

BRONWYN GREEN

IMMORTAL CURSE



Witch Way

Immortal Curse
by Bronwyn Green

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A Witch Way Story

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P.O. Box 992

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Immortal Curse

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resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, places or occurrences, is purely coincidental.

To my Dad and my uncles who all attended Star School when it was a far less spooky place. To Kelly and Jen who thought visiting a creepyass, abandoned schoolhouse with me was a good idea. To Brynn who had to deal with the skulky ghost in her bathroom because of our bad choices. Sorry. I promise—we won't go back. To the skulky ghost who inhabits the old Star School building. Thanks for the story idea, but dude, you should probably move on and stay out of Brynn's shower. And lastly to Kris. Without your butt kicking and support, this story wouldn't have gotten finished.

Chapter One

Emma Boulton let herself sink beneath the surface of the steaming water, hoping the heat of the bath would ease the tension from her neck and shoulders. On a good day, teaching high school level English was difficult. On a day like today, it was hell on earth.

Amber, one of her students, was back in school after having missed several days to attend her grandmother's funeral. Unfortunately, the spirit of said grandmother decided to come to class with Amber. Once the old woman had figured out Emma could see her, she'd spent the entire day in her room, throwing markers, fiddling with the window blinds and dropping books.

Only one student had caught sight of the spirit, but she'd wisely put her head down and closed her eyes. Normally, not paying attention in class was an instant detention, but Emma wasn't about to send her to the principal's office. Hell, if she could have gotten away with putting her head down on the desk and ignoring it, she would have done the same thing. It wasn't that she was afraid of ghosts, per se. But they were dead and the dead belonged on the other side—instead of staying here and throwing spit wads at the living.

Emma had stayed until even the cleaning crew had left the building and tried to convince Amber's grandmother to move on. It had taken several long hours, but eventually the old woman crossed over.

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Gripping the rim of the claw-foot tub, Emma pulled herself up to the surface and wiped the water from her eyes. She opened them, and a scream caught in her chest. A tall and decidedly transparent man leaned against her sink. Dressed as he was in a black suit, complete with a long frock coat, he looked like an antique photograph come to life. Shaggy, dark brown hair drooped across his forehead, and he pushed it aside. Deep blue eyes watched her intently.

"For fuck's sake," she was finally able to mutter.

"Language, Miss Boulton."

She grabbed a towel and quickly stood to wrap it around herself. Pointing at the door, she said, "Out. Out of my bathroom. Out of my house. Out of this plane of existence, already."

A dark eyebrow rose. "I'd love to. Really, I would." An Irish accent colored his words, and his deep voice wrapped her in tingling warmth. "However, I'm not leaving until you convince your harridan of a sister and her equally obnoxious companion to leave."

"What?"

"Your sister." He spoke slowly as though he thought she were an idiot. "Is in my schoolhouse. With her friend—the girl with red hair. They're not listening."

Realization sank like a stone in her stomach. "The abandoned schoolhouse on eighty-fourth street."

"The same. They have an Ouija board." Distain dripped from his voice. "A *pink* Ouija board."

She was going to kill Meaghan. And her friend, Rowan. She'd told them time and time again to stay away from there,

but they didn't listen. Now, she had to deal with a pissed off ghost.

"Look, I'm sorry they disturbed you, but they really don't mean any harm."

"I don't care. I want them out."

She sighed. Meaghan wanted nothing more than to see the same spirits Emma did, but it wasn't where her gift lay. She was a seer—not a medium. Of course, Emma heartily wished *she* wasn't a medium at the moment.

Tightening the towel around herself, she walked past the apparition. Just as she was about to pass through the bathroom door, he moved in front of her, simply appearing there in that annoying way ghosts had. Her next step carried her directly through his body, but instead of the icy cold that normally accompanied spirit contact, her body flushed with heat. She whirled to look at him, her surprise mirrored perfectly on his face.

"I can feel you," he whispered, sounding as shaken as she felt.

She forced herself to speak around the words that clogged her throat. "You need to go."

Without another word, he disappeared from view.

Blood pounding through her veins, she quickly darted into her bedroom and shut the door. Not that a closed door would keep out the ghost if he decided to return, but she clung to the false sense of security anyway. Quickly, she tugged a pair of underwear and jeans over her damp skin and pulled on a T-shirt.

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Grabbing her phone off the dresser, she punched in Meaghan's number. Pacing the room, she waited for her sister to pick up. As she passed in front of the mirror, she noticed the damn ghost lounging on her bed, watching her intently.

"Get out of my bed."

"I'm not in your bed, sister mine," Meaghan answered with a smile in her voice.

Emma nearly growled in frustration. "No. You're in a haunted schoolhouse, and the ghost who haunts it wants you out. Now."

"What?"

"The spirit who haunts the old school is here. In the house. Demanding that you leave."

"Cool! We'll be right home." She moved the phone away from her mouth and called out, "C'mon, Ro, we need to get home quick. The spirit is at the house."

Emma turned to the ghost. "They're leaving. You can go, too."

"No!" Meaghan screeched over the line. "Keep him there until we get back!"

"Bye, Meg." She disconnected and set her phone on the dresser. She never should have let her sister move in when she'd graduated from college.

Emma stared at the spirit expectantly. Instead of disappearing as she'd hoped, he arranged himself more comfortably on her antique quilt. He should have looked ridiculous stretched over the pale, floral print in his austere, black clothing. Instead, he looked like a fantasy come true—a

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gorgeous man in her bed—waiting for her. Except that he was dead.

"They're leaving." She crossed her arms over her chest. "That's your cue to follow suit."

He watched her through hooded eyes, his gaze slowly traveling over her body, lingering at the curve of her breasts before heading to her mouth.

She shifted uncomfortably under his heated appraisal, and her nipples tightened at the glow of appreciation evident in his expression. Great. The first man to show any interest in months was incorporeal and couldn't do a thing to ease the ache of neediness that had spread through her body.

"Seriously, it's time for you to leave."

"Are you sure you want that, sweet Emma?"

In the time it had taken her to blink, he'd gone from reclining on the bed to standing directly in front of her. She stumbled backward. He reached out as if he could catch her, but his hand went through her body like a heated caress. She backed away. She'd never had an experience with a ghost that hadn't ended with a bone deep chill. This was almost like being touched by a flesh and blood man ... except for the part where he passed through her body.

"You can either leave or I can force you to go."

"And how will you do that?" he asked, his voice a rough caress curling around her body, stroking her skin.

She had to swallow several times before she could actually form words. "Spells. I have spells."

His blue eyes hardened to shards of glass, and he stared at her. "Of course, you do. I should have known you for what

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you are. Foul witch." Without another word, he was gone, leaving the house emptier than she'd ever felt it.

* * * *

Ian O'Meara had told himself he wouldn't return to the witch, no matter what. However, he was standing at the foot of her bed, watching her squirm, the bedclothes tangling around her. She blew out a hard breath and shoved her long, silky brown hair off her face. Flipping onto her stomach, she clearly tried to get comfortable but to no avail. She rolled over again and kicked off her covers, freeing her beautifully bare legs. The light from the streetlamp showed through her window, bathing her in an almost ethereal glow.

Taking care to keep his presence undetectable, he moved closer to the bed. She lifted her head, and he froze, but she appeared to be checking the time on her clock. With a huge sigh, she reached toward the nightstand, yanked open a drawer, removed something and laid it on the bed next to her. As he watched, she pulled open her nightshirt and exposed her breasts. Had he had the capacity to breathe, his breath would have caught in his chest.

Her slender hands cupped the gentle mounds while her fingers pinched the already taut nipples. She rolled them between her forefingers thumbs, and it was all he could do not to join her on the rumpled bed. Inexplicably, arousal coursed through his body. He hadn't experienced that sensation for nearly a hundred and fifty years, but he recognized it. His skin felt too tight, his cock hardened and he swallowed hard, wanting nothing more than to draw those

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tight peaks into his mouth. That wasn't exactly true. If he were honest, he'd admit he wanted far more than that. He wanted to lose himself in the witch's supple curves until he felt alive again.

Her breath hitched, and his gaze followed her hand between her thighs. What he wouldn't give to replace her fingers with his mouth. He should leave. Standing here, watching her, was killing him. Well, it would have killed him if he wasn't already dead.

Emma wriggled out of her undergarment—if such a tiny scrap of fabric could be called that—and a quiet buzzing noise filled the room. She writhed on the twisted sheets as she parted the folds of her pussy with the object fashioned into the shape of a man's erect cock. The light from the window caressed her body while he watched the molded head stretch her delicate tissues as it disappeared into her body only to reemerge, slick with her juices.

She planted her feet on the mattress and lifted her hips, propelling the thing deeper inside her. Eyes closed and lips parted, she panted while she fucked herself. Her free hand tugged at her nipples, pinching sharply while she moved her hips and her hand faster. As much as he wanted to, he couldn't bring himself to touch her, to break the spell. He needed to see her release as much as she clearly needed to experience it. Unable to help himself, he inched closer.

Her scent drifted to him. Or at least, he imagined what her arousal would smell like. He'd lost his olfactory sense when he'd been banished to this ghostly existence. But he

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remembered the warmth of a woman's body, the soft, sweet tang of her juices as he'd buried his head between her legs.

His erection throbbed within the confines of his clothing as he watched the false cock disappear almost completely into her body. He loved the way her cunt gripped it, greedily trying to keep it inside her. Goosebumps rose on her exposed skin as she breathed faster, her muscles trembling as she strained toward release. He'd never seen a more beautiful sight in his life.

She was so close. She plunged the cock deeper and harder as she arched off the bed. Unable to help himself, he reached out and brushed his fingertip over her damp, swollen nub. She broke. Her body tensed, and she muffled her cry with her free hand as tremors rolled through her. Finally, she sank limply against the mattress and turned off the device.

Despite the fact, he knew he'd neither taste nor feel, Ian lifted his finger to his mouth and sucked off the moisture. Honeyed flavor burst across his tongue, and he gasped in surprise. He couldn't feel the sensation of his finger in his mouth, but he could taste her. How was this even possible? In the century since he'd been cursed, he'd felt nothing—not 'til she'd walked through him earlier this evening. And now he could taste?

It was related to her witchcraft. He was sure of it. Nothing else made sense. He'd had sporadic interactions with the living over the years since his death, and he'd never been able to feel any of them. He'd been able to discern a difference in temperature, but never feel them like he could feel Emma. He'd touched her, and with that touch, he'd

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pushed her over the edge into orgasm. His body ached to possess her, to pound into to her until she found her release again, calling out his name.

He glanced at the bed. She'd fallen headlong into sleep. Carefully, he pulled the blankets over her. She looked innocent ... sweet. Nothing like the witch she was. For the briefest of moments, he considered letting her attempt to free him from this plane—letting her free the souls of the children trapped at the schoolhouse—but he couldn't trust her. He couldn't trust she wouldn't send them someplace worse.

* * * *

Emma leaned on her desk as she read aloud from the textbook. Trying to get a bunch of fourteen and fifteen year olds to care about poetry, let alone interpret it, was nearly impossible.

"Brandon ... what about you? What do you think the second stanza means?"

"Dunno. It sounds dirty to me."

"What do you mean?" she asked, dreading the answer.

"He thinks everything sounds dirty," the girl next to him scoffed.

She sat on the desktop. "Can you explain it a little more clearly?" she asked Brandon.

"Well ... he's talking about 'pulsing, shooting life' like it's a ... you know ... one of those things that means something else."

"A euphemism?" she supplied.

"Yeah. That. A euphemism for sex."

"I think the boy is onto something," a voice behind her desk whispered.

She whipped around her head to find the ghost slouched in her chair, watching her expectantly. Her eyes widened and she mouthed, *go away*.

He ignored her directive with a grin. "That's a very suggestive poem to be teaching a group of young men and women. Especially considering the way some of the boys watch you."

"Ms. Boulton? You okay?" one of the girls asked.

Turning her back to the infuriating ghost, she addressed the kids again. "Yes, sorry. Thought I heard a buzzing back there. I'm ... I'm allergic to ... um ... bees."

The girl who'd noticed the ghost of the dead grandmother the day before watched Emma with horrified fascination. More precisely, she watched the damn ghost.

Emma scanned the faces of the rest of her students. Some of them looked puzzled at her odd behavior, but no one seemed to sense anything was amiss—only Sarah in the back row. Trying to ignore the spirit behind her, Emma focused again on Brandon. "Well, I suppose sex is one way that stanza could be interpreted. Who's got another way of looking at it?"

A few students called out ideas. Acting as though this was any other class, she stood and jotted the ideas down on the white board, while the spirit leaned against it, critiquing her handwriting. The jerk. He watched her with a smile that hinted at secrets as his eyes swept the length of her body. He looked as if he were remembering seeing her naked in the

bathroom. Heated appreciation glowed in his eyes, and her nipples tightened traitorously beneath her knit top. She didn't miss the widening of his grin as his gaze dropped to her chest. Thankfully, he hadn't seen what she'd done last night. What she'd done last night while thinking of him. It had been the only way she'd been able to relax enough to fall asleep.

