

WICKFORD HIGH FURIOUSLY TEMPTED

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World Castle Publishing

<http://www.worldcastlepublishing.com>

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World Castle Publishing

Pensacola, Florida

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ISBN: 9781937085322

Library of Congress Catalogue Number 2011928099

First Edition World Castle Publishing May 15, 2011

<http://www.worldcastlepublishing.com>

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Cover Artist: Spittyfish Designs

Editor: Gateway Editorial Services, and Kate Richards

Printed in the United States

Chapter One

Vicky Phillips stood up on tiptoe and kissed Luke Wolfburn gently on the cheek. "Thanks for bringing me home, Luke. I can take it from here."

He furrowed his brow, shaking his head solemnly. "No, Vicky. It's after midnight and I told your dad I'd have you home by ten o'clock. I want to be here to help you explain why you're late."

She smiled, looking up into his eyes. "Things might be . . . easier to explain if you weren't here." Her cheeks heated. "If my dad is still awake," She bit her lip, looking up at the soft glow coming from an upstairs window, "and I'm afraid he is still awake. He'll jump to all the wrong . . . conclusions. Just kiss me good-bye, and I'll see you in a few hours in school."

He put his arms around her and she lifted her hand to brush his blond hair away from his forehead, fingers trailing down the side of his gorgeous face in a caress. "I don't need an excuse to kiss you." His smile grew tender and he furrowed his brow again, shrugging one shoulder. "I'm afraid your dad won't let you date me anymore, if I don't explain things to him myself. You are very precious to him, and to me. I just think it's better if we tell him together, what happened tonight." His smile turned into a roguish grin. "I am, however, going to kiss you before we go inside. I don't think we'll have the opportunity again after we open that door."

"When my dad hears what happened tonight, he won't hold you responsible."

Looking away, Luke frowned. "I would if I were him."

"Luke, look at me." Reaching up, she placed her palm on his cheek, turning him to face her. "It wasn't your fault."

"Your dad left you in my care, and I almost lost you."

"You saved me."

"It was too close for comfort. We haven't known each other very long, but I would have been devastated if something worse had happened."

"You didn't send those evil people after me, Sara did."

“Sara . . .”

Vicky shrugged. “I’m not a hundred percent sure, but I do believe she was responsible.”

“Sara’s mean, but . . . to try to kill you?”

“What better way to get rid of the competition?” Luke raised an eyebrow and she continued, “That evil man taunted me, telling me that someone in this town turned me in. I accused Sara, but he just laughed.” She shrugged. “At the time, I was assuming that to be his agreement, but now . . . I don’t know for sure.”

“I’m going to make sure Sara pays for that.”

She shook her head. “You need to leave Sara to me. I want to be positive that it was her before I *do* anything.” She tilted her head meeting his gaze. “I haven’t known Sara very long, but if she was behind that mob, she *will* brag about it. Sara likes to have the upper hand and feels threatened by me. If she was behind this, I’m going to give her a reason to feel threatened.”

He smiled at her show of temper. “You’re beautiful when you’re angry.”

She batted her eyes playfully. “Flattery will get you *almost* everywhere, Mr. Wolfburn.”

Cupping her face between his palms, he brought his lips down to meet hers. She placed her arms around his waist, melting into him, parting her lips to stroke her tongue with his. Heat coursed through her as the kiss grew more demanding, getting a little carried away.

“You’re late!” Vicky jumped —

Chapter Two

Vicky winced. They'd failed to hear the door open because they were too wrapped up in their kiss. Vicky's eyes flew open and she pulled out of Luke's embrace. Turning her head, she locked eyes with her father. "Dad, I can explain . . ."

His expression brooked no explanations.

"Luke, go home. I'll explain everything to my dad," she whispered, patting his arm.. Luke pressed his lips into a grim line, and stood his ground.

Mr. Phillips crossed his arms over his chest, looking very tall and very angry. "Luke's not going anywhere, young lady, until I get to the bottom of this. I want you both inside and in my study now."

"But Dad . . ."

"Yes, sir," Luke tone was resigned, but the glint in his eye told her he hadn't lost any of his resolve.

"But Dad, it's not what it looks like . . ."

"Now, Vicky."

Vicky lowered her eyes, her shoulders slumping. "Yes, sir."

Luke took her hand and led her through the front door,

Mr. Phillips huffed out an exasperated breath and followed them into the study, shutting that door too.

Her father brushed past them, taking his chair behind his desk. Leaning back, he steeped his fingers under his chin and sat, while the silence stretched. Luke cleared his throat to speak, but Mr. Phillips held up his hand for him to remain silent. He leaned forward in his chair, clasping his hands in front of him on the desk. "Luke, I trusted you with my daughter. I distinctly remember telling you to have her home not one minute after ten. It's now almost one in the morning. Add to that, you were pawing at my daughter on the front porch. I suppose you know she's no longer allowed to go out with you."

Until her father spoke, Vicky's guilt had her staring at a spot on the carpet. Upon hearing his verdict, her eyes lifted, and she glared at him. "Dad, that's not fair. We

didn't do anything wrong. All you saw was Luke kissing me goodnight. He wanted to come inside and tell you what happened tonight, but I didn't want him to."

"Vicky, you are just one step away from being grounded. Don't push me." Examining her rumpled, dirt-stained clothes, he glanced from Luke to Vicky and he rolled his eyes. "What have you two been up to?" He slammed his hands down on his desktop, standing up abruptly. "What have you been doing with my daughter?"

Luke's mouth dropped open. "I haven't done anything to Vicky, Mr. Phillips. Please, just let me explain . . ."

Vicky could not take it anymore. Her father's accusations were so far off base it was absurd. Her tired mind cracked a little and a giggle escaped her lips.

Luke shot her a worried glance. "Vicky, stop, this isn't funny." She shook her head, laughing harder.

Mr. Phillips crossed his arms over his chest, glaring at his daughter. "Vicky, this isn't anything to laugh at. You're working on being grounded for a month. Would you like to go for two?"

Her eyes widened. "Dad, I have had the worst, and best day rolled into one. Before you kick out my boyfriend and ground me, I want to speak." She inwardly cringed. *Boyfriend*. She and Luke had not had that talk yet, and she'd blurted the word out to her dad in the heat of the moment. Too late for regrets, she charged on. "You're jumping to way too many conclusions without asking for my side of the story. I have never given you any trouble before, so why would you think I'd start now?"

"Just look at yourself."

She looked down at herself, and then back up at him, shrugging. "I can explain."

