretty much thrown me out of his house. Since then, he hadn't returned any of my calls or texts, and he'd stopped going out with his work friends on Fridays, which was my usual night to babysit. When we were in the same room at a family function he treated me with polite cordiality, but that was it.

I wasn't used to going more than a few days without serious Charlie time, so the last month had been hard.

"He decided to take Charlie and my parents on a last-minute trip to Disney World for Charlie's birthday," I reported. "They left yesterday morning."

"What's Clara doing while they're out of town?" Lily said curiously. Clara was Charlie's vampire bodyguard.

"Oh, she went along. Maven flew a coffin down to Orlando and had a human contact pick her up," I reported. "She's mostly guarding a closed hotel room door, but she checks in with me every night so I know Charlie's okay."

Lily searched my face, sensing my trepidation. "When are they coming back?"

“I don’t know.”

Lily reached out and gave my shoulder a quick squeeze. She knew me well enough to know that part of me hoped John would never come back to Boulder. He could just . . . I don’t know, buy a condo in Orlando and stay there forever. Charlie would be out of reach for Maven and all the other Old World creatures who might want a piece of Charlie.

It was a nice fantasy, but even if John never came back to Boulder, Charlie would still be a null. Eventually, some other supernatural creature would figure out what she could do for them, and I wouldn’t be there to protect her.

“You look tired, Lex,” Lily ventured. “Have you—”

She was interrupted by a loud, hollow thunk from the other side of the basement. Lily paused, giving me a questioning look. “Was that the boiler or something?”

“No . . .” I squinted at the dim light across the room. There were only a couple of bare lightbulbs down here, and they were all over by the gym equipment. It hadn’t really sounded like a boiler, more like someone gently tossing a baseball into the window well farthest from us. But the nearest neighbors were half a mile away.

I shrugged it off, figuring a stray rock or clump of dirt had been knocked down, bumping into the glass. Or maybe it was starting to hail. “Anyway, I’m fine,” I started, but then the thunk sounded again. And again, louder this time. Lily and I had just enough time to exchange a concerned glance before we heard the glass shatter inward and a small, dark blur streaked into the basement, across the concrete floor. Right at us.

I sprinted three steps to a nearby chair and leaped onto it, managing to keep my balance after a wobble. “Lily!” I yelled, but my friend had already jumped onto the weight bench, looking rather comically like a fifties housewife hiding from a mouse. Except this intruder was a lot bigger than a mouse.

“Where did it go?” she called. We were both turning now, scanning the room, but the creature was nearly the same color as the concrete floor. There was a moment of stillness, and then a furious chittering sounded from right beneath Lily’s weight bench. She froze. “What is it?” she hissed. “A squirrel?”

“Too big.” I squinted, trying to make out the furry shape. It was the size of a small dog, but the body wasn’t right. It shifted, letting out a sort of furious, strangled hiss, and for just a second I could make out its full silhouette. “Fox, I think. Gray fox.” I tried to remember my aunt Violet’s many nature-walk lectures. There was something unique about gray foxes, something important . . .

“They can climb!” I shouted to Lily. But the warning came too late—the fox was already scrabbling up the metal crossbars of the weight bench where Lily still stood. “Lily, run!”

She looked around for a second, panicked, and then reached up, stretching on her tiptoes to get both hands around the rafter beams. Kicking her legs, she swung back and forth for a moment. The fox had reached the top of the bench and began swiping furiously at her ankles, letting out a high-pitched, rhythmic bark. In the full light of the gym area, I could see its wild, frantic eyes—and the line of white foam clinging to its lips. Rabies, I thought, fear wrenching my stomach sideways. I looked around, but all my weapons were locked away upstairs.

Lily had gotten her legs up and managed to jam her feet and ankles into the tiny space between the rafter beam and the ceiling. The fox snarled—my God, could foxes even make that sound?—and went up on its hind legs, clawing at the air where Lily had been. It turned in a frenzied circle, and then its feverish eyes fixed on me. It hissed, spattering the weight bench with foamy saliva. Shit. I needed a better, higher place to go, but there was only a small metal stand for kettlebells, the weight bench, the chair, and a treadmill, none of which seemed all that great for defense against a rabid animal. I could run for the steps, but the fox would be able to climb those just as well as I could, and if it got through the door, it could infect all my rescue animals.

“What’s happening?” Lily shouted, unable to see. Her voice was strained. She looked like she was crouched on all fours, but upside down. Only her ankles were actually being secured by the rafters, which meant she was holding the rest of her body up there. I probably would have fallen by now. Maybe I had underestimated those yoga muscles.

I looked back down, but the fox had vanished. “It’s—” I started to say, but I was interrupted by a crash. The fox had managed to tip over the weight bench, which

clanged down on the concrete, sending hand weights and water bottles skittering across the floor. My dogs had started barking in a frantic chorus on the other side of the basement door, and were scratching at the knob hard enough for me to shoot a worried look at the steps.

“Lex!” Lily wailed, now dangling over nothing but a concrete floor. The fox was nowhere in sight.

“Quiet, please,” I ordered. I listened, turning my head back and forth for the sound of movement. There was a bit of rustling, but it wasn’t loud enough for me to pinpoint. “Can you throw something at it?” I called out to Lily, referring to the combat magic she’d used against Morgan.

“Not if I can’t see it. And not upside down.” She made a small grunt of exhaustion in the back of her throat, and I realized she wasn’t going to be hanging on much longer anyway. The fall wasn’t high enough to hurt her, but if she dropped down, there’d be nothing protecting her from this thing. If I could just see it—

I heard a tremendous hiss that seemed to come from an inch behind my head. Acting on pure reflex, I dropped and rolled sideways as fast as I could, just as the fox sprang at me. Its body, rigid with rage and madness, went sailing over me like we were playing a demented game of leapfrog, its legs scrabbling for purchase. Even out of the corner of my eye I could see the flash of its exposed teeth as it snarled.

I popped up and raced across the basement, away from the stairs, heading straight for the washing machine. I jumped on top of it, hearing the small thud of the fox hitting the side of the machine below me, but not as far below me as I would have liked. It could jump.

It pulled back and leaped again, tiny claws scrabbling impotently. It came close, but I was pretty sure it couldn’t jump high enough to get on top of the machine. It hissed and barked with frustration, and a wave of stench rolled over me: the smell of old death. I almost gagged. My dogs had rolled around in dead animals, and I’d smelled repugnant things in Iraq, but this was different. What the hell had this thing been eating?

I looked around for something heavy that I could use to stun or kill it, but I was distracted by the screeching of its claws on the washing machine and the mad, high-

pitched noise exploding out of its throat, drowning out the muted barking from upstairs. The fox had to realize I was out of reach, but it was like it couldn't stop itself from pursuing me anyway. I was awed by the intensity of its desire to kill me.

Then the fox suddenly paused, going still, and as I looked at it one word popped into my brain: unnatural. Then its head turned away and I realized what the fox was looking at. Only ten feet behind it, Lily had dropped to the ground.

"Lily, run!" I cried, and my friend took a few halting steps toward the stairs. Her legs must have been numb, though, because she stumbled over one of the water bottles and went sprawling onto the floor.

With unbelievable speed, the fox shot toward Lily.