Carefully, out of view of her students, she wrote on the board. *Why are you here?*

"Why do you think, love? Your sister and her friend are at it again."

She wiped away the question, jotted down a few more student responses, then wrote, *Go away! I'll take care of it as soon as I'm finished with class.*

"I'll wait." He disappeared and resurfaced in the back of the room, near Sarah. The girl startled briefly, before settling into her seat and watching him warily. The spirit made his way around the room, peering at students' notebooks and textbooks while Sarah's gaze followed him around the room.

The ghost stopped behind Brandon's desk and gazed at the paper where Brandon wrote furiously. The boy shivered, suddenly seeming chilled, but otherwise had no reaction.

"Well no wonder he saw a euphemism for sex in that poem. It's clearly all the boy can think about."

Sarah giggled and looked down when the rest of the class turned to stare at her.

Great, she could hear him too, but obviously, the other kids couldn't. Small mercies. Still, Emma would need to talk to Sarah about the apparition.

"Okay guys. We need to talk about your next assignment."

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A chorus of groans filled the air.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I know, meanest teacher ever," she said with a grin. "Anyway, I want you to choose five poems by five different authors. You're going to spend the next week interpreting them in your journals. Then you'll pick your favorite and give a presentation to the rest of the class."

"What if we hate them all?" Jacob, the class smartass asked.

"Then choose better poems. I'll see you all Monday. Sarah, can I see you a minute?"

The girl slowly collected her books and shuffled toward the front of the room while the other kids raced out, eager to begin their weekend. The ghost stood near the windows, absently spinning the globe. Sarah's gaze stayed on him as she stopped at Emma's side.

"So..." Emma began.

"You see him and hear him, too?" Sarah asked in a rush. "I'm not crazy, right?"

"No, you're not. He's here." Emma glared at the spirit. "Unfortunately."

"I don't appreciate your tone, Miss Boulton."

"I don't appreciate you following me around, Mr. Whoever you are."

"Ian. Ian O'Meara."

Ian. It fit him.

Sarah sighed. "I was almost hoping you'd say I was crazy."

Emma patted her shoulder. "How long have you been able to see spirits?"

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The girl worried the edge of her notebook with her fingertips. "Off and on ever since I was little. My mom always said I was imagining things ... after a while, I used to think that maybe she was right. And then I saw that old lady in class yesterday." Sarah wrapped her arms around herself. "She freaked me out."

"And now there's this guy," Emma said, frowning.

"I don't mind him so much. He's pretty funny—and totally right about Brandon."

Emma laughed.

"So, do you see them all the time?" Sarah asked.

Emma's smile faded. "More often than I'd like. But hopefully, this one will go back where he belongs in the very near future."

The young woman looked again at the spirit who was watching them closely. "Why is he here?"

Scrubbing a hand over her face, Emma sighed. "My sister and her friend have invaded the place he haunts, and he wants them out."

Sarah's forehead wrinkled in confusion. "Then why not bug them?"

"They can't hear or see me," Ian volunteered. "So, I've come to your lovely teacher for help."

Emma rolled her eyes and turned her back on Ian. "I just wanted to make sure you were okay with..." She gestured loosely, unable to think of an adequate description of the situation.

"The crazy?" Sarah suggested.

"Yeah." Emma laughed. "That."

"Actually, it helps knowing I'm not the only freak—ohmygod! Not that I think you're a freak. I'm so sorry, Ms. Boulton."

"It's fine. Really. Freak works for me."

Emma laughed again, and Ian decided he quite liked the sound. He liked the way she interacted with her students. Granted, it was an infinitely more lax atmosphere than when he was a schoolmaster, but children today were far different than they were in eighteen-forty-nine. Emma's head bent close to the girl's as they talked quietly. Before the young woman left, she gave her teacher an impulsive hug that Emma returned.

"Any time you want to talk to me," Emma said, sliding a sidelong long glance at Ian, "about anything. My door is always open."

"Thanks Ms. B." She waved as she headed to the door, awkwardly waving at him, too. "Have a good ... or at least ... an interesting weekend."

Emma looked at him again. "I have a feeling 'interesting' is going to be an understatement."

She pulled out a phone and punched in a number. He'd observed enough over the last century and a half to stay current on technology. He couldn't use any of it, but he understood the basic idea behind most inventions.

"Damn it. It went to voice mail."

"Language, Miss Boulton."

"Screw you, Mr. O'Meara," she snapped as she dialed Rowan's number. Getting the same result, she tossed the phone in her handbag.

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He appeared behind her, close enough that his lips brushed her ear. "Gladly."

She whirled away from him. "Stop that! Stop appearing behind me!" Glancing toward the open door, she lowered her voice. "Look. I know you want them out of your ... home ... as much as I do, but trying to scare me isn't going to help."

"Maybe I'm not trying to scare you."

She met his gaze, her huge brown eyes wide and her full lips pressed tightly together. The memory of the way she'd looked last night filled his mind's eye. He wondered what she'd do if he kissed her. He didn't miss the way her gaze dropped to his mouth, but she turned away and busied herself with a stack of papers.

"You should just blip yourself somewhere else," she said without looking at him. "I'm heading to the schoolhouse now. I'll make sure they don't bother you again." She slung her bag over her shoulder and walked out the door, never checking to see that he did as she'd asked.

He sighed in frustration. He shouldn't want the witch, but when had he ever taken the path of least resistance?

Several minutes later, he materialized in her automobile. Though they hadn't yet been in use when he'd been alive, he'd explored them over the years. Emma's was small, red and filled with books and papers. Her footsteps approached, slowing when she noticed him in the passenger seat. She wrenched open the door and tossed her bags on the seat behind him.

"Do you actually need to ride with me?" she asked as she slid into the seat next to him. "Can't you just trust me that I'll do what I've said I'll do?"

"You're a witch."

"And...?" She left the question hanging.

"Witches aren't to be trusted."

For a moment, she looked as if she might respond, but her deep brown eyes clouded and she turned away. Discomfort prickled through him. Had he hurt her? It didn't matter. He knew what people like her were capable of. At least, he tried to tell himself that. Realistically, he knew not all witches were like Leona, but she *had* cursed him to this unending hell. It was difficult to trust any of them. Even ones who made him feel more alive than he'd felt before he'd died.

He glanced at Emma, her knuckles white as she clenched the steering wheel. "In my experience, ghosts aren't to be trusted either."

He laid a hand on her arm, feeling her muscles tighten beneath his fingertips. "I won't hurt you, but I do need your help, and I'm not leaving until I get it."

"Fine," she said, her voice heavy with annoyance. She yanked a strap over her shoulder and secured it at her waist before starting the engine and pulling onto a street filled with similar vehicles.

After a seemingly endless silence, she asked, "So ... who did this to you?"

"And what did I do to deserve it?" He filled in her unspoken words, and she looked somewhat sheepish.

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When she didn't answer, he continued. "Her name was Leona." He stared out the window, absently watching the congested landscape of the city pass by.

Emma remained quiet, patiently waiting for him to continue.

"She was the sister of a woman I was courting."

"What happened?"

"An Irish immigrant school master wasn't good enough for her sister. When she discovered our plan to elope, she cursed me."

"The bitch!"

He chuckled wryly. "On that, we can agree."

"What happened to your poor fiancée?"

He shrugged. "Clarice got over it quickly enough and married a man her sister approved of in under six months."

"What a *hag*."

He sighed. "She didn't know. Leona told her I'd left the country to return to Ireland." In the end, it had all come down to money. Leona had never had any desire to marry and wanted Clarice to wed someone wealthy enough to look after them both. Leona, of course, could see him and had taken great pleasure in visiting the schoolhouse to tell him of Clarice's wedding, the births of her children, her happiness with her husband.

In the early days of his curse, he'd been bound to the schoolhouse and remained bound until after Leona had died. Even now, he couldn't travel far from the school without the anchor of a powerful medium. And Emma was the strongest one he'd ever come across.

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"And no one found your ... body?" she asked, returning his attention to the present.

He shook his head. "I don't even know where it is."

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "I don't blame you for being angry."

He suppressed a growl of frustration. The last thing he wanted from her was her sympathy. "It doesn't matter," he snapped. "All I want now is my peace and quiet, and for that, I need you to keep your sister and her friend away from me."

"If you were this much of a jerk to Leona, I don't blame her for cursing you," she muttered half under her breath.

He knew he was being irrational. It wasn't her fault the other women didn't listen. And yet, he couldn't seem to stem his anger. She made him want things he'd abandoned since Clarice had wed another. There was something about Emma that gave him hope and made him long for the impossible. He crushed the thought. Hope led only to madness.

She turned off the main road and pulled up next to a squat building.

"This isn't the schoolhouse," he pointed out.

"I'm aware. But if you're going to insist on pestering me, then you can damn well wait until I get some freaking coffee."

"Language, Miss Boulton."

She glared at him, her dark eyes narrowed. "Don't you *language* me. I'm not one of your pupils."

He snorted. "If you were, I'd have turned you over my knee already."

Her lips parted in surprise before she turned away from him, she spoke to a disembodied voice outside the window.

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She pulled the car up to a window in the building and an overly friendly young man handed her a tall, steaming white cup. Lifting the cup to her lush lips, she took a swallow then groaned, closing her eyes.

The sound of her pleasure shot straight through him, reminding him of the wanton picture she'd presented the night before, sheets tangled, hips lifting as she fucked herself with the false cock. He shifted in his seat, decidedly uncomfortable as arousal once again assailed him. He'd never seen a more carnal sight.

Over the years, teenagers from all generations had used the abandoned schoolhouse for everything from illicit parties to sex. Hell, they still did. He'd seen plenty of naked, twining bodies, but nothing that affected him like Emma did. He wanted to watch her do it again. He wanted to touch her while she did it. He wanted to bury himself inside her warm, willing flesh.

After taking another drink, Emma set her cup in a small well and started to move the car forward.

"What were you imaging last night before you fell asleep?" he asked.

The vehicle jerked to a sudden stop, and a horn sounded from behind them.

"What?" she demanded, her cheeks bright pink. Refusing to look at him, she focused on the traffic and pulled on to the street. "What are you talking about?" she finally asked, her voice painfully even.

"Last night," he reiterated. "You were pleasuring yourself. I asked what you were thinking about."

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"You *watched* me?" If possible, her cheeks flushed brighter and she swallowed convulsively.

He didn't answer. What could he possibly say?

"None of your damn business. Stay out of my room. Stay out of my house. Stay out of my classroom and stay out of my car. Just ... stay the hell away from me."

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Chapter Two

Emma couldn't believe the damn ghost had watched her get off last night. Despite her anger and mortification, desire tingled to life, and she prayed he couldn't read minds. Of course, if he could, he'd likely be gloating right now because she'd been thinking about him the whole time. Imaging that he was just as gorgeous naked as he was in that sober, black frockcoat. Imaging his mouth on her body, his cock filling her.

What the hell was the matter with her that she was attracted to a spirit? Maybe it was the accent, she reasoned. Or the fact that he was the hottest man she'd ever laid eyes on. Or maybe it was simply that being a ghost he was completely unattainable, and she didn't need to worry about rejection.

She hazarded a glance at him. He seemed to be intently inspecting the interior of the car—better than avidly studying her as he had been. Every time she thought about him watching her last night, she wanted to crawl into a hole. At least, he was dead, she reasoned. Masturbating in front of a flesh and blood man would have been so much worse. Once she got Meaghan and Rowan to clear out of the schoolhouse, Emma would likely never see the spirit again.

Silence stretched between them. Trying to will away her humiliation, she watched as the strip malls became fewer and farther between, giving way to the rolling hills of the outlying farmland. In a few minutes, they'd be at the schoolhouse and he'd be out of her hair.

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A pang of sadness tugged at her. "Look," she began. "You don't need to be trapped on this plane forever. I know witches aren't your thing, but I can help you move on. I can help you get to where you need to go."

Ian remained silent as she pulled her car alongside the decrepit schoolhouse. The majority of the white paint had peeled away to expose the gray, weathered wood beneath. The bell was long gone from the roof, and nearly every pane of glass in the windows was cracked or shattered. The glass that remained in the frames glinted like dirty, broken teeth. Chicken wire covered the openings from the inside, and the shutters hung drunkenly off the building.

Parking the car, she met his gaze.

"I can't leave," he said. "I have duties to see to here."

"What duties? You're dead."

His eyes hardened and without another word, he vanished from the car.

Emma thumped her head against the headrest and sighed. Probably not the best thing she could have said, but dead was dead and he needed to move on. In fact, he was way past due.