"Well, you'd better start talking fast and make it good. And it better be the truth, young lady."

She crossed her heart, holding up her hand in pledge. "I'm going to tell you the God's honest truth, Dad." She locked eyes with her father again. "Can we sit down and talk with you?"

Her father exhaled heavily, gesturing for them to be seated. "You're stalling, Vicky."

"I'm not stalling, Dad." Swallowing hard, she glanced at Luke, and he reached over, squeezing her hand for support. She exhaled. "Here goes nothing. I was having a wonderful time on my date with Luke." Her father's eyebrow raised once again, and she continued, "By the way, his family's place is a restaurant, not a diner." He rolled his eyes, opening his mouth to speak, and Vicky held up her hand to stop him. "Anyway, Luke took me to the department store for my uniform, just like he was supposed to do." She did not want to tell her father what happened, because she was afraid he would make her pack up again and move. She liked Luke and did not want to move, again. Closing her eyes, she gripped the arms of the chair for courage. "Now, Dad, I want you to listen to everything I tell you before you react . . . okay?"

He gripped the arms of his leather chair, knuckles white. His voice dropped to a low growl, "Just spit it out, Vicky."

She looked away before she spoke. "That vigilante group, the ones that killed Mom . . ." Her voice quivered, and she looked at the ceiling, trying to blink back the tears. "Well . . . they kind of . . . um . . . kidnapped me from the dressing room of the store." The color left Mr. Phillips's face, his irritation replaced with concern. "They . . . um . . . knocked me out with chloroform . . . and I . . . uh . . ." A single tear trailed down her cheek. "Dad, this is hard for me to say." Bracing herself, she charged on, "I woke up tied to a stake." She shook her head, the words pouring out easier. "They must have dragged me through the field before they tied me up. I don't remember how I got so dirty."

"Oh my God, Pumpkin." His voice shook with emotion. His wife, Emily, had died that way the week before. She winced at her father's reaction, his face paling and he swallowed hard before he spoke again, "Did they hurt you?" She opened her mouth to speak and he cut her off, Luke needs to go home. We need to talk about this in private."

She shook her head. "Luke stays, Dad." Her father opened his mouth again, and Vicky pressed her lips together, shaking her head. "Luke knows, Dad." His eyes grew wide. "Luke is the only reason I'm sitting in front of you now. He and his family saved me from that bunch of maniacs. I used my powers to stop those lunatics, but it wasn't enough. They would have burned me at the stake."

Mr. Phillips's gaze wandered around the room. "Well, if Luke and his family called the police, why didn't they call me?"

Vicky gave Luke an uneasy glance, biting her bottom lip. "The police weren't involved."

"Vicky, those madmen have to be stopped."

She shrugged, tilting her head. "Oh . . . they *were* stopped."

His eyebrows knit together in confusion. "Do they have them tied up somewhere?"

She winced. "No, not exactly . . ."

He blew out a breath. "Well, Luke, since I'm getting evasive answers out of my daughter, could you please explain to me what you and your family did to rescue Vicky?"

"Dad," Vicky cut in, "this is the part where I ask you to have an open mind."

Ryan held up his hand, shaking his head. "Okay, I'll keep an open mind. I just want answers, and I want truthful answers."

This time Vicky reached over, squeezing Luke's hand reassuringly. Luke pressed his lips in a grim line, looking from Vicky to Ryan before he spoke. "Well sir . . . we are . . . man this is hard to say." Vicky nudged him for encouragement. "Here goes nothing. We're werewolves sir."

Vicky's father sat back in his chair, closing his eyes. He shook his head and then reached his fingers up, rubbing his temples. Opening his eyes, he stared hard at Luke. "What did you do with those madmen?"

The color drained from Luke's face. "Uh . . . let's just say that they won't be a threat to Vicky anymore."

Mr. Phillips shifted in his chair "What do you mean, no longer a threat? Until those men are dealt with, they will always be a 'threat' to my daughter."

"Dad . . ."

He shook his head at Vicky. "Pumpkin, I *need* to know . . . all of it. If those men are still out there, we have to leave. Your mother died at their hands. I can't lose you too."

Vicky shook her head. "Those men can't hurt me or anyone else anymore."

Luke swallowed hard, shifting uneasily in his chair. "They've been *dealt with* sir."

"Dealt with? You mean dead, don't you?"

Luke diverted his eyes. "Yes, sir, I do."

Mr. Phillips stared off into space. "I see. I guess we need to report this to the police," he mumbled more to himself than to anybody.

Luke caught his breath in alarm. "That won't be necessary."

He turned his head, and furrowed his brow in worry, as he focused his full attention on Luke. "We have to report this. I don't want to get you and your family in trouble, but someone will find the bodies. It could get ugly."

Luke shook his head. "They won't find any bodies." He shifted in his chair. "All traces of the . . . event . . . have been removed, including the stake."

He stared hard at Luke, frowning. "It sounds like you and your family are accustomed to *dealing* with these kinds of situations."

Luke's eyes locked with his. "No, sir . . . we're not. My family and I may be werewolves, but our kind doesn't make a habit of killing people. We're not like the werewolves you read about in horror stories. We *can* control ourselves. Our kind are more of a shape-shifter for lack of a better explanation. Our bite can't turn people into werewolves. It's a gene that passed on from generation to generation."

He shook his head in thought. This was a lot to absorb, and he was suddenly curious. "Do you know how your family inherited this . . . trait?"

Luke nodded. "About a hundred and fifty years ago, a white witch enchanted my ancestor. Her reasons have been lost over time, but I believe it had something to do

with protection. I don't know the whole story. I believe at the time someone or something was after her. I can't imagine what it could be because she was a very powerful woman. I mentioned to my mother that Vicky was a white witch. My mom said that their kind is rare and that Vicky is probably an ancestor of the witch that enchanted our family. We will protect her with our lives. I instinctively feel like that's what our kind was created to do, and my family feels the same way I do."

Mr. Phillips let a long breath slide past his lips.. "You've given me a lot to think about." He glanced up at the clock. "Go home Luke. It's late, and I still need to talk with Vicky. Thank you for coming to her aid."

Luke stood up, but hesitated. "Sir, I . . . uh . . . Vicky and I . . . I mean . . ."

Frustrated, he spoke forcefully. "I still want to date Vicky."

Vicky's eyes widened and she placed her hand over her mouth to stifle a giggle. "Good-night, Luke. We'll talk at school."

Mr. Phillips cleared his throat. "You'll know what my decision is on *that* subject, later, after I've had a private talk with my daughter."