She got out and walked through the thigh-high brown grass toward the back of the building. An overgrown orchard, full of gnarled apple trees covered the land behind the schoolhouse. For a moment, she thought she heard the faint sounds of children laughing, but the wind carried away the noise before she could be sure.

From the corner of her eye, she caught sight of the spirit of a little girl, peering at her from behind a tree. Long black

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hair hung almost to the child's back, and she held an apple in her cupped hands. It was hard to tell because of her transparent state, but she appeared to be of Hispanic descent. Emma peered more closely, and a sharp chill raced through her. The ghost looked like the little girl who had gone missing several years ago from her family's farm a few miles away. Emma took a couple tentative steps toward her, but the child vanished as if she'd never been there.

Wrapping her arms around herself, Emma turned away from the orchard. The setting sun shone through the golden leaves on the trees, casting an eerie glow over the land around her. The sharp scent of wood smoke and the overly sweet smell of apples rotting on the ground filled the cool, autumn air. She loved this time of year, except for the part where spirits came out of the woodwork. The closer it got to Samhain, the more active the ghosts were. They definitely took advantage of the thinning veil between the planes. She saw spirits all year round, but once October hit, they were everywhere as evidenced by, Ian, the child and her student's grandmother.

Turning the corner, Emma nearly ran smack into Ian. He seemed oddly more transparent here than he had at her house or the school. Standing shyly behind him were three young children. Two girls and a boy. One little girl looked to have died during the same era as Ian. The boy's clothing appeared to be from the early nineteen thirties and the other little girl wore a bright, flowered mini-dress that appeared to be straight out of the nineteen seventies. Leaning insolently

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against the nearest apple tree was the ghost of a teenage boy, looking for all the world like a blond James Dean.

"What is this?" she asked. "Ghost Central?"

The young boy tugged on Ian's sleeve. "I think she can see us, sir."

Ian stared at her, his eyes still hard. "That she can, lad."

Refusing to look away from him, she held his gaze.

He motioned to the boy against the tree. "Donny, why don't you take the young ones off to play for a bit while I talk to Miss Boulton. And see if you can find Marisol."

Emma's blood nearly froze in her veins. That had been the name of the missing child from the farm. She pointed in the direction she'd come from. "If you mean the little girl with long, dark hair, I saw her over there."

All four children stared at her curiously then blipped out of sight one after the other like extinguished light bulbs. The breeze picked up, and Emma shivered, feeling as if she'd never be warm again. Of course, she wasn't sure how much was due to the weather and how much was due to the fact she was faced with a schoolyard full of ghosts. Adult spirits were one thing, but the ghosts of children broke her heart. Especially Marisol's. Her parents were still grieving, still searching for her.

Ian crossed his arms over his chest, his expression stern. She had no trouble imagining him in front of a Victorian era classroom. He looked with disgust toward the building. "They're inside with candles and that ridiculous pink Ouija board."

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"I'll get them to leave," she said as she glanced toward the back door. It hung from one hinge, a rusted padlock and chain in a pile on the ground nearby. "But you and the children need to move on from here."

His face clouded, and his brow furrowed. "Do you think we haven't tried to go toward the bloody light? Do you think we want to be stuck here?"

"If you'll let me, I can help."

He turned as if to walk away. Without thinking, she reached out and grabbed his hand. For the briefest of moments, his long fingers closed around hers, engulfing them with heat. Then her hand passed through his, falling loosely to her side.

"You're too closely bound to this plane. If you let me, I can help you and the children move beyond this place."

"We don't need the help of a witch." His eyes flashed a brilliant blue, and he stepped close to her, an attempt to intimidate her, she was sure. He held his hand between their faces and peered at her through the transparent flesh. "You can see how well that worked out for me the last time."

She refused to be cowed by him. "What about the children?" she demanded. "How were they trapped here?" Judging from the period of dress, it wasn't by the same person.

"They've just arrived over the years. Violet died of the fever a few years after I was cursed. Robert died of starvation and Janet fell."

"What about the older boy?"

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"Donny died in a car accident." Ian lifted his arm and pointed at a stand of trees. "He missed the curve."

"And Marisol?" she asked, though she was certain she knew the answer.

His expression darkened. "Murdered, I suspect. But she refuses to speak to anyone." He turned and looked out over the orchard, dismissing her.

She reached out to touch him, her hand hovering above his broad shoulders. "Please let me help. I can free you all from this place."

"Emma? Is that you?"

She whirled to see Meaghan peering out the door.

"What are you doing here? Who are you talking to?"

When Emma turned back, Ian was gone. She sighed as frustration welled up within her. "You and Rowan need to leave."

Meaghan shook her head. "We're not done, yet. Why don't you come in and give us a hand? Ghosts always like you better."

"I'm not going in there. There's a pissed off spirit here, and he wants you two out of there. Now."

Her sister's face lit up with excitement, and she scanned the area around the house. "Where is he? Is he here, now?"

Emma shook her head. "He left, but he wants you and Rowan gone. He came to class today, and one of my students saw him. He's serious, now get going."

"Is it the same guy from last night?"

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"Yes," she ground out. She couldn't help but imagine Ian standing by her bedside, watching as she made herself come. Heat crept over her cheeks again. She'd never live this down.

A scream sounded from inside the building, and Meaghan dashed away. Emma raced through the doorway and followed her sister up the rickety steps that led to the classroom. Rowan stood in the center of the room, her head whipping from side to side.

"Someone yanked on my hair," she whispered, her eyes wide.

Meaghan sighed. "Of course, we finally get some action when I leave the room."

"I'm outta here," Rowan said, rubbing her hands over her goose bump covered arms. "If you want to keep trying to contact the dead, do it on your own."

"We're leaving, anyway. The angry spirit that visited Em last night came back again today. He wants us gone."

"For real?"

"Yes, for real," Emma snapped. "Get your stuff together and come on."

Emma watched while the other two women gathered their belongings. As she observed them, the room seemed to change. For the briefest of moments, it was as if a velum overlay had been placed over the dirty, rotting woodwork, and she saw the interior of the schoolhouse as it once was. The polished hardwood floors gleamed as if freshly waxed and wooden tabletops crowned wrought iron desks sitting in tidy rows. A large wooden desk sat at the front of the room. She had no trouble recognizing the tall, imposing figure at the

head of the class. Ian gestured toward a map with a wooden pointer as children in nineteenth century dress repeated the names of the continents and countries.

She'd heard of places having memories and people with mediumistic talents being able to tap into them, but she'd never experienced it. As suddenly as it appeared, it was gone. It was a little disorienting. In place of the well-kept schoolroom were graffiti, empty beer cans and a few ratty looking blankets. The afternoon sun made octagonal shaped shadows as it showed through the chicken wire covered windows. The mesh shaped pattern stretched across floor, creeping up the sturdy built-in bookcase next to where Ian stood ... watching her.

From behind him, stepped the little girl in the brightly colored mini-dress. She stared at Emma intently, and Emma immediately felt the typical drop in temperature that she usually experienced when encountering a ghost.

"Donny said he heard you say you can free us from this place," the child said. "Can you really?"

Emma glanced at Ian, barely noticing as Meaghan and Rowan carried their supplies out to Meg's car, but his expression told her nothing. She looked back at the little girl. "Are you Janet?"

The child nodded, eyes wide, clutching Ian's hand.

"I'm Emma. I'm pretty sure I can free you and everyone else here, but I'll need my friends to help. Is that okay?"

"Yes. I'll make sure Violet doesn't pull anyone's hair."

Emma choked back a laugh and looked at Ian. His expression was unreadable. "Can I have a moment alone with Ian?"

The girl vanished without another word.

"Are you okay with this?" she asked. Before he could answer, she rushed to say, "I promise, I won't do anything to hurt them. They've suffered enough."

"Aye. They have."

"So have you," she murmured. "I understand that you're angry and bitter, and like I said, I don't blame you. I won't try to force you to leave if you don't want to."

"Do you swear you won't hurt them?"

"I swear. Do you really think I want you haunting me for an eternity?" She'd tried to make a joke, but it fell flat—ending up somewhere between genuine concern and breathy invitation.

He raised his hand and caressed her cheek. She fought the urge to lean into it, not wanting to feel her face pass through his hand. "Haunting you doesn't sound like a bad way to spend eternity. Particularly if I can watch you pleasuring yourself." His eyes glowed bright with desire, and her breath caught in her throat. "It was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," he continued. "It makes staying here tempting, but if you can end this miserable existence, then do it. I shouldn't ... but I trust you." He frowned as he brushed his thumb across her lower lip. "Don't make me regret it."

"I won't. I—"

"Hey, Em," Meg called. "You ready?"

Emma turned away from Ian. "Slight change of plans."

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"Oh?"

"Yeah. I need you and Rowan to run home, grab the salt, angelica root and enough sage to smudge the hell out of this place. Also get as many white candles as you can find and the big crystal formation on my dresser."

"Care to tell me what's going on?"

"There are six spirits trapped here. We're going to try to bring the light to them."

Her sister's eyes widened. "Okay then. Want me to see if I can round up anyone else?"

She thought of Marisol. "No ... there are kids here. I don't want to spook them more than necessary. But I will need you and Rowan to raise enough power to do this."

The other woman nodded. "We'll be back as soon as we can."

Emma watched her sister leave, feeling the temperature in the room drop sharply. Slowly, she turned around. Violet and Marisol stood behind her. Waiting.

"I think Marisol wishes to speak with you, ma'am," Violet said, her large dark eyes solemn, before vanishing from sight.

"What is it, Marisol?" Emma asked.

The child lifted a hand and pointed toward the door.

"You want me to leave?"

Marisol shook her head.

"You want me to go outside?"

She nodded once then preceded Emma down the back stairs. Though, to be fair, the little girl didn't walk as much as hover. When they reached the doorway, she disappeared and reappeared deep in the orchard. Emma carefully picked her

way over fallen logs and through tangled brambles toward where Marisol waited.

Dread churned in Emma's stomach as she got closer, and she had a horrible feeling she knew what the child wanted to show her. Marisol lifted her hand and pointed toward a fallen tree almost twenty yards away. Late afternoon sunlight cast lengthening shadows across the ground. The twisted, overgrown trees seemed to writhe around her as she moved farther away from the little girl.

Reaching the fallen tree, she noticed a torn black garbage bag. Feeling ill, she picked up a stick and caught the edge of one of the holes with the tip of the wood. Bright pink fabric showed through the tear. The same shade of pink as Marisol's knit shirt.

Tears burned Emma's eyes and clogged her throat. At least, her family would have the closure of burying her. She stumbled away from the makeshift grave toward the edge of the woods. Ian stood with Marisol, waiting for her.

Emma swiped at the tears that spilled over her cheeks and squatted down in front of the little girl. "Do you want me to call the police so they can let your family know?"

She nodded.

"I'll need to help you get to the other side first. Is that okay?" If she called now, the place would be crawling with cops, a forensics team and likely reporters. She just hoped they could find a clue to Marisol's killer.

The little girl nodded again.

"Do you know who hurt you?"

She shook her head and vanished.

Standing, Emma looked at Ian. He gently brushed the tears off her face.

"I'm sorry you had to see that," he murmured.

"Me too." She closed her eyes, but tears continued to spill from beneath her lashes. Ian wanted to take her in his arms, give her some small measure of comfort, but it was pointless. He doubted she'd take any comfort from passing through his non-existent body.

Opening her eyes, she pinned him with her wide, brown gaze. "But at least her family gets some peace, right?"

Before he could respond, the sound of gravel crunching beneath tires pulled her attention away from him.

Meaghan rounded the corner carrying a bag and hurried to her sister's side. "Em, what is it? Are you okay?"

Emma shook her head. "I'll explain it in a little while, let's just get this done." She turned back to him. "Will you please round up all the kids?"

He sensed most of them were in the schoolhouse already, but he needed to find Marisol and Violet. Nodding, he left Emma to search for the girls. He didn't have to go far. They were in their favorite spot, high in the branches of an apple tree on farthest edge of the orchard.

When they returned to the schoolhouse, Emma and the other two women were already lighting candles and burning foul smelling herbs. All of the children watched them curiously.

Donny turned to look at him. "Is it true? Can she free us?"

"I hope so." He didn't want to give the boy false hope, but he didn't want to worry him unnecessarily, either. He wasn't

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sure when he'd started trusting Emma, but he had. As a teacher, he knew she cared deeply for her students. He knew she'd never do anything to hurt them. That same level of concern extended to his charges. He trusted her to free them from this place.

He looked at the other two women. As obnoxious as they were, he trusted them, too. Annoying didn't equate to hurtful.

Rowan looked around almost nervously. "Is everyone here?"

Emma did a quick headcount. "We've got everyone. We're going to have to cast a bigger circle than usual to fit everyone inside." She held a slender, curved stick that looked to be made of oak. Pointing it toward the floor, she walked around them, chanting under her breath. As soon as she reached her starting point, a perfect circle formed on the floor and glowed with a blue-white light.

The children stared in awe at the figure shimmering on the floor, as Emma quietly intoned the words of her spell. He tried to ignore the prickle of discomfort that slid down his spine as her barely audible voice wove around him. Memories of Leona cursing him assailed him, but this time, there was no pain, no cold, no empty yawning darkness. Forcing a calm he didn't feel, he focused on Emma. He caught maybe every fifth or sixth word—lord, lady, earth, air, fire, water, spirit. The sounds darted through his mind like sleek, silver fishes he'd seen once in a decorative pond, leaving eddies in their wake.

Emma raised her arms ceiling-ward. It was easier to quell his unease when taking in the lithe line of her body, her shirt rising slightly to expose the silky-looking skin of her stomach.

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A faint blue-white glow encompassed her body and her words became more discernable.

*Spirits hail,
Thin the veil,
Take your lost,
Back across,
Through dark of night,
Into the light.*

At the far side of the circle, a pinprick of light materialized. As she repeated the charm, the light expanded, growing brighter, seeming to pulse. Another voice joined Emma's—Meaghan. The light flared brighter, and it seemed that a hole, or perhaps a portal, opened up in the wall. As the portal grew, the wall behind it disappeared entirely. Gone were the windows and the graffiti sullied plaster. For an unsettling moment, he had the feeling that he was looking through time and space. Sudden movement on the far side of the opening startled him. Shadowy figures crossed back and forth, some stopping to peer back at them. His apprehension grew as the shimmering opening continued to spread and more shapes gathered.

Rowan's voice joined the others as the portal now stretched from ceiling to floor. He glanced at the faces of the children, concerned that they'd be frightened. He needn't have worried. Their faces were lit with excitement, their joy rivaling the brightness of Emma's spellwork. Even Marisol was more animated than he'd ever seen her.

Emma turned toward them while the other women chanted. "It's ready, who wants to go first?"

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Robert hopped eagerly from foot to foot but didn't speak. "I'll go." Donny stepped forward.

Ian stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. "Perhaps I should make sure it's safe."

Donny shook his head. "You stay here with the pipsqueaks. I'll check it out." He tousled Robert's hair. "I'll be waiting for you on the other side, buddy."

Robert nodded, his eyes wide, watching as Donny swaggered toward the light, hesitating uncertainly before catching sight of one of the figures through the portal.

"Ma?" Donny asked, his voice cracking.

Though Ian couldn't hear the response, Donny must have. A smile split his face, and he strode quickly into the light, the brilliant blue-white glow swallowing him.

"Oh. My. God," Meaghan muttered. "I actually saw that."

"Keep the spell going," Emma snapped.

"Hey, lady," Robert said. "I wanna go next."

When she nodded, he turned back and gave Ian an impulsive hug. He dashed across the floor and through the opening, calling, "Mama! Papa!"

Emma wiped tears off her cheeks as she watched him disappear. Janet tugged her sleeve. "I'd like to go next. I think my grandmother's waiting."

"Go ahead, honey."

Violet clasped Marisol's hand. "You can come with me. My family will take care of you until yours gets there." Marisol nodded and the barest hint of a smile curved her lips. Together they walked forward, stopping next to Emma.

"Thank you, ma'am," Violet said with a small curtsy.

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Marisol looked up at Emma, her eyes bright with happiness and the first true smile he'd ever seen from the child. "Thank you for saving us."

"You're welcome," Emma managed to choke out, her voice thick.

Violet looked at Rowan. "I'm sorry I pulled your hair." Then she tugged the younger child toward the light, and they both vanished into the sea of shadowy figures beyond.

Relief and regret spread through him. Relief that the children were freed from this plane of existence, and regret that he was unlikely to see Emma again for a long time ... if ever.

She turned to face him, her cheeks still damp with tears, eyes shining. "Are you ready?"

"Almost." He stepped toward her and cupped her face, wiping her tears away with his thumbs. "You should know I'm not about to leave without tasting your mouth."

He felt her sharp intake of breath all the way to his gut. It tightened with anticipation as he leaned forward, hovering above her softly parted lips.

"Ian, I..." Her gaze dropped to his mouth before flitting back to his eyes.

Leaning closer, he whispered into her ear, his lips coasting over the silk of her hair, sending shivers rattling through her. "I'd rather have more of what I tasted the other night, but in our present company, this will have to do."

Surprise widened her eyes. "You—"

He refused to give her a chance to pull away. Lowering his mouth to hers, he brushed his lips across hers. He'd intended

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a gentle, chaste kiss, but as soon as he felt the softness of her mouth, he was lost. He coaxed her lips open before delving inside, stroking into her sweet warmth.

She raised her hands to his shoulders, but they passed straight through his body, having the same sobering effect on both of them. They straightened and awkwardly backed away from one another. For whatever reason, he could touch her, but when she tried to touch him, he was as insubstantial as mist.

"Holy shit!"

Meaghan's exclamation brought him back to himself, back to the present. He needed to let Emma go. He was dead. He could offer her nothing.

She watched him with wary eyes, her fingertips on her mouth.

"Thank you. For freeing the children and for freeing me."

She nodded slowly, her eyes never leaving his.

"Goodbye sweet Emma." He forced himself to turn away from her and walk toward the light. All of the shadowy figures had vanished. There was no one to meet him. It looked as if he were walking into a world as bright and empty as the sun. But he took with him her sweet taste and the soft scent of her skin.

Putting one foot in front of the other, he pushed aside the anxiety of walking into the unknown and focused instead on the memory of Emma's beautiful body, stretched out and naked on her bed. As he passed through the portal, he turned to look back at her one last time, but the brilliant glow closed around him obscuring her and the rest of the schoolhouse

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from view. He took a step forward and looked around. The light vanished, and he was plunged into instant suffocating darkness.

Anger superseded any fear he felt. The same thing had happened when Leona had cursed him. Well, the blinding pain was missing, but the all-encompassing darkness was identical. An ache pulsed in his chest. She'd tricked him. "You lied," he said, though he knew she couldn't possibly hear. And even if she could, it wasn't as if she'd care.

Emma stared at the space where the veil had been open—where Ian had vanished. Emptiness settled over her like a cold, damp blanket. Meaghan and Rowan's excited chatter drifted to her, sounding muffled and tinny as if the sound were being pumped through cheap headphones.

Over it all, she heard the ghostly echo of Ian's voice. *You lied*. The anguish in his tone ripped through her, weakening her knees 'til she sank to the floor. What had she done?

"Em? You okay?" Meaghan asked.

"You don't look so good," Rowan added.

"I'm okay." Emma forced herself to her feet and methodically opened the circle. There was no need to ground the energy they'd raised to open the veil. It had dissipated as soon as Ian had passed through. The tiny bit that had remained had fizzled out as soon as she'd hit the floor.

Both women watched her with twin expressions of concern on their faces.

"Can you guys cast a glamour over this room and make it look like we were never in here?" Emma asked.

"Yeah, but why?" Meg asked. "What's going on?"

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"I have to call the cops." The words tasted bitter in her mouth, and she wished more than anything that Ian was here. Despite the fact he annoyed her, he was still a reassuring presence in the face of what she had to do.

She forced herself to focus on the task at hand. "Did you see the little girl in the bright pink top?"

"With long black hair?" Rowan asked.

Emma nodded. "She led me to her body. It's in a trash bag out back. I need to call it in and report it, but I wanted the spirits to move on first."

Meg blew out the candles and began picking up their supplies. "Who knows when we would have had a chance otherwise."

"Exactly." Stomach in knots, Emma went outside, pulled her phone from her purse and dialed nine-one-one. When she went back to check on Meg and Rowan, it looked as if the schoolhouse hadn't seen a visitor in the last twenty years. "You guys are good," she murmured.

Her sister put her arm around Emma's shoulder. "I learned from the best."

She hugged Meg. "You guys don't have to stick around for this is you don't want to."

"We're not going to leave you to do this alone," Rowan added. "Besides, while we wait, you can tell us what the hell happened in there. Who were all those kids?"

"Who was the guy?" Meg demanded. "Is he the one we pissed off?"

Her sister's excitement tugged a small smile from her, but over it all she heard the echo of Ian's voice. *You lied.*

A squad car pulled in behind their cars, blocking them in. A uniformed officer got out of the car and ambled toward them, his hand resting loosely on the handle of his gun, the setting sun glowing behind his head. "One of you called for assistance?"

Emma stepped forward. "That would be me."

"What seems to be the problem?"

His cavalier attitude grated on her nerves. "The problem is there's a body in that garbage bag over there."

He frowned. "Why don't you show me?"

Emma picked her way through the shadow-clad ground, the autumn leaves crunching beneath her feet along with the occasional squish of a rotting apple. In combination with her solemn task, the sickeningly sweet scent almost gagged her. When she got near enough to see the black plastic poking up through the branches and several years worth of fallen leaves, she stopped and pointed. "If it's all the same to you, I'd just as soon stay back here."

The officer picked up a stick and tugged at the holes in the bag, exposing the same bit of dirty pink sleeve she'd seen before. Squatting, he dropped the stick, tugged on some latex gloves and made the hole a little bigger. He peered inside before standing and glowering as he pulled the radio from his shoulder. Rattling off the address, he called for forensics and the coroner. He shoved his gloves in his coat pocket and looked at the three women. "Why don't we go have a seat in my car while I take your statement."

"This won't end well," Meg muttered as they followed the officer to his vehicle.

Emma glared at her sister and willed her to keep her mouth shut. Too bad there wasn't a spell for that.

Meg and Rowan clambered in the backseat while she got in the front and squinted at his nametag. Officer Jaglowski opened his laptop and brought up what looked to be a blank report form. After he took their names, addresses, and virtually every other bit of personal information, he got around to the question she dreaded most.

"How did you find the body?"

She couldn't very well tell him the ghost of the dead girl had pointed it out to her. She doubted that would go over well.

"I was walking in the orchard. I saw the black plastic and thought I'd pick up the trash and throw it away."

His brow furrowed as he stared at her for a moment, then typed her response into the appropriate box. "What were you doing in the woods in the first place?"

What the hell was she going to say? She was horrible at lying. Why hadn't she thought of something before the guy had gotten there? Before she could answer, Meg piped up from the backseat. "We were looking for a good spot to take pictures. I need some new ones for the online dating service I'm trying out. Do you know how hard it is to find a decent guy in this town?"

Officer Jaglowski looked to Emma to confirm Meg's version of events.

Emma nodded, blessing her sister for her ability to lie brilliantly. "Meg wanted us to take some candid shots, and I

suggested the old schoolhouse. It seemed like such a pretty place to for pictures."

He typed the information into his report, surprisingly fast for a man with such large hands.

Meg rested her arms on the back of the seat. "So have you ever tried online dating?" she asked the cop.

"Uh ... no."

Two vans pulled in on the other side of the building. It was impossible to miss the expression of relief on the cop's face. Emma didn't think she'd ever seen anyone so happy to see a coroner before.

After another forty-five minutes of questions and a promise that they wouldn't leave town, they were finally allowed to depart what was now considered a crime scene. The officer removed his car, allowing them to back out. Of course, by that time, several news stations had gotten wind of the find and had set up their cameras and their perfectly coifed reporters across the street.

Meaghan and Rowan walked Emma to her car. "You've got to be really shaken up after everything that's happened. Do you want me to drive you home?"

Emma gave her sister a quick hug. "I'll be okay, and honestly, I could do with a few minutes of quiet."

"I'm so sorry you had to be the one to find the body." Her sister's eyes shone with unshed tears.

"I'm just sorry there was a body to find." She would never understand what would drive a person to hurt an innocent child.

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Rowan reached out and squeezed Emma's hand. "But at least she's at rest now. You were able to do that for her."

"Uh-oh." Meg nodded her head toward the reporters who were making their way across the street. "Um, Officer Jaglowski," she called sweetly. When he got closer, she gestured at the converging reporters. "Can you maybe shoo them away so we can get out of here?"

"Absolutely, ma'am."

"Hey. I'm so not old enough to be called ma'am."

Jaglowski's lips quirked as if he fought a smile, but when he turned to face the news media, his scowl was firmly back in place. Using his flashlight, he urged the reporters back toward their vans. She knew it wouldn't stop the camera people from using their long-range lenses, and it certainly didn't stop the correspondents from shouting out questions as she and the other women got in their cars, but they ignored the reporters and took off.

The car felt oddly empty without Ian. She couldn't help but wonder who'd met him on the other side and if he was finally at rest. Had she imagined him speaking from beyond the veil? Had she imaged the accusation? *You lied*. The words still hung in the air, haunting her. If he thought she'd lied, he couldn't very well be at rest.

But even that didn't torment her as much as Marisol's little body, left to rot like so much trash. More than anything, she hoped that the police were able to find enough evidence to capture whoever had hurt her. She also hoped it would bring the child's parents a little peace. More than likely, it would simply confirm their overwhelming grief.