Luke inclined his head. "That's fair enough. Well . . . goodnight." He met Vicky's gaze straight on. "Will you meet me in front of school before class?"

Vicky couldn't help it, she giggled. "Sure, Luke, is fifteen minutes early, early enough?"

"Yeah, that would be great."

"I'll see you in a few hours."

"Great! Good-night, Vicky, and you too, Mr. Phillips."

Mr. Phillips wrinkled his brow shaking his head. "Good-night, Luke."

"I'll let myself out." He left, closing the study door behind him.

Her father grew serious again. "Are you okay, Pumpkin? Did they hurt you?"

She self-consciously rubbed at her chafed wrists. "I'm okay, Dad. I'll be sporting a few bruises for about a week, but otherwise I'm unhurt."

He shook his head, leaning back in his chair. "I think we need to move again. Someone in this town informed those lunatics you were here. I thought this place,

would be safe for you." He scrubbed his face with his hands. He brought his gaze back to hers "It appears that I was wrong."

Vicky shook her head frantically. "I don't want to move again."

He sat up straight, splaying his hands. "Be reasonable. Someone in this town is out to get you."

"Luke will protect me." As her dad's eyes widened, she tried to reason with him. "I think I know who is out to get me."

He scowled. "Oh? Whoever it is, we have to stop –"

Vicky shook her head. "I'm not absolutely sure but . . . I think it was that girl . . . you know . . . the one I got into a fight with . . . in the bathroom at school." He shook his head in confusion. "That girl that I was forced to *demonstrate* my powers to yesterday at school."

He gave her a puzzled look. "The one that you said called you a harlot?"

"Yeah, that would be the one."

"That's all the more reason that I should get you out of here. If that girl's out to get you, I need to take you away from here, to safety."

"I'm not running from Sara! If I'm ever going to feel safe anywhere, I have to stand on my own two feet. I have to stop running and stand my ground." She jumped up from the chair charging up to the desk. "Dad, I've never been a coward. Don't turn me into one now."

"You're right. I didn't raise a coward." He gave her a weak smile, standing. "But, if things get out of hand, I need to know immediately. Do we have a deal?"

She rushed around his desk, throwing her arms around his neck. "We've got a deal." She let go, backing up. "Oh . . . Dad . . . uh . . . about Luke . . ."

He sat back down, crossing his arms over his chest, "What about Luke?"

She shrugged. "I want to continue seeing Luke."

He shifted uneasily in his chair. "I don't know. Luke seems like a nice kid, but, he is a wolf, a predator, underneath it all. I have your wellbeing to think about."

"That's being prejudiced and you know it. You, of all people."

"What's that supposed to mean? That's not being prejudiced, it's being cautious."

"That's prejudice, in my book." She brought her hand up to her chest. "People would be prejudiced against me, and fear me, if they knew I was a witch. They definitely showed bias against Mom for that. It's something that we can't help. We were born that way. Just like Luke was born a shifter. He can't help what he is any more than I can help what I am."

He looked away. "That's different."

"Different because I'm your daughter?" He stood up abruptly from behind his desk, raking his fingers angrily through his hair. His expression softened as her words finally sunk in, and she laughed bitterly. "You see, Dad, prejudice is everywhere. Luke saved me. I am safe with him, and I really like him. He likes me in spite of the witchcraft. Cut him a break, will you?"

He sat back down in his chair. "Okay, you can continue to date Luke, if that's what makes you happy."

She ran over to her dad, wrapping her arms around his neck, kissing him on the cheek. "Thanks, Dad!"

He squeezed her tight and then let her go. "Now, off to bed. You have to get up in a couple of hours for school."

She hurried to the office door, stopping to peer back over her shoulder. "Good-night, Daddy, and thanks."

He leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes. "Good-night, Pumpkin, get some rest. I love you."

"I love you too, Daddy," she called from the stairway.

Chapter Three

Vicky pulled her '99 Ford Mustang into the Wickford High School parking lot fifteen minutes early as promised. The first student to arrive, she parked as far away from the building as she could get. She cut the engine, but left the key engaged so her radio continued to play in the background.

Luke was nowhere to be seen. *Either I'm early, or he's running late.* She turned around in her seat and her gaze stopped at the building. Goosebumps traveled down her arms in an unexpected shiver. Her impression of the building from the day before had not changed much. It still felt ominous and foreboding. There were things going on behind those walls, evil things that were kept secret. She shivered again. *Girl, you're letting your overactive imagination run away with you,"* she mumbled to herself again.

She sucked in a breath at a knock on her driver's side window and jumped. She giggled nervously, rolling down the car window; the frantic pace of her heart had not slowed much. "Luke . . . you snuck up on me . . . again!"

Eyes sparkling, he smiled. "Did I scare you again? Or are you just happy to see me?"

Heat rose to her face, and she turned away self-consciously. "I guess it's a little of both," she replied, looking past him into the parking lot. "Where's your truck?"

"I live close enough to the school that I don't need the truck."

"I didn't see you walk up . . ." She giggled softly. "I didn't see you walk up because. I assume you approached my car as a wolf?" His smile grew larger. She grabbed her bag and tossed it to the back seat. "Why don't you climb in, and we can listen to the radio while we talk."

He opened the passenger door and climbed in. He leaned forward and gently kissed her. Sitting back in his seat, he stared at her clothes. A slow grin spread across his face. "Nice legs. That skirt really shows them off."

She rolled her eyes. "Stop teasing me. I hate this horrid uniform, and you know it."

"No, seriously, the uniform looks great." She tugged at her skirt trying to cover more of her legs, and he changed the subject, "I see you're still in one piece after your private conversation with your dad."

She shifted uneasy in her seat. "Yeah, Dad wanted to pack up and move again."

The smile left Luke's face. "I don't want you to move!"

"I don't want to move either." She exhaled dramatically. "I think I was able to talk him out of it. It really depends on what happens in school if I'm threatened again, he won't give me any choice. Luke's eyes took on a hard gleam. "We'll just have to make sure that doesn't happen."

"You're sweet, but I don't know if there is anything you can do to stop it."

"I will always be there to protect you."

She caressed his face. "I couldn't ask for a better champion than you." She kissed him gently, and turned away, dropping her hand to her lap. "I'm afraid that this battle is going to be fought with magic. I'm going to have to prove to myself and to Sara that I'm not a coward. I'm going to have to stand on my own two feet, just like I told my dad I would."

Luke's gaze dropped to his lap. "Speaking of your dad," he began nervously, his eyes rose to meet hers, "what's the verdict?"