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Tears welled in her eyes and clogged her throat, but she swallowed them down. She needed to get home. She could fall apart as soon as she was in the safety of her room. Just a few more miles.

Meaghan and Rowan were already there when she arrived, and Meg waited for her with a huge cup of steaming tea. Tonight, Emma could honestly say she was glad her sister had moved in with her. She really didn't want to be alone tonight.

"I'm thinking pizza for supper. Sound good to you?" Meg asked.

"Actually, all food sounds awful right now, but go ahead and order. I might feel like eating later."

Meg nodded, and Emma turned toward her room.

"I think I'm going to lie down for a while and see if I can de-stress a little."

Her sister squeezed her hand. "Go rest. I'll check in on you in a little bit."

Emma turned the doorknob, surprised to see light flickering from under the door. Meg must have lit candles for her. Pushing open the door, she felt the world tilt on its axis, and the mug fell from her numb fingers to smash on the hardwood floor.

"Hello, Emma."

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Chapter Three

Ian sat cross-legged in the middle of her bedroom floor, surrounded by Emma's spell books. He watched as her mouth opened and closed, like a beached fish.

Her sister dashed to her side. "Em, are you—What. The. Fuck."

"Language, Ms. Boulton. How is it that neither of you can keep a civil tongue in your mouth?"

"More importantly," Meaghan snapped. "How is it that you're here? And alive...?"

Rowan peered warily at him from behind Meaghan as Emma stepped over the shattered cup and crossed to his side. Tentatively, she reached out a hand and touched his shoulder. "What happened?"

He fixed her with a stare. "I was hoping you could tell me." He'd been furious when the darkness had enveloped him, but it was difficult to remain angry when he'd gone from incorporeal to solid. For all intents and purposes, he was alive.

Rowan scooted forward and picked up the broken chunks of pottery before laying down a towel to sop up the liquid that had spilled.

Emma sank to the floor next to him, confusion marring her face. "I ... I don't understand." She looked at the other women. "How is this even possible?"

Both Meaghan and Rowan shook their heads, their expressions troubled.

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Emma pulled a blanket off the end of the bed and wrapped it around her shoulders. "I'm going to see if I can figure out what happened. Will you give us a few minutes?"

Her sister frowned. "I don't know if that's a very good idea."

"I'll be okay. Ian's not going to hurt me." She caught his eye and looked at him as if daring him to disagree.

Meaghan's frown deepened. "Okay, but I'll be back to check on you." She glared at him as she said the last.

"I promise. I won't hurt your sister."

"You'd better not, or it'll be the last damn thing you ever do."

When they moved away from the door, he reached out and flicked his fingers at it, watching it shut.

Emma's breath caught as she stared at the door in amazement then back at him, her expression crestfallen. "If you can still do things like that, you're not alive."

He took her hand then pressed her palm to his chest and held it there. The warmth of her trembling hand seeped through his clothing and he wished he would have thought to unbutton his shirt first. "My heart's beating. It hasn't pumped blood in a century and a half."

The wonder in her eyes and the heat of her touch sent his blood southward.

She grabbed his wrist with her free hand. "I feel it ... your heartbeat, your pulse, your warmth." Her fingers flexed momentarily on his chest. "You're *solid*." Her hands fell away from him as if she'd been touching something dangerous. "I just don't get it."

Immortal Curse
by Bronwyn Green

As if waking from a dream, she glanced at the various books that littered the floor. "What are you doing with those?"

"I thought perhaps if I researched your methods, I could figure out what went wrong."

She absently traced a knotwork pattern embossed in the leather of one of the journals. "I don't think you're going to find anything in there to help you. I, um ... I sorta made it up on the spot."

Anger tightened his hands into fists, but he forced himself to relax. "How could you do that?" he demanded. "How do you even know the children went where they were meant to go?"

She tugged at her wrist, but he refused to release her. "Couldn't you feel it? The sense of peace as soon as the veil split? Besides, if that wasn't where they were supposed to go, their families wouldn't have been waiting for them to cross over."

He leaned back against her bed and closed his eyes. She was probably right. Though he hadn't experienced the peace she talked about, he had witnessed the joy in the faces of his charges. That was the only proof he needed, he supposed.

"Didn't you see anyone when you went through?" she asked.

Not bothering to open his eyes, he shook his head.

"What happened?"

He shrugged, brushing his thumb over the delicate skin on the inside of her arm. "At first, it was nothing but light, but as soon as I took a step, it was like falling down a mine shaft at

night. Endless darkness ... until the falling sensation ceased. When I opened my eyes, I was here."

"Why here?"

Lifting his head, he pinned her with his gaze. "Perhaps, because it's the last thing I thought of."

Her cheeks flushed, as if she were remembering what he'd whispered to her before he'd walked away.

A sharp rap sounded at the door. "You okay in there, Em?"

"I'm fine."

"You sure?"

Emma laughed. "I'm sure."

"Okay. Mom wants you to call later—when you're up to it. She and dad saw us on the news tonight, and she wants to know how you're doing."

"You didn't tell her about..."

"The ghost that wouldn't go? No. I didn't."

Emma sighed in relief. "Good."

"You called the authorities?" he asked Emma, pulling her attention from her sister.

As if he'd turned down a burning lamp wick, the light faded from her eyes. She nodded, seemingly unable to speak. The pain in her expression lodged itself in his chest, and he pulled her into his arms, offering her the comfort that he hadn't been able to give her earlier.

She sank against his body, a warm, limp weight and cried in nearly soundless, shuddering sobs. He tugged her onto his lap, smoothing his hand over her hair as he whispered soothingly to her. Eventually, she fell silent, but he didn't release her. She seemed content to rest in his arms.

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He was more than content to hold her. He reveled in the feel of his shirt clinging to his chest, damp from her tears. The moist puffs of her warm breath against his skin. The solidity of her body in his arms. It had been so long since he'd felt anything at all, the sensations were almost overwhelming. But he wanted more.

She raised her head and met his gaze. "I'm sorry. I don't know why it didn't work for you."

"I don't know. But I'm not complaining, love." He brushed her damp hair from her face. "Especially not now." He wanted to kiss her without the shroud of death between them. He wanted to help her forget the awfulness of the last few hours. Hell, he wanted to forget too—the helplessness, the pain, the loneliness. He wanted to forget it all.

She slid a hand behind the back of his neck and drew his mouth to hers. He froze for a moment as she kissed him, her fear and need palpable in the press of her lips. Slipping one arm around her waist and the other around her shoulders, he dragged her to his chest. Her nipples contracted into tight peaks as her breasts flattened against him.

Her lips parted beneath his, and he stroked inside her mouth, tasting her thoroughly while she shifted to straddle him. His already hard cock throbbed as she ground herself against him. He groaned into her mouth, so she did it again.

For a moment, she broke the kiss, and he looked into her face. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes wild. She needed to forget the pain as desperately as he did. Ian drove his fingers through her hair and captured her lips while she rocked against his erection, grinding her warmth against him.

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He knew her undergarments clung damply to her pussy lips. Her heat radiated to him as her nimble fingers plucked at the buttons on his shirt.

When she'd dispatched with all of them, she shoved his shirt and jacket off his shoulders and down his arms, dragging open-mouthed kisses over his shoulders and neck. The wet warmth of her mouth had him aching to come as he imagined it wrapped around his cock. Wriggling free of the garments, he tugged at the stretchy red fabric of her shirt and yanked it over her head, revealing nearly all of her creamy flesh. A miniscule scrap of red lace kept her breasts from being fully exposed to him. Her nipples crinkled enticingly beneath the material. He swirled the palm of his hand over one of the pebbled tips, abrading the tender flesh with the scrape of the fabric.

Her eyes closed, and her head dropped backward. She arched her back, bracing her hands on his thighs as though she were offering herself to him. He didn't need to be invited twice. Bending, he sucked a swollen nipple into his mouth, sucking on it through the rough lace. It hardened further against his tongue.

"Oh God, yes," she breathed. "Please, Ian. More."

Reaching out, he made a twisting motion with his fingers, and the bedroom door locked itself. It wouldn't do to have her sister walk in and interrupt them. He trailed a line of kisses over her chest until he reached her other nipple, sucking and nipping at it, he teased her with barely-there caresses. Unable to resist, he pulled down the straps of her bra, baring her and trapping her arms at her sides. Deep pink nipples

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topped pale, trembling breasts. He swore under his breath as he wrapped his arms around her and lowered his head, burying his face in her softly scented flesh.

She tried to raise her hands to pull him nearer, but with the straps impeding her and his arms around her, she could only reach his waist. Her fingers scrabbled against his skin as she fought to get closer. Finally, she reached behind her, unclasped the undergarment and threw it on the floor, before wrapping her arms around his neck and pressing her warm, firm breasts to his chest as she kissed him.

He slid his arms under her ass and lifted her to the bed, pushing her back against the soft, faded quilt. She tried to pull him down on top of her, but he evaded her grasp and hooked his fingers in the waistband of the blue denim trousers so many women in this time period favored. Her skin beneath the backs of his fingers was warm, and she shivered at his touch.

She watched him with big, dark eyes as he unfastened the brass button. He frowned at the metal teeth barring his way.

"Pull the tab," she murmured.

She bit her full lower lip as he grasped the tiny bit of metal and tugged it downward, the teeth rasping against each other as he pulled, revealing inches and inches of creamy flesh, barely concealed by impossibly tiny red underclothes. The delicate scent of her arousal drifted to him as he dropped to his knees between her legs.

Gripping her pants, he slid them off, leaving her in nothing but that scarlet scrap of material. His cock jerked against his trousers as he noticed the damp spot between her legs. With

a hand on each silky thigh, he spread her legs and leaned forward, nuzzling her lace-covered pussy. He sealed his mouth over her, pressing her underwear against her folds with his tongue.

"Oh, God," she groaned. Her fingers tangled in his hair. She held him steady as she lifted her hips against his mouth.

He suckled at her through the fabric barrier while she writhed beneath him. Her hands left his head to trail upward, over her stomach to twist and pinch her nipples. She was glorious—her skin flushed, her breathing shallow. Unable to wait any longer, he yanked the material from her body, baring her completely. Short, dark curls glistened damply around her sweetly swollen pussy lips. He trailed a finger through her cleft causing her to shudder and jerk. Lifting his fingertip to his lips, he sucked off the honeyed moisture while she watched, her lips parted as she forced breath in and out.

Using his thumbs, he spread her wide, exposing her slick, needy flesh. He swiped his tongue through her gathering cream then raised his head. "Is this what you imagined when you were fucking yourself the other night?"

She stiffened at his question.

"I know I did. I wanted to move your hands and lick you until you found your peak—again and again."

Her shuddering breath pulled his balls up tight. After decades without an actual body, it was practically a miracle he hadn't come at his first taste of her. He trailed his lips and tongue over her pussy, devouring her addictive cream. She tasted like heaven. Using the very tip of his tongue, he circled the swollen nub of her clit, careful not to touch it.

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Hands back in his hair, she tried to guide him where she most wanted his touch, but he refused to give her what she craved. Not yet.

"It was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," he continued. "Watching the way you stretched to take that cock. I couldn't help but imagine it was me filling your body."

Tremors shook her limbs as he dipped his tongue into the weeping opening of her body.

"What did you imagine?" he asked again. "Who did you envision fucking you?"

She squeezed shut her eyes.

"Tell me, and I'll make you come."

Wordlessly, she shook her head, her cheeks stained pink with embarrassment.

"I know where you keep it. I could get it and fuck you with it, bringing you to the edge, over and over."

"I want you—not the toy," she whispered.

He groaned as he lowered his head and tasted her again. An admission like that deserved a reward. He lapped at her, sliding a finger into her snug channel. His breath caught at her firm grip as he glided through her silken tissues. Her juices continued to flow like honey, sharp and sweet. The more she gave him, the more he wanted.

"If I tell you," she panted, "will you fuck me?"

He added a second finger to her tight cunt. "Until you scream," he promised roughly.

"Oh, God," she whimpered. "I imagined this," she said, her words shaking as he continued to pump into her needy body.

"I imagined you, with your head buried between my legs, licking my pussy until I came—over and over again."

His cock jerked painfully. He'd hoped she'd been thinking of him, but hearing it confirmed ... He couldn't wait much longer now. He had to be inside her. The need was so sharp, his body ached with it. Turning his fingers, he rubbed on the slightly rough patch of skin inside her passage while he sucked her throbbing clit into his mouth. It pulsed rhythmically against his lips. She covered her mouth with her hands as she hovered over that precipice of release then fell, her entire body stiffening and shaking as waves of completion broke over her body. He suckled and licked her until she collapsed bonelessly to the bed.