She tilted her head, furrowing her brow. "You're not on trial. My dad doesn't blame you for what happened last night."

He lowered his eyes to her lap and picked up her hand; he rubbed his thumb over her palm in a gentle caress. Lifting his eyes to hers, he asked, "Did he change his mind about me? Can we still go out?"

"My dad was angry, and he didn't have any facts when he said we couldn't date."

"I'm aware of that . . . but . . . is he going to hold my being a . . . wolf . . . against me?"

"I'm not going to lie to you . . . he tried." Clenching his jaw, he looked away. "Luke, don't look like that. I had a very serious talk with my dad, and I told him his

concerns were unfounded, that I felt safe with you. And so that you know, he likes you. It was the wolf thing that had him going. To answer your question, yes, we can still date."

Luke let out a breath in a rush. His eyes sparkled. "Good, we'll go out again tonight

"Luke . . ."

"Maybe we can go to a movie . . ."

"Luke . . ."

"Or . . . or . . . go out to dinner again!"

She giggled at his enthusiasm. "Luke, I can't go out again tonight."

"Why not? I thought . . ."

"It was after one-thirty before I was finally able to go to bed last night." She reached over and squeezed his hand at the disappointment still evident on his handsome face. "I wish I had your energy. I'll tell you what, why don't you come over to my house for dinner, we'll order a pizza or something, and we'll watch some TV or maybe a movie."

He beamed. "Sure, why not. At first I thought you were trying to just brush me off . . ."

She rolled her eyes again and grinned. "No, I enjoy your company. You are the only reason I want to stay in this town. It certainly isn't for this creepy school." She shivered.

The smile left his face, replaced with an expression of concern. "Are you getting sick? It's not cold."

She shrugged. "No, I'm not getting sick. I . . . just . . . I mean . . . It's just . . . this place . . . it's just . . . so . . . creepy."

Luke glanced over at the building, shrugging. "It just looks like a school to me. Since I've lived here all my life, I don't have anything to compare it to. I'll have to take your word for it." His eyes sparkled mischievously. "You're safe with me. I'll protect you from whatever you're afraid of."

“I didn’t say that I was afraid of anything. I just said that the building gives me the creeps.”

“I’m just saying, you can run into my arms anytime.”

She laughed. “If the need arises, I’ll take you up on that.”

He wiggled his eyebrows. “Why wait?” She opened her mouth to tease him back, and was surprised when he brought his lips quickly to hers in a kiss so hot that it seared her to her toes. He pulled her closer, and she melted into his arms, stroking her tongue against his. Hot, intense yearning flowed through her. That kiss effectively erased all thoughts of the creepy school from Vicky’s mind. First and foremost were the new intense sensations and emotions she experienced with Luke. Every nerve ending in her body alive and hypersensitive, she wanted to lose herself in the experience.

Suddenly, a set of knuckles rapped urgently at Luke’s window.

Chapter Four

"You better cut that out before Father Thomas catches you!"

Luke froze, and Vicky's eyes flew open. She hurriedly pulled herself away, and gazed out the driver's window. Bringing her hand up to her kiss-swollen lips, she brushed them with her fingertips, having momentarily forgotten she was in the school parking lot.

Luke laughed and turned his head, finally acknowledging his friend. "What do you want, Chuck?"

Vicky looked up and up. Chuck towered over the little car, his strong beefy build stretching the sleeves of his tight T-shirt.

He chuckled. "I'm just trying to keep you out of trouble, Luke. We can't have our star quarterback suspended from school and not able to play in the game on Friday night."

Vicky turned back to Luke in surprise. "You're on the football team?"

"Is that such a surprise?"

"Yes. You never mentioned it. That's usually something that guys brag about."

Chuck knocked on the window again. "Hey, Luke, who's your new girlfriend?"

Luke ignored him "I'm not usually much of a bragger." He shrugged one shoulder. "The subject never came up."

Chuck rapped on the window nonstop. "Come on, Luke."

"I'll have to come to the games and watch." She rolled her eyes, and pointed at Chuck, laughing. "You might as well answer him. It doesn't appear that he's going to give up."

Luke surrendered. "It's probably about time that we go to class anyway. I guess I better find out what else Chuck wants since he's not going away." He opened the door, easing out of the car, and splayed his hands at Chuck. "What?"

Chuck grinned. "Hey, Luke."

Vicky slung her bag over her shoulder and joined Luke on the passenger side of the car. She giggled at the expression on Luke's face.

“Hey, Luke?” Luke rolled his eyes. “Out of all that annoying pounding on the glass you did, all you had to say was ‘Hey, Luke?’”

Chuck laughed, and leaned his shoulder against a light pole. “Naw, of course not. I was just tryin’ to get your attention. Who’s this?”

Luke draped his arm around Vicky’s shoulders. “This is Vicky Phillips. She started here yesterday.” He squeezed her shoulders. “Vicky, this is Chuck Holmes.”

Vicky smiled, putting her hand out. “Hi. It’s nice to meet you.”

Chuck took her hand, bringing her fingers to his lips. “Hiya, Vicky.”

Vicky tugged her hand back in surprise, leaned in to Luke.

Luke tightened his arm around Vicky, positioning his body between them. His eyes dilated, turning golden around the edges. “Chuck . . .” he growled.

Chuck lifted his hands and stepped behind the light pole. “Hey man, you know I’m just playing. It’s nice to meet you too, Vicky.”

Vicky tugged on Luke’s shirt, “It’s okay, he just took me by surprise.”

Luke closed his eyes. When he opened them again, they were back to normal.

“Luke, you almost . . .” Chuck gestured toward Vicky in warning.

Luke shrugged. “She knows.”

Chuck’s mouth dropped open. “How?”

“Please, just drop it for now.”

Vicky shook her head. “No, Luke. I need to quit hiding behind secrets. That’s what got me in trouble yesterday.”

Luke gazed searchingly into her eyes. “Are you sure?”

She nodded. “You told me yourself last night that I fit right in this godforsaken town, so I might as well start fitting in it openly.” Squaring her shoulders, she met Chuck’s eyes, taking a deep breath for courage. “I know what Luke is. You see, I’m a witch, and he saved my life last night.”

Chuck’s eyes took on a steely gleam. “A witch, huh?” Contempt rang clear in his voice as he turned to Luke. “What did ya go and save a witch for?”

"She can't help that she's a witch," Luke replied. "No more than *we* can help what *we* are."

Vicky's eyes rounded. "We?"

Luke nodded. "Chuck is my cousin."

"But I thought all of your family was there with you last night."

Luke shook his head. "No, that was just my immediate relatives. I'm a member of a very large pack."

"What do you mean? Being a witch is something someone chooses to do," Chuck interjected.

"Not Vicky. She's a white witch."

Chuck lifted an eyebrow skeptically. "That's impossible. There is no such thing as a white witch. They're a myth."

Luke turned to Vicky, his eyes sparkling. "Show him, Vicky."

She shook her head. "I really shouldn't."

"I don't think she *can*," Chuck said. "At least not without chanting or potions."

Vicky looked away. "Oh, I can, I just don't think I should."

"That's what I thought. She practices black magic like the rest of 'um. Chuck's eyes dilated, turning golden around the edges. The air around him shimmered.

Luke tucked Vicky protectively behind him. "Chuck! What the hell!" The air wavered around him as well.

Vicky frantically scrutinized the two. She had to do something. "Stop!" she shouted in a commanding voice.

The ground beneath Chuck's feet trembled, and the wind whipped around him. Chuck sucked in a startled breath, whipping his head around to glare into her eyes.

"I'm not trying to hurt you," she said. "I just don't want you two to fight because of me."

Chuck grabbed the light pole to steady himself. "What you're doing is not possible. White witches are supposed to be just a myth."

Shrugging, she stopped the earth's trembling and calmed the wind. "I don't know about myth, but I don't practice black magic – honest.

A murmur of surprised voices in the parking lot behind them made Vicky cringe. She had not meant to put on a show for the school. Turning her head, she observed the crowd that had gathered at a safe distance around them. Some of the students showed fear, while others reflected open curiosity. She recognized many of them from her classes yesterday. "Great," she grumbled. "Yesterday everyone stared at me because of my clothes, and today they'll stare because I'm now the school freak."

"You're talking to yourself again," Luke whispered.

She gave him a weak smile. "Well, I wanted there to be no more secrets." She sighed theatrically. "I guess I just got my wish. It won't take that crowd long to spread the word."

"The show's over," Luke spoke loudly.

A disappointed murmur echoed throughout the gathered students, but they slowly dispersed.

Vicky focused her attention back on Chuck. "I would rather be your friend than your enemy," she remarked, wincing at the hard look on his face. "But, ultimately, the choice is yours."

"I would rather not be enemies," Chuck remarked. "But the friendship part . . ." He shrugged, shaking his head doubtfully. "I don't know. That depends on you. You're going to have to prove to me that you're not like the other witches around here before I will call you my friend." He turned his back on her and walked away.

Vicky closed her eyes, exhaling slowly in defeat. Luke put his arms around her, pulling her close. "I tried, Luke. I can't make someone like me."

He squeezed her shoulders, hugging her to him. "They'll all come around. They just don't know you like I do. I told you yesterday that people are hard to get to know here."

"I thought if I wore this god-awful uniform the others wouldn't stare at me anymore." She blew out a breath. "Now they're going to gawk at me for something that I can't hide."

He kissed her on the forehead. "They're going to stare at you because you're beautiful."

She peered into his eyes. "I couldn't even wear my makeup. It makes me feel naked."

He tilted her chin up with his finger, gazing into her eyes. "You're pretty with it, but you're beautiful without it."

She smiled. "I don't believe that, but thanks for saying it anyway."

He kissed her forehead again, hugging her tight. Almost everyone had gone inside the school. "It's about time for class. We'd better go inside. I think we've both been in enough trouble for a day or two anyway."

Chapter Five

Luke held the heavy front door open and Vicky strolled through waiting for him inside. He let the door swing shut, walking back up beside her. She gazed into his eyes, grinning mischievously. "Thanks. One of these days, you're going to forget to do that, and it's going to disappoint me."

Draping his arm back around her shoulders, he hugged her to him as they walked. "I won't ever forget to treat you like a lady." They reached their first period classroom, and he paused. "Are you going to meet me for lunch?"

"Sure. I'll try not to be late today." She walked to her desk, and sat down. Looking all around her, the smile dropped off of her face when she noticed that everyone's eyes were upon her. Some stared with open contempt, others with fear, but no one, except for Luke, appeared friendly. She turned to face the front of the class, placing her bag beneath her desk. "Great."

Luke sat down behind her. Leaning forward, he whispered, "It'll get better in a day or two."

"I'll have to take your word for it," she whispered back.

Luke laughed softly as the bell rang.

Sara's desk was empty. "Hummm Hmmm. . ."

"What are you thinking?"

She shrugged. "I don't know."

Father Turner cleared his throat. "Is there something that you'd like to share with the class, Vicky?"

Her eyes grew wide, and she flushed a deep red at being singled out. Swallowing hard, she glanced around the room. "N . . . no . . . Father Turner . . . sorry."

He cleared his throat again. "It's nice to see you came dressed appropriately for class today."

She slumped down in her chair. "Yes, sir," she replied in a small voice.

It will be okay. She frowned in confusion, whipping her head around to look at Luke. He grinned, wiggling his eyebrows. *I forgot to tell you that I could do that.*

"Vicky, turn back around and face the front," Father Turner commanded harshly.

She cringed, slowly turning. *Sorry.* She heard Luke again and she rolled her eyes.

"I'm sorry if facing the front is such an inconvenience, Miss Phillips."

She shifted uneasy in her chair. "I'm sorry?"

"'I'm sorry' isn't a question. Either you are or you aren't sorry."

She shook her head frantically. "No, Father Turner, I didn't understand your statement about it being an inconvenience." He gave her a stern look, and she swallowed hard. "It's no inconvenience at all."

"See me after class."

Her heart sank. "Yes, sir."

I'm sorry, Vicky. Luke intruded in her thoughts again. She closed her eyes, nodding once to acknowledge his apology. "*I'll wait for you after class.*"

Propping her elbow on the desk, she rested her chin on her open palm letting out a long slow breath. *Oh, Luke, why couldn't you have told me you could do that before class?*

Because the subject never came up.

She sat up straight in the desk. *Wait a minute. You can hear me?*

Yes.

Hey, this could come in handy. How far away can you do this?

You're the first one that I've been able to do this with other than my family. I don't know, maybe five miles or so.

So, I can just call out to you, and you'll hear me.

Yeah, I guess so.

This could be bad, too. Can you turn it off?

I don't think I can. Once I've tuned in, I can't tune out. It's complicated.

You better not hold anything I think against me. I don't know if I can control my thoughts.

She could hear him laugh at her. *You better pay attention before you get into more trouble with Father Turner.*

Tell me about it.