He sat back on his haunches and waited while she caught her breath. She was so beautiful, so free, so replete in her pleasure. For a moment, he thought of Clarice. Though he'd brought her pleasure, she'd always seemed embarrassed and ashamed of her reactions. Emma reveled in them. Even now, she stretched like a cat on the bed—relaxed and sated.

She pushed herself into a sitting position and gestured for him to rise. When he was standing between her spread legs, her inner thighs pink from the whiskers on his jaw, she deftly unbuttoned his trousers. Hands at his waist, she guided him closer, pressing nibbling kisses over his stomach.

He stroked the hair from her face, wanting to see every breathtaking detail of her mouth on his skin. Tugging on his pants and underwear, she freed his aching cock, teasing the length of it with her fingertips—cool against his overheated flesh. Gripping the base, she engulfed the head in the

glorious, wet warmth of her mouth. Without warning, she took as much of his length as she possibly could down her throat.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph." Only sheer force of will kept him from exploding at the firm suction of her lips. "Stop," he gritted out.

She took him from her mouth, but her hand remained secure around his shaft. She looked up at him, questions in her eyes.

"I can't wait any longer," he said. Laying her back against the bed, he covered her with his body, resting in the cradle of her thighs. The head of his cock brushed enticingly over her damp curls before lodging against her molten heat.

Pausing, he stared into her eyes. The questions had been replaced by raw need. She lifted her hips against his, urging him home.

"Please, Ian. I need this. I need *you*."

He knew she didn't truly need him, but it felt good to be wanted.

"Fill me," she whispered, her voice rough with need.

His eyes drifted shut as he slid into her velvet-soft channel. Slick, tight muscles gripped him as he pushed deeper inside her. Nothing had ever felt this good. The rippling warmth of her cunt, her arms around his neck, her lips at his throat. Even if he hadn't been without form for the last miserable century and a half, nothing had ever compared to this—nothing had ever compared to Emma.

He wanted to take it slow, make it good for her. Pulling back then surging forward, he pushed a cry from her throat.

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She lifted her hips to meet him, and his good intentions vanished. Unable to keep up the steady, measured pace, he plunged faster and harder. He slipped his arms beneath her back and gathered her closer to him, plundering her mouth as he pounded into her pussy.

She clutched at his shoulders, her short nails scoring his skin. The subtle pain only spurred him on. Her lips left his, stroking along his jaw line, blazing a path to his ear.

"Harder," she whispered. "I need you to fuck me harder."

He could only groan as he complied with her wishes, shafting her until the bed shook.

Her internal muscles contracted around him, rippling as she tumbled headlong into release. She pressed her lips together as if to muffle the sound of her pleasure. He pushed through her quivering peak, and his balls drew up tight. He wouldn't last much longer. White-hot streaks of lightning raced along his spine to coil at the small of his back before shooting forward to twist his balls. He filled her, coming in shuddering spurts as she moaned at the sensation, still meeting him thrust for thrust, taking everything he had to give her.

Their motion eventually slowed, and he placed a reverent kiss on her parted lips, stunned at the level of connection he felt to this woman. It was more than the sex. He'd experienced an undeniable pull to her from the moment she'd first spoken to him.

Hot tears leaked from the corners of her eyes, and he brushed them away. "What is it," he asked, half afraid she regretted what had just happened.

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"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I took advantage of you."

He snorted. "You don't hear me complaining, do you?"

A wan smile curved her lips, but she looked away. "I just wanted to forget for a while. Not that I didn't enjoy it," she rushed to say.

"I could tell."

Her smile broadened, and he felt warmth in the cold spot behind his heart. He reluctantly withdrew from the heat of her body and pulled her back to his chest. "Lay here with me, and I'll help you forget again in a while."

* * * *

Emma woke alone to a cold bed. For a brief moment, she wondered if she'd dreamt the entire thing, but her pleasantly aching body dispelled that notion almost immediately. Of course, without Ian, the pleasant ache quickly turned to emptiness and worry. Had he finally passed through this plane? Had he decided to simply explore this new century on his own? Or maybe she was just freaking out and jumping to conclusions and the poor guy had simply wandered into the kitchen to find something to eat.

She grabbed her robe from the hook on the back of her door. Hurriedly, she shoved her arms through and tied the sash then followed the sounds of laughter into the kitchen.

Meg sat at the table in her cow-jumped-over-the-moon flannel jammies, and Ian leaned against the counter in faded jeans and a snug-fitting gray T-shirt with a piece of pizza in his hand. Emma looked back and forth between the two, relief spreading through her at the sight of Ian.

"Morning, sisty," Meg said. "I'm just introducing Ian to the pleasures of cold pizza for breakfast. Want a slice?"

She shook her head, unable to tear her gaze away from the way the modern clothes hugged his lean, muscular frame. Straightening, he crossed the room and dropped a soft kiss on her lips. The scent of pizza mixed with freshly washed man.

"Your sister was kind enough to show me how the shower works and procure these clothes for me."

"They're Ryan's," Meg volunteered.

That made sense. Their older brother was about Ian's size. Almost exactly, from the looks of it.

"But I did stop at the store and grab some new socks and underwear, though." Meg grinned knowingly. "I thought you might be a little too tired this morning to actually venture out yourself."

Emma rolled her eyes. "I'm going to take a quick shower." She retreated into the bathroom, wondering just how loud she and Ian had been last night.

Stepping under the warm spray, she washed away the evidence of the night before, letting the hot water soak into her stiff muscles. The insides of her thighs were tender, where his cheeks had abraded her skin when he'd gone down on her. She sighed as she ran her fingers over her mound. She'd never had anyone make her come as hard as Ian had. The things that man could do with his mouth. Hell, the things that man could do with his entire body. The memory of having that impossibly thick cock buried inside her flooded her body with fresh arousal. Closing her eyes, she fingered

her clit, wishing he was nailing her to the wall right now. He'd fucked her so hard, exactly how she liked it. Exactly how she'd asked for it. She frowned.

Sighing, she worked shampoo through her hair. She still felt bad about coming on to him last night. Granted, he hadn't seemed to mind, and it wasn't as if she didn't already want him. Oh she'd wanted him all right. She still did. But last night she'd been desperate to push away the death that had surrounded her and just *feel*. He'd definitely made her feel. Unfortunately, her desire for him was nowhere near sated, but she couldn't shake the sensation that their time together was limited. The fact that he still seemed to possess spirit abilities worried her. If he were truly back in this plane, those skills should be gone.

Rinsing the soap from her body, she dried herself and put her robe back on. They needed to figure out what had happened when he'd attempted to cross over. When she opened her door, she found Ian on her bedroom floor reading, much as he'd been the night before. Only this time he wasn't reading her Book of Shadows or her Grimoire, he was engrossed in an erotic novel she'd had hidden behind her spell books. Several more volumes were stacked at his side.

"Your sister left to go shopping with Rowan," he said, never looking up from the story.

"Okay." She turned away to hide the bright red flush creeping over her cheeks. Keeping her back to him, she pulled a pair of underwear from the drawer and hastily put them on. She grabbed a bra and, suddenly shy, cast a quick glance at him.

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He watched her intently, blue eyes dark with arousal, a noticeable bulge in his jeans. "You won't be needing that, love," he said firmly.

"Beg your pardon?" she managed to choke out.

His eyes shone with wicked excitement. "I've discovered something important in these books."

She eyed the titles on the floor. She knew exactly what was in those books, and she sure as hell didn't like where this was going.

He pushed to his feet and crossed the room to stand before her, his gaze holding hers the entire time. Drawing a finger down the center of her chest, he slowly separated the robe. It parted like wet paper, barely resisting when he tugged at the loose knot holding her sash together. The fabric opened, and a rush of cool air tightened her nipples against the material that scarcely covered them.

Ian's breath caught as his finger continued its downward trek to stop at the edge of her panties. Her pussy moistened in anticipation, and she couldn't help but wonder if he could smell her arousal. He ran his finger along the edge of the silky, purple fabric. Goose bumps followed in the wake of his touch, spreading across her skin like a trail of need. He snaked an arm around her waist and pulled her flush against his body. His rock-hard erection pressed into her softness, making her ache.

"You're so beautiful," he breathed as he lowered his head to claim her mouth. He coaxed her lips apart, nibbling at her, stroking with his tongue as he deepened the kiss. She was

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vaguely aware of him walking her backward, but she was still startled when her knees hit the back of the bed.

Gently, he toppled her backwards, following her down onto the mattress. He raised his head and stared into her eyes.

"Aren't you curious about what I discovered?"

She swallowed hard but couldn't respond.

"Shall I tell you, then?" Without waiting for her to answer, he slid his hand over her stomach, the muscles trembling and jumping beneath his touch. "I realized that all of those books naturally fell open to a specific part in the story as if they'd been read repeatedly. And all of those sections had one thing in common."

She closed her eyes in embarrassment. She'd never shared her fantasies with anyone else, and Ian managed to stumble across them on accident.

He traced the outer edge of her lips with his fingertip. "In each story," he continued, his voice rough and his brogue more apparent, "the woman's lover ties her up and fucks her."

She gasped, unable to keep the sound from escaping.

"Have you ever let anyone take you like that?" he asked as he nuzzled the underside of her breast.

Speech had deserted her completely. She shook her head. She'd never trusted a lover enough to tell him about her secret desires let alone act on them.

Sheer male satisfaction glowed in his eyes. He tugged the belt from her robe, then straddling her body, rapidly bound her wrists and secured them to the headboard. She tugged at the binding, finding herself immobilized. A hungry throb

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started deep in her pussy, and she squirmed beneath him. A fresh rush of moisture dampened her panties as Ian sat back on his heels and surveyed her. He pushed open her robe, completely baring her breasts. Her aching nipples stabbed upward into the chilly, morning air. Tight and swollen, they begged for the touch of his fingers, his mouth.

Reaching out, he rolled each one between his thumb and his forefinger—pinching and tugging—making her cry out. With her hands bound, it was nearly impossible to muffle her sounds. He bent over her and drew a swollen peak into his mouth. She arched off the bed, trying to get him to take more. She groaned as he switched to the other nipple while tormenting the damp one with his fingers. The harder he sucked, the more she wanted. She lifted her hips, repeatedly trying to make some kind of contact with his body. She'd never felt so needy in her life.

Ian climbed off the bed to stand at the foot end. He watched her through desire-darkened eyes. "Spread your legs," he commanded. "I want to see how wet this makes you."

Her pussy pulsed emptily at his words.

"Show me. And keep your eyes open," he added.

Tentatively, she parted her legs.

"Farther," he demanded, his voice rough.

She did as he said, spreading her legs as far as she could.

A strangled groan escaped him as he stared at her barely covered pussy. She'd bet the purple fabric was dark with the evidence of her arousal.

"Someone should have tied you up a long time ago," he said darkly. "You've soaked clear through these."

He pulled off his borrowed T-shirt, revealing the beautifully plated muscles she hadn't taken the time to truly notice. He wasn't huge and bulky, he had the lean build of an athlete that made her want to run her tongue along each demarcated line of muscle. She swallowed thickly, watching as he unbuttoned his jeans and partially lowered the zipper. The long, thick line of his cock was visible, a wet spot spreading across the blue fabric of his underwear. At least, she wasn't the only one affected.

She watched in confusion as he shuffled to her nightstand, but understanding dawned quickly enough when he pulled out her vibrator. He turned it back and forth. It should have looked silly in his big, capable hands, but instead the sight had her pussy clenching emptily. His nimble fingers found the switch, and it buzzed to life in his grip. A slow grin curved his lips as he adjusted the speed, slowing it down.

Climbing on the bed, he knelt between her legs. With agonizing slowness, he lazily coasted the head of the vibrator over her stomach. Her muscles tensed and quivered as the vibrations played across her skin. He dragged the dildo along her sternum before circling an aching nipple with the pulsating head. She writhed, trying to get more contact than he gave her.

He leaned forward and laved the tender bud with his tongue before running the vibrator over it again. The sensations were sharper, more acute this time. He turned up the speed slightly, and she jerked against the sheets. Using

his free hand, he rolled and tugged her other nipple, teasing her mercilessly. She needed him inside her.

"Please, Ian. Just fuck me already."

"I don't think you're quite ready for that yet, do you?"

She nodded frantically.

Releasing her nipple, he gave her clit a hard tap, and she cried out, nearly coming from the contact. Hooking his fingers in the front of her underwear, he lifted her lower body up until her feet were flat on the bed. She braced herself as he ground his denim-covered cock against her needy cunt. Keeping his grip on her panties, he thrust against her, the friction on her clit almost unbearable.

He pressed the vibrator against her fabric-covered pussy. She lifted her hips, rubbing herself against it as best she could. She could only imagine how wanton and desperate she looked, but at this point, she didn't care. If he wasn't going to fuck her then she'd take whatever she could get.

Without warning, he pulled the dildo away from her, and she groaned in frustration. He tugged off her underwear, yanking the sodden material down her legs and dropping it on the floor. Gently, he pushed down on her hips until she rested on the bed again.