The classroom door opened and Sara walked through the door with a tardy slip in her hand. She tossed her silky blond hair over her shoulder. "I'm sorry that I'm late, Father Turner. I had a flat tire."

Father Turner accepted the paper, inspecting it. "Take your seat, Sara."

She smiled at the other students in the class until she locked eyes with Vicky. The smile dropped, all color leaving her face.

Vicky glared back. *She's surprised to see me.* She sent the thought to Luke.

It does seem like that, doesn't it?

Wait a minute. That doesn't prove anything

What do you mean? Why not?

I haven't seen Sara since the confrontation in the girl's bathroom yesterday. I scared her pretty bad. She may still be reacting to that.

You really aren't like Sara. She would have acted first and thought about it later, if at all.

Tell that to your cousin Chuck.

I plan to tell him. I may just have to knock some sense into him.

No, Luke. He's entitled to his own opinion.

Maybe so, but he doesn't have to be so rude about it.

You're sweet, but please don't resort to violence. I don't see how that will help my cause any.

I see your point.

"Luke!"

He jerked his head up, locking eyes with Father Turner. "Uh . . . sir?"

Uh oh .

Father Turner crossed his arms over his chest and glared. "See me after class

"Yes, sir." *It seems like we're both in trouble.*

I'm sorry.

"Don't be sorry. We'll go to confession together."

Chapter Six

Vicky and Luke followed Father Turner down the hall toward the small chapel, and ultimately the confessional.

"We need to be careful with this new talent of yours," Vicky whispered. "We can't keep getting in trouble every day."

"I don't know. I don't mind getting into trouble with you," he teased softly.

"I don't like it. Eventually they'll call my dad, and that can't be good. I never misbehaved in Fort Lauderdale, and he'll think you're a bad influence on me. I don't need to give him an excuse to decide we can't date." She shrugged her shoulders in frustration. "Besides, I'm not even Catholic. I don't understand how sitting in a little black cabinet and reciting a few short prayers is going to correct any discipline problems they think I might have."

Luke shrugged. "That's just the way it's always been done here."

Father Turner ushered them inside the small chapel.

She glanced over at the confessional, and her eyes rounded. "Luke, I'm nervous. I don't know the prayers."

Father Turner turned, glaring at her. She shrank back, stepping closer to Luke. *Help.*

I'll walk you through it, piece of cake." Luke's mental voice soothed her mind.

Father Turner pointed toward the confessional. "Father Thomas is waiting for you in the confessional, Vicky." He turned to Luke. "Have a seat on the bench to wait your turn."

Vicky shot Luke a pitiful look over her shoulder as she stepped inside the booth. And Father Turner shut the door behind her. She sat down, scanning around the small, dark chamber. She was terrified and trembling uncontrollably. The small panel between the booths snapped open, and she jumped.

Father Thomas spoke softly, "May the Lord be in our hearts to help you make a good confession."

Ugh, Luke, what am I supposed to say?

Luke chuckled softly. *Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been about...say how long since your last confession. These are my sins. Then you just tell him what your sins are.*

"Uh . . . Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. I'm not Catholic, so I've, uh, never been to confession before. These are my sins. Um . . . I unintentionally disrespected Father Turner in class today."

"I see. I want you to recite The Hail Mary."

Help.

I'll tell you slowly, in two parts, repeat after me. Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus."

She nodded, swallowing hard. "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus."

That was good. Here's the rest. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

She repeated what he said.

Good.

"Now, my child, I want you to say the Act of Contrition."

What in the heck is that?

It's where you pray to God for forgiveness. Listen closely. O my God, I am sorry for my sins because I have offended you. I know I should love you above all things. Help me to do penance, to do better, and to avoid anything that might lead me to sin. Amen.

She nodded, taking a quivering breath and repeated what he said.

"Very good."

"Your sins are forgiven; go in peace."

Vicky stood up to leave. *Thank him first!* Luke projected urgently.

She caught her breath. "Th-thank you, Father."

Her knees felt rubbery as she stepped out of the confessional. She hobbled over to the pew, sitting down next to Luke. Leaning forward, she placed her face in her hands. *Thanks for helping me get through that*

Luke smiled. *"You're welcome. My turn. I'll see ya in a minute."*

Luke took a little longer. Father Thomas gave him a lengthy lecture along with the prayers, due to his frequency in the confessional. He stepped out of the confessional and she stood up.

Father Turner cleared his throat. "Now, you both need to go to your next class. You're already late. Don't tarry in the hallway."

Vicky threw her bag over her shoulder. "Yes, sir."

They walked out of the chapel side by side. Luke stopped at the corner, turning to face her. "My class is in the opposite direction from yours. We're still on for lunch, right?"

"Sure, lunch will be great. I'll see ya then. Bye."

He tapped his finger to his temple. "If you need me, just holler."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Chapter Seven

Sister Phoebe's eyes widened slightly at seeing her in the doorway. "Vicky, you're late," she remarked in an icy tone.

She inwardly groaned. "Yes, ma'am. I had to go to confession and see Father Thomas."

"Indeed. Why is it that that doesn't surprise me?"

Vicky's mouth dropped open. "I don't know Sister Phoebe. I'll try not to make a habit of it."

A skeptical eyebrow greeted her protest. "Only time will tell with that one, won't it?" Sister remarked. "Take your seat. Class has already begun."

"Yes, ma'am." She brushed past Sister Phoebe to get to her desk.

In this class too, the other students openly stared at her. She sat, sliding down in her chair, and glanced over at Sara, who had a satisfied smirk on her face, but was carefully avoiding Vicky's eyes.

Sister Phoebe picked up a piece of chalk, addressing the class, "I'm going to write your classroom assignment on the chalkboard."

Vicky took out a notebook and pen from her bag, and copied the assignment as Sister Phoebe wrote it. Suddenly, a large, black spider scurried across the top of her desk. Her heart racing frantically, she took in a terrified breath, and jumped, dropping the pen on her desk.

What's wrong? Luke asked frantically in her head.

There's a huge spider on my desk.

Vicky glanced at Sara, who stared at the spider, her eyes wide. She looked away, snickering behind her hand.

Well, kill it, Luke's mental voice was demanding.

She started at Luke's command, slamming her notebook down on top of the spider and muttering under her breath.

Sister Phoebe turned from the chalkboard, glaring at her. "Is there a problem, Miss Phillips?"

"N-no . . . no, there's no problem, Sister Phoebe. I was just killing a spider."