"Keep your legs open, love," he murmured.

Spreading her lips, he brushed the vibrating cock head back and forth over her clit.

She clenched her teeth as her hips automatically sought more of the teasing sensation, but he pulled it away. Her hands tightened into fists around her bindings. "If you don't want to fuck me, untie me and I'll get myself off."

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"That's the problem with your century. You're always rushing around instead of taking the time to do things right." The smile in his voice was unmistakable.

"So torturing me endlessly is 'doing things right'?"

He pressed a kiss to the inside of her knee and shifted to lay between her legs. "Trust me, sweet Emma." He slid the vibrator along her cleft until it was as wet as she was, then he fit the head to her slick opening and gently pushed it inside. Before she could even enjoy it, he pulled it back again.

Each time, he filled her a little more, alternating between maddening retreats and gentle lunges until it was seated fully within her. He turned the speed to high and began fucking her, using a slow, steady rhythm. She lifted her hips in response, meeting each carefully measured drive.

With his other hand, he kept her lips spread and leaned down to lick her pussy. "You taste so good," he said between lapping strokes. "I could do this for hours."

She was so close. "More, please, Ian. I need more."

He increased the speed of the thrusts and vibrations before sucking her clit between his lips. He scraped his teeth across it, and she burst. The need that had coiled so tightly in her abdomen flew to pieces, sending shards of sensation streaking through her body. Colors collided behind her closed lids, and she felt as if she'd never be whole again.

Slowly, Ian lured her back to earth, gentling her until her breathing returned to normal—or at least as close to normal as it would ever be when he was around. Turning off the vibrator, he set it aside and stared down at her, his eyes full of some unreadable emotion.

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"Please tell me you're going to take off your pants and finish what you started," she whispered.

"I'd like to tell you that I'm a gentlemen, and I'll wait until you've recovered, but I don't have that kind of strength.

"I don't think there's any recovering from you." As soon as she'd said the words, she realized she was right. He'd changed her life irrevocably, and she had no interest in going back to the way things were. "Please?" she said, unable to put what she was feeling into words.

"Please what?" he asked, his eyes softening.

"Please love me." She closed her eyes. She hadn't meant to phrase it like that. To reveal the ridiculously sudden depth of emotion she felt for him.

The bed shifted. She could tell he'd undressed and now leaned over her. He trailed soft kisses over her belly, between her breasts, along her neck and jaw until he reached her mouth.

"Always," he murmured against her lips.

It took her a moment to register what he'd said. Surely, he didn't mean it like that, but all thought melted away as he slid into her welcoming body.

"*Christ*, Em," he groaned as he withdrew. "I thought I could take you slow this time, but I can't." He slammed forward again. "I need you too badly."

She lifted her hips to meet him. "I don't care. Just ... take me."

Withdrawing completely, he flipped her over and urged her to her knees. He pushed the robe up and over her back,

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revealing her ass. He knocked her knees further apart so her pussy was completely exposed.

"Do you have any idea how beautiful you are? Tied up, your body weeping for me?"

He dragged the head of his cock along her cleft and she cried out. Steadying himself with one hand on her ass, he guided himself into her cunt, until he filled her completely.

The position changed everything. He felt even larger sliding through her sensitized passage. She rocked against him as best she could with her hands tied.

He gripped her hips and began pistoning in and out of her body, his balls slapping wetly against her pussy. All sense of rhythm dissipated as his speed increased. "I can't hold back," he grunted.

Reaching around her, he found her clit and rubbed it frantically. His hot breath kissed her spine as he bent over her and fucked her faster. Release still hovered centimeters away when he stiffened, spilling himself in hot, shuddering gushes inside her. As he continued to spurt, he pinched her clit, taking her over the edge with him.

They collapsed in a tangle of sweaty limbs. He reached up and untied the sash, freeing her hands. Gently, he rubbed her wrists, getting the circulation moving again while pressing tender kisses to her shoulder and neck. He shifted, pulling her against his chest. Dragging the covers over them, he murmured sleepily, "Being cursed was worth finding you at the end."

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His breathing deepened and slowed. Within seconds, he was asleep, leaving her wrapped in his arms and the warmth of his words.

Emma laid there and tried to quiet her thoughts. Being with Ian brought her a peace she'd never before experienced, but something dark and insidious crept along the edges of her thoughts. Something wasn't right.

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Chapter Four

Despite the easy rhythm she and Ian had settled into, Emma couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. In the two weeks he'd been with her, she and Meaghan had gotten him up to speed on the twenty-first century. In fact, Meaghan had some of her less than upstanding friends looking into obtaining documentation for Ian. He'd need paperwork to get a job or to travel back to his native Ireland. While she wasn't crazy about the idea of forgery, she also had no idea how they'd explain Ian's appearance. The truth was obviously out of the question.

Sighing, she shoved her hair from her eyes and poured the hot, spiced cider she'd made into mugs. They'd figure something out. Headlights pulled up alongside the house and she checked the clock. Almost midnight. Looked like Meaghan was home early from her date. Ian opened the door for her, bringing the chilly air and the crisp scents of autumn leaves and burning wood into the house.

Meaghan plopped herself in a chair at the table, and Ian returned to Emma then wrapped his arms around her waist, dropping kisses on the back of her neck. "I missed you," he whispered in her ear, his lips grazing the outer shell.

Need tingled to life low in her belly. She'd never tire of his touch, never tire of his voice in her ear, never tire of him period. In a shorter time than she ever would have believed possible, she'd lost her heart to him.

"Oh for God's sake," Meg muttered. "Would you two get a room already?"

He chuckled. "Have I told you yet how wise I think your sister is?"

Emma smiled, reveling in the happiness she'd discovered with Ian.

All at once, the air changed, becoming charged, ominous.

"Em?" Ian's voice sounded as if he called her from another room.

She glanced down at where his arms were wrapped around her. They'd gone transparent. She could see the pattern of her sweater through them. Hands shaking, she turned in his arms and clutched at him. The solidity of his body gave way under her fingertips, and she was left grasping at air as he faded from view, calling her name.

Her world tilted violently, and she sank to the kitchen floor.

"What the hell just happened?" Meaghan asked, looking as shell-shocked as she felt.

"I don't know." She pressed her hand against her mouth, willing herself not to cry. Pushing to her feet, she searched for any trace of him. She closed her eyes, reaching out with her other senses, but there was nothing. If not for the gaping hole in her heart, it was as if he'd never been there.

She opened her eyes to find Meaghan staring at her in horror.

"There's got to be a way to get him back, right?"

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Emma nodded, but she wasn't sure if she believed it. "Get whatever books you can find with ghost lore and spells dealing with the spirit realm."

Both women ran to their rooms and brought their books back to the kitchen table. The only thing that made any sense was that the original spell was affecting him somehow. Perhaps because at midnight it was officially October thirty-first—Samhain—and the veil between the two worlds was thinner than ever. She worried her thumbnail with her teeth as she stared unseeing at one of the texts Meaghan has grabbed. Without knowing what the original spell had been, she didn't know how to break it.

Everything else forgotten, she and Meaghan poured over the books for hours, growing more frantic with every moment that ticked by.

"Do we know who cursed him?" Meg asked.

"A woman named Leona is all I know. Oh, and she had a sister named Clarice." The thought of his former fiancée left a bitter taste in her mouth, but she pushed it aside. It was stupid to be jealous over a woman long dead.

"Okay. Maybe I can find out something about her by doing genealogy research using the names, locations and approximate years."

Emma rubbed her hand across her eyes. "It's worth a try."

Meg squeezed her hand. "Don't worry. We'll find him." She brought her laptop into the room and set it on the table. "If there's any info on the net about Leona and Clarice, I'll find it. You work on a spell to get him back."

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Emma tried to piece together a summoning spell that might work. It was one thing to open the portal for souls who were already dead. It had helped that she'd known exactly where they were and where they needed to go. But she had no idea where Ian was or if he was dead or alive. He'd been solid for more than two weeks, but watching him fade away like he had made her question that assumption.

The clock edged toward three in the morning, by the time Meaghan had found something on an obscure local genealogy web site. "I found a record of a Leona and Clarice Jones who lived in town and died around the end of the nineteenth century. Some personal items are on display at the Sidney Historical House." Meg turned the computer to face her and pointed to the picture of the small museum. "This looks like letters and maybe a cookbook or a journal."

"I'll call in sick tomorrow and head down there."

"I'll go with you," Meg said. "I have a feeling distractions may be required."

* * * *

Emma laid in bed watching the numbers slowly morph from one to the next, clutching Ian's pillow, breathing in the cold comfort of his scent. Tears leaked from her eyes and ran into her hair, overwhelmed by the sensation of loss.

Morning dawned gray and rainy, pewter colored clouds hanging low in an angry sky, the weather mirroring her mood perfectly. Dragging herself to the kitchen, she hoped Meg had already started the coffeepot. As she crossed the threshold of the room, the same disturbance of energy she'd felt the day

before sputtered to life in the pit of her stomach. She looked up scanning the room. Ian flickered into existence in the middle of the kitchen. A scream escaped her. Racing across the room, she threw her arms around him.

"Oh my God, I've been so worried! Are you okay?"

He hugged her close as if he'd never let her go. "I'm so sorry, Em. I'm so sorry," he said again.

Meaghan rounded the corner, and a huge grin spread across her face. "You're back."

"Where did you go?" Emma asked.

"I don't know. It's cold. It's dark." He stroked his hand over her hair, and she thought she felt it tremble slightly. "I've never been there before."

"Was there anyone else there?" Meaghan asked.

Emma was so relieved to have Ian in her arms again, she'd forgotten Meg was in the room.

Ian shook his head. "There's no one there. It's empty ... a void."

Emma's heart ached at the thought of Ian trapped and alone. "How did you get back here?"

"I don't know. It's almost as though the effect wore off, and I was able to get back to you." He splayed his fingers through her hair and tilted her head back. "I had to get back to you," he whispered, staring into her eyes. "But I'm not sure I'll be able to stay."

Cold panic clawed at Emma's throat, and she tightened her arms around him. "What do you mean?"

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"I can feel whatever it is pulling at me, trying to suck me back." He pressed a kiss to her temple, keeping her tight in his embrace.

A chunk of ice dropped into the pit of her stomach. "No," she whispered.

"I'm trying to fight it."

"Okay, then if we're going to try to get you back, we need as much information as possible," Meaghan said.

Emma swallowed hard. Her sister was right. "Is the last name of the woman who cursed you Jones?"

Ian nodded, surprise in his eyes.

Meg made a note on her pad of paper. "Do you know if she kept a journal of her spells or hexes?"

He shook his head. "I didn't even know she was a witch until she cursed me, and my body started to fade away."

"And you have no idea where your grave is, right?" Meaghan asked.

"I don't even know if I have one. As far as I know, my body was never found."

Meaghan's face brightened. "I don't think you were ever dead, it's why you couldn't cross over with the kids. And that threw you back to the land of the living—at least, for a while."

"That would make sense. She cursed you to walk between the realms where you couldn't take comfort on either side." Emma studied him. "Keeping you in a sort of suspended animation."

"What a fucking bitch," Meg said. She arched a brow at Ian. "Don't even think about lecturing me on language."

Emma felt him smile against her hair.

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Hope bubbled tentatively to the surface of her consciousness. Maybe there was a way out of this, yet. "Now that Samhain is here, death is pulling on you. There's got to be a way to stop it."

She tilted back her head to look at him. His eyes were somber. He didn't think she could do it.

"Don't you dare give up," she demanded. "I'm going to find a way. We're going to a museum where some of Leona's letters and personal effects might be. We'll figure out what we need to do to stop this." She didn't realize she was crying until Ian brushed her tears away with his thumbs.

Lowering his head, he captured her lips in a kiss so tender it broke her heart. Finally, he lifted his head. "I love you, Em. Never forget that." His voice grew fainter, and his body started to fade. "No matter what happens, I love you."

She willed him to stay where he was, to stay solid. But for the second time in twelve hours, he vanished, leaving her with nothing but an aching heart and an arm full of emptiness. She'd never even gotten a chance to tell him that she loved him.

Fighting against immobilizing sadness, Emma called in sick to work and pulled on her clothes. Meagan drove to the museum and, once they were inside, chatted up the docent about the furnishings and detailing on the elaborate Victorian gowns while Emma looked for anything that might have belonged to Leona Jones.

In a tiny third story bedroom, she finally found a diary encased in glass. It lay open on an intricately carved wooden bookstand, and the pages displayed detailed her younger

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sister Clarice's elaborate wedding ceremony. She tried to lift the glass, but it was sealed somehow. She'd have to do it the hard way.

Focusing all her energy into her right hand, Emma directed it at the book and visualized the pages turning backward. If there was anything about Ian in the book at all, it would be well before Clarice's marriage. Slowly, the pages began to turn and she scanned them, hoping to find something, anything that would lead her to a course of action to save Ian.