Sister Phoebe gave Vicky an icy glare. "Spiders are God's creatures, Miss Phillips. *Thou shall not kill.*" She enunciated each word.

Vicky's mouth dropped open in disbelief. "But it was just a spider."

Sister Phoebe raised an eyebrow. "It's still one of *God's* creatures."

Vicky swallowed hard. "Yes, ma'am.

With a sharp glare, Sister Phoebe returned to the chalkboard and resumed writing. Sara giggled at Vicky's misery and Sister Phoebe paused in mid-sentence. "Is there a problem, Miss Jenkins?" she demanded without turning back around.

"No, Sister. There's no problem with *me.*" Sara snickered again.

Vicky glared at her until the smile left Sara's face then picked up her pen, to copy the instructions from the chalkboard. This time two black spiders scurried across Vicky's desk. Her eyes grew wide, her heart slamming in her chest. She dropped the pen again. "*Luke! There's two more!*"

Kill them!

I can't! Sister Phoebe will make me go see Father Thomas again.

Well, then use your notebook and brush them off of the desk.

Okay. Vicky flowed into action. She used the notebook, flinging the spiders off her desk, to land on Sara's.

Sara jumped out of her desk. "Hey!" she shouted. "Cut that out!"

Sister Phoebe whirled around to face the class. "Sara Jenkins! Please control yourself, and explain that outburst!"

Sara pointed an accusing finger at Vicky. "Vicky flung two spiders at me!"

Sister Phoebe trained her glare on Vicky again.

Vicky swallowed hard. "You told me I couldn't kill them," she said. "I'm afraid of spiders. They had to go!"

Sister Phoebe rolled her eyes, and most of the class sniggered. "Miss Phillips, you will control yourself in this class, or you will be going to see Father Thomas again. Have I made myself clear?"

Vicky bit her bottom lip while Sister Phoebe chewed her out. "Yes, Sister, crystal clear," she replied in a strong voice, then slouched down at her desk trying to appear less noticeable. *Luke, I'm dying in here.*

Just try to hang on. Class is almost over.

I just want to get out of here.

It'll be lunch before you know it.

Not soon enough. She picked up her pen again to write the assignment. This time a spider dropped down from the ceiling, dangling right in front of her face. Her eyes darted frantically around the class, a cold sweat beading her forehead and upper lip. She caught the startled look on Sara's face too. She placed the pen on the desk. *Luke . . .*

What?

There's another one, and it's dangling right in front of my face.

What, again?

Uh huh.

Vicky, unless you're sitting under a nest of spiders, that can't be a coincidence. Take your notebook and gently bat the spider to the floor.

She did as Luke suggested. Sara didn't take her eyes off of her as Vicky gently batted the spider to the floor and let out a relieved breath. *Okay, it's on the floor.*

Good. Now, check around and see if you see a nest of them somewhere.

Vicky investigated under her desk and up on the ceiling, turning her head to scan the aisles on both sides of her desk. "I don't see anything."

It's witchcraft, Luke growled in her head.

What?

Black magic

But, Sara seems just as afraid of the spiders as I am.

She may be good at hiding it, or there may be a different culprit.

Well, if it's not Sara, then who can it be?

I don't know. No one here knows you well enough to be setting you up. Do they?

I've never seen anyone at this school in my life, at least that I remember. But someone knew that I was coming. Sara said so yesterday.

You may have to find out from Sara just where she got her information.

You don't really think that she's going to volunteer that information, do you?

Probably not.

Great .

Take a look around and see if anyone is giving you any strange looks.

Luke, after this morning, everyone is giving me strange looks.

Then just peek to see if anyone is giving you a smug look. They should be pretty happy with themselves right now, since you've been getting into trouble.

Okay, I'll look. She pressed her lips together into a thin line, turning her head to stare around the class. No one seemed to be paying any attention to her except Sara, and she was paying attention in a worried way. Vicky noted the pen on her desk, staring hard. It seemed like every time she picked up that pen, another spider made an appearance. Luke, you know more about black magic than I do. Can an object be cursed?

Yes, why?

Every time I pick up that pen to write, another spider appears from thin air.

Where did you get the pen?

I took it out of my bag, why?

Is it yours?

She shrugged. It's just a generic pen. I have a whole bag of them at home that look just like it.

How many did you bring with you to school today?

Two I always have two in case I lose one, or it runs out of ink.

Don't be obvious, but check your bag.

Vicky picked up her bag, and shuffling through it, she pulled out two more pens. I have two more pens in my purse.

Carefully pick the pen up and place it on the floor next to your desk. Be prepared for another spider, just in case. The cleaning people will sweep it up tonight.

Vicky allowed it to roll off the desk, hitting the floor. Sara looked down at the pen on the floor and then back at Vicky. She shrugged, reaching for the object until Vicky placed her hand on her arm to stop her. Sara glared at her hand, yanking her arm back. Vicky shook her head no, motioning with her eyes to the pen on the floor. Three more spiders scurried away from it. Sara's eyes grew wide.

It was the pen.

Okay, how did it get in your bag?

That's the million dollar question.

Who have you been close to today?

Well, there was Father Turner, Chuck, and Sara – but she genuinely seems confused by all this. Then, of course, you, and I'm pretty sure you're not a witch.

Everybody's suspect until we get to the bottom of this.

Even you?

He chuckled softly. You can hear my thoughts. Do you think I'm a witch?

No, of course not, I would trust you with my life, and I have actually done that.

Has anything happened in the last few minutes?

She glanced at the pen on the floor and then around the room, studying the faces of the other students. No, everything seems normal, for now.

I'll see you at lunch, then.

Lunch sounds good.

Chapter Eight

Vicky walked into her next class, taking her seat next to Rachael. She smiled brightly. "Hi, how are you today?"

Rachael looked away, shrugging. "I saw you."

Vicky raised an eyebrow. "You saw me? What did you see?"

Rachael stared at the floor. "Everything."

"You're going to have to tell me what exactly you saw that's bothering you."

She picked at her cuticles. "I was with that group in the parking lot. I saw you use your magic on Chuck."

Vicky closed her eyes and counted slowly until she calmed down. Opening her eyes, she tried to reach Rachael's hand and she moved it away. "Rachael, I was just trying to stop a fight. I wouldn't have hurt Chuck. I wouldn't do that. You do believe me, don't you?"

She timidly shrugged her shoulder, refusing to meet Vicky's eyes.

Vicky crossed her arms while she tried to think of a way to get through to Rachael. "I told you yesterday that I was a witch and that I want to be your friend." Rachael nodded sadly. "You don't believe that I want to be your friend?"