About six months before the date of the wedding, she found an entry about getting rid of vermin at the schoolhouse along with a list of components. The date on the entry was October thirty-first, eighteen forty-nine. To the casual observer, it looked like an odd list of ingredients, but Emma recognized them for what they were—a binding spell. From what she could discern, Leona had placed the physical components in either a poppet or a hex bag—something that would remain hidden or, more likely, unrecognized for what it truly was. She scanned the room, searching for anything the woman might have used to bind Ian. Who knew if it had survived all these years, and if it did, had it made it into the museum's inventory? She shook her head. It had to exist. If it had been destroyed, the spell would have been broken.

There were no dolls or pillows to be seen. An old treadle sewing machine sat in the far corner of the room with a woven basket full of sewing supplies on the chair in front of it. Emma crossed over the red velvet rope hoping like mad that the museum didn't have cameras or motion sensors installed.

Lifting the lid of the sewing basket, she found the expected assortment of needles and thread, scraps of fabric and quilt squares, scissors and two pincushions. One was an elaborate metal and velvet affair, the kind typically found in upper class Victorian homes and the other was a crudely made bundle tied with black and red string. Accurate botanical images has been embroidered into the cloth with black thread—nettle, milkweed and witch hazel. This had to be it. It *had* to. It practically vibrated with still potent energy. She'd have to look up the meaning of milkweed, but witch hazel was universally used in spell work and nettle was rarely used for anything positive.

Meaghan's loud giggle drifted to her. "I'm sure my sister is around here somewhere. She's just fascinated by antique books."

Emma shoved the charm into her purse and hopped back over the rope. She was casually leaning against the glass case housing Leona's journal when Meaghan and the older woman entered.

"Please don't touch the glass," the docent snapped.

She took a step back, heart pounding loudly in her chest. "I'm so sorry, I was just reading the details of Clarice Jones' wedding. It sounds lovely."

The guide warmed considerably. "We have her dress in the next room, would you care to see it?"

Emma let the woman lead the way while she nodded to Meaghan and patted her purse.

* * * *

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The hours until midnight were the longest she'd ever spent. They dragged interminably while nervous anticipation and outright fear warred for dominance within her. But eventually, it was time to go to the schoolhouse. Thankfully, it had been long enough that the crime scene investigation had been completed. The schoolhouse had gone back to serving its main purpose of being a place for teenagers to party. She desperately hoped she wouldn't run into any of her students tonight.

The building was empty, but the new padlock and chain the police had put on it was already lying in a heap in the damp grass. Emma sighed. Good to know kids didn't let a little thing like the discovery of a dead body interfere with their partying.

Breathing deeply, she tried to relax and get into the right mindset for what she needed to do. Meaghan and Rowan placed thirteen white candles in a circle on the floor. In the center of the circle sat a small, cast-iron cauldron. Carrying the hex bag, Emma sat in front of the vessel while Rowan and Meaghan lit the candles and cast the circle.

Afterward, they joined her around the cauldron. Emma dropped the binding charm into the bowl and held her hands above it, directing her energy toward the hex bag.

*What was done was done,
Be now undone,
Spirit bound,
Your freedom found,
Charm to burn,
Freewill return,*

*Destroy this token,
The curse is broken.*

Emma lit a match and dropped it on the charm. Fire engulfed it instantly, the flames turning an unsettling shade of blackish-purple. Joining hands around the cauldron, the three women repeated the spell twice more as the hex bag was almost instantly reduced to a pile of smoldering ash.

Still holding hands, they waited for Ian. Any minute now, he'd be there, she was sure of it. They waited until the ashes were cold in the cauldron and the candles had dripped all over the floor. Nothing. They waited until the cold seeped into their bones and desolation settled in their hearts.

"I don't understand," Meaghan said after they finally closed and grounded the circle.

Emma swallowed past the lump in her throat. "Maybe that wasn't Ian's hex bag. Maybe that was some other poor bastard Leona cursed."

"Is it possible," Rowan ventured, "that he crossed all the way over?"

Emma nodded her head, her eyes burning at the likelihood that she'd never see him again. "It's possible."

Meg hugged her tightly. "Why don't you go on home. We'll take care of everything here."

"Are you sure?"

Her sister nodded. "Go on. We've got this covered."

On wooden legs, Emma walked to her car and got in. She didn't remember traversing through the dark streets, but she must have because she was sitting in the driveway of her house. The light was on in her bedroom. She must have been

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in such a hurry to get to the schoolhouse she'd forgotten to turn it off. Fat lot of good it had done.

The tears she'd fought since the spell had failed came rushing forward and spilled down her cheeks. She kicked off her shoes and pushed open her bedroom door then stopped dead. Looking better than any man had a right to was Ian, pacing the floor.

"What took you so long?" he asked.

Despair turned to joy, and she launched herself at him. "I thought I'd lost you," she whispered as she pressed kisses wherever she could reach.

"I don't know what you did, love, but you broke the curse," he said.

"I found the spell bag Leona used to bind you and destroyed it. I thought you'd come back to the schoolhouse since that's where she'd performed the spell in the first place."

A wicked light glinted in his eyes. "I think your bedroom has a much stronger draw for me."

A watery laugh escaped her as tears continued to spill from her eyes.

A tender smile curved his lips as he wiped the moisture from her cheeks. "How is it I'm always wiping away your tears?"

"I have no idea. I've never cried this much in my life," she said.

He pulled her onto the bed with him and kissed her. It felt like she'd been denied his touch for far longer than a day. He

took her mouth in a slow, drugging kiss that drove away every shard of fear and loneliness.

He lifted his head and stared into her eyes. "You have no idea how much I missed you. The thought of getting back to you was the only thing that kept me sane in that void."

"I love you," she whispered. "I didn't get a chance to tell you that earlier."

His hand coasted over her hip and waist, upward to rest under the swell of her breast. He brushed his thumb across her nipple, hardening it instantaneously. Her breath caught in her chest. She wanted more.

"That's all right," he said as he continued to torment her nipple. "You've got the rest of our lives to make it up to me."

Her lips quirked as she tugged his shirt over his head, baring his body as quickly as she could. "I thought you hated witches."

"How could I hate the woman who holds my heart in her hands?"

"And you have mine," she whispered. Love had bound them together stronger than any binding spell ever could. There, staring into each other's eyes, she felt their connected souls lock. "Forever."

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About the Author

Bronwyn lives in Michigan with her wonderful husband, two amazing sons and six somewhat-psychotic cats. When not tormenting her characters, she can usually be found helping with reading and writing projects in her sons' classrooms as well as being the car pool mom extraordinaire for four teens and a of couple preteens. Besides writing, she also enjoys reading, knitting, sewing, cross-stitching, pottery, drawing—basically anything that helps her avoid cleaning and cooking.

Bronwyn loves to talk to her readers and can be found at www.bronwyngreen.com.

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The *Not Quite Wicked* Series

Wolf in Men's Clothing by Dakota Rebel

Little Red Riding Hood has nothing on Rhys. On his way to his grandmother's house, Rhys' car breaks down in the middle of nowhere. Fortunately for him, there is a big, bad rescuer watching and waiting to sweep him off his feet.

Just Right by Bronwyn Green

When Department of Natural Resources officer, Gwendolyn Locke, hits a black bear on the way home from work one night, her entire view of reality changes. She discovers that shape-shifters exist, and she's just become Goldilocks to three gorgeous, very aroused men who also happen to be werebears. Being snowbound has never been so hot.

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Open Sesame by Mia Watts

Alister Baban overheard a business discussion that netted him and his Uncle Cassimer a lot of money. When the Simsim Group stock crashes and declares bankruptcy within weeks, the owners immediately suspect the Babans of playing dirty.

Oz Adamo, one of four brothers who owned Simsim Group, agrees to abduct Alister to obtain information and win back the lost pensions of former employees.

Tied to a bed and lusting after his captor, Alister fights the sexual attraction he has for Oz. They want information and he isn't about to give it. But Oz loves a good challenge, and shrewd, serious, sexy Alister is naked and his—at least for now.

Heart of Ice by Brynn Paulin

Kai is perfectly unhappy with his life. Cast into a role as shop boy and forced into marriage to save his family, he sees nothing good in his future. In fact, his betrothed, Gerda, seems to hate everything he enjoys. Especially winter and his attraction to dominating his partners. His prospects look grim ... until the Snow Queen arrives.

Wyn has spent her life alone, living vicariously through those who love winter. When she learns of Kai's predicament, she knows she must save him. If only she could save herself. She craves his dominance, but there's one tiny thing standing in their way. No human can touch her without experiencing chilly agony. And that might bring any relationship to an icy death.

Also Available from Resplendence Publishing

Cuffed and Dangerous by Bronwyn Green

When a bounty claim becomes a fight of five against one, Jude Caulfield and Gideon Wells step in to help hunter, Wrenn Saunders, before she's mortally injured. Wrenn soon learns that three is a good number whether in a fight or in the bedroom. Especially in the bedroom—and that's just where Jude and Gideon want to keep her.

The Resurrection of Josephine by Melinda Barron

Martin Vandreen avoids graveside funerals at all costs—for good reason. As a spiritual medium with the ability to communicate with the dead, cemeteries tend to be filled with restless souls that want to chat with him. But when Martin makes an exception and attends the burial ceremony of his dear friend's departed father, he encounters a powerful entity that nearly kills him.

Rumer Rousseau and her lover Noah Hopper will do anything to stop the resurrection of Josephine, including forcibly enlisting the help of Martin. Martin reluctantly agrees to help find a way to destroy Josephine before the evil witch gains enough power to overturn the spell binding her spirit to her crypt, thus allowing her to return to the world of flesh and blood.

Suddenly, Martin's orderly, somewhat private lifestyle is turned upside down. But within the arms of Rumer and Noah, he's finds that he no longer desires the solitude he once treasured, and longs to have a relationship that can stand the test of time. But will the bond they forged together be strong enough to survive the resurrection of Josephine?

Red: A Seduction Tale by Maddie James

Immortal Curse
by Bronwyn Green

Garnet Boudreaux is going home. Not back to her nice little apartment in New York City, but to her childhood home in the bayou. She doesn't want to go, and isn't certain what will be waiting for her when she arrives. But standing there in the voodoo shop on Bourbon Street, in the middle of one helluva party, she's told by Madame Madeleine Dupuis that she has no choice. She presses two pouches into Garnet's hands, wraps a red cape around her and tells her she must go—and go now—to see to her grandmother.

Max LeBlanc spies the lovely redhead across the street and knows in a heartbeat she is the one. A rougarou always knows when he's met his mate. Some may call him a lycanthrope, a werewolf if you will, but in Cajun bayou lands, he's known simply as *The Rougarou*. He's waited several hundred years for this moment, and for her. There is nothing left for him to do but mark her and claim her as his mate. Soon.

Rules of Darkness by Tia Fanning

One special gift ... Twelve rules to follow ... There are some rules that should never be broken.

They tell me that I am special, that my ability to heal is a "gift" that should be treasured and appreciated. As far as I'm concerned, I'm not gifted ... I'm cursed. Nothing in this life is free, not even gifts. There is always a price to be paid somewhere, somehow.

My healing gift came with twelve *Rules of Darkness*, rules that I must follow at all times, until the day I die. The rules are ingrained in who I am. They dictate how I live my life when I am awake, and they haunt me when I'm asleep. *Don't*

look into a graveyard, Katia. Don't touch the dead, Katia. Never seek out the lost, Katia ... It's enough to drive a person mad.

And perhaps that's where I find myself now. A victim of a disease I can cure in others, but not in myself. It's madness to break the rules, and yet, I don't care anymore. I'm tired of living my life this way. I'm tired of the rules. I won't do it anymore, and if that means I suffer the consequences, then so be it.

Dragon's Blood by Brynn Paulin

For centuries, there have been legends of Vampires—the fault of one careless dragon. But humans only know part of the story. Walking amongst us are Dragons—shape-shifters who feed on blood.

Reluctant Dragon Elder Janos Aventech's vacation in New York is about to come to an abrupt end. Riding on the subway, he stumbles across a Dragon mate—one of the few human women with whom his people can unite and be truly happy. And his people's enemies are out to get her. As his attraction to this woman grows, he knows he must find her mate and see her safely into that man's arms. It's destined. But as every minute passes in her company, Janos begins to see he'll never willingly let her go, mate or not.

If only she were *his* mate...

On the subway, Scarlett couldn't stop staring at him—then he turned crazy. When he essentially kidnaps her off the train, she knows she should be irate and terrified. Instead, she finds her initial attraction growing. But what's all this stuff he's spouting about mates and enemies? She only wants to

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return to her life, not get caught in the middle of a war. But it's too late for that. She's destined for a Dragon's bed, and in Janos' arms, she can only hope it's his.

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