No response.

Vicky placed her hand on Rachael's shoulder aghast when the girl cringed away. Pulling her hand back, she sighed. "Is that it? Is this cold shoulder due to what happened in the parking lot this morning?"

Rachael shook her head and sniffed. "No."

Vicky sat back in her chair. "Then something else happened to upset you. What?"

Rachael looked up, tears pooling on her bottom lashes, threatening to spill. Her beautiful blue eyes reflected pure misery. "You told me that you were going to get even with Sara for what she did to me." She reached up, pulling on a few strands of her lush auburn hair for Vicky to see. "It took me almost a year to get all my hair back. No one at this school will talk to me because of her." She blinked and the tears fell down her

cheeks. "I saw you. You treated her like a friend, even after what she's done to me." She buried her face on her arm. "I thought for once, I was truly going to have a friend in this godforsaken place. I couldn't believe that you could betray me almost as quickly as you made the promise."

Compassion gripped Vicky's heart. An overwhelming need to cry swept over her. "I'm truly sorry. I know it must have seemed that way to you, but believe me, Sara is not my friend."

Rachael wiped the tears from her eyes and frowned. "I saw you wave her away from picking up that pen."

Vicky sat up straight, frowning back in alarm. "How do you know about the pen?"

Rachael sniffed. "When no one talks to you, you have a lot of time to yourself. I have learned to see everything and I saw those spiders coming out of that pen. I can't believe you stopped her from picking it up. She deserved to get bit. She's probably the one who cursed it in the first place."

"Luke thinks so too." She shook her head. "But honestly, Rachael, I'm not so sure."

"Don't fool yourself," Rachael said, glaring. "Sara will stab you in the back if you don't watch her."

"I didn't get a chance to talk to you yesterday, after lunch." She scooted her chair closer and lowered her voice. "I was on my way to my next class when Sara grabbed me from behind and yanked me into the girl's bathroom. I hit the back of my head pretty hard when she shoved me against the wall." Rachael's eyes grew very wide as Vicky rubbed the lump on the back of her head. "She thought she could intimidate me. I proved to her that she couldn't." She laughed softly. "I popped a few light bulbs, made the floor shake, and rattled a few of the metal stall doors. I threatened her and told her if she didn't leave me and everyone else in the school alone, she would have to deal with me. I left her in the bathroom cowering in the corner."

A ghost of a smile lit Rachael's face. "I would have loved to have seen that." "I'm not proud of what I did. I wasn't raised that way."

Rachael shifted uneasily in her chair. "I wasn't either, but after what she put me through . . ."

Vicky gave her a sad smile. "Believe me, I do understand. Sara can be pretty mean and vindictive. She put you through hell. I had my own bit of trouble last night, and I was furiously tempted to put all the blame on Sara." She placed her hand on Rachael's shoulder. "She seemed the likely culprit, but I don't want to do anything unless I'm sure, although it was *very* tempting."

Rachael gave her a look of concern. "What happened last night?"

Vicky looked around to make sure no one was listening, and dropped her voice to barely a whisper. "Someone tipped off a vigilante group that I was a witch. They kidnapped me and tried to burn me at the stake." Rachael's mouth dropped open as Vicky continued, "Luke and his family rescued me. I wanted to immediately blame Sara, but she seems like the type of person who would brag about what she did, just to hold it over your head to see you squirm. When I saw her this morning, she didn't seem surprised to see me — she seemed to fear me." She shook her head. "I just don't know."

Rachael nodded at her statement. "You're right. I've heard her brag about what she does to people. As much as I hate to say it, if she were responsible, she would be rubbing your face in it."

Vicky's shoulders slumped. "I'm at a loss. I desperately need to find out who's after me. At least now I know she, or he, is a witch. That cursed pen was a sure sign."

Rachael's eye lit up. "Not necessarily." She shrugged. "There's an occult store tucked away in the back of the only book store in town. This place is *full* of witches. That's where they buy the things they need to conjure spells and stuff. Someone may have purchased a cursed object from them. They probably told the shop owner that it was for a practical joke or something."

Vicky tapped her index finger on her chin. "You might have something there. Maybe I'll get Luke to help me check it out."

“Vicky Phillips!” Father Turner snapped. Vicky closed her eyes, slumping down in her chair. “Although it is nice to see that Rachael finally has a friend to talk to, you both are disrupting my class! Is another trip to see Father Thomas in order for this afternoon?”

“N-no, Father Turner.” She looked down at her desk, swallowing hard. “I’ll stop talking.”

He glared icily. “This is your final warning for today.”

“Yes, thank you, Father.”

Chapter Nine

The bell ending third period rang. Vicky grabbed her bag, scooping up her notebook and placing it inside. She stood briefly by her chair. "Rachael, I'm supposed to be meeting Luke for lunch. Why don't you join us?"

"I don't want to intrude."

"Hang on a second," Vicky stalled her, staring off into space. Rachael looked at her strangely. *Luke, are you listening?*

Yeah, where are you?

I haven't left third period yet. I invited Rachael to eat with us, but she doesn't want to intrude.

Bring her with you.

We'll see you in a few minutes.

Vicky turned her attention back on Rachael, catching her staring.

"Do you do that much?"

Vicky lifted an eyebrow, shifting her bag to her other shoulder. "Do what?"

"Space out like that."

"Oh, that. I didn't space out. I was talking to Luke."

Rachael frowned. "Luke's not here. Do you need to sit down or something?"

Vicky laughed at Rachael's confusion. "I'm not crazy. I know Luke's not here. He's a telepath. He can read my thoughts, and I can hear him speaking to me." Rachael pursed her lips. "No, really, it's true. Do you remember when I got in trouble this morning?" At Rachel's nod, she continued. "Luke had just spoken to me for the first time, and I was shocked. Father Turner thought I was acting out. I was rolling my eyes at Luke's comment, not Father." She shifted her bag to her other shoulder. "Anyway, I was asking Luke if he minded if you joined us. He wants you to come along."

Rachael paused only for a second, then a huge smile suddenly split her face. "Thanks, I accept."

"Well, come on then. Lunch is the one class that I don't want to be late for."

Vicky's eyes scanned the cafeteria until she found Luke. She waved. *We'll get our lunch and meet you at the table.* She glanced at Rachael and pointed toward him. "Luke has a table for us."

Rachael giggled, bouncing a couple of times on the balls of her feet. "Okay, that sounds great."

I've already got lunch for all of us. Just come to the table.

Vicky's mouth gaped open. *You didn't have to do that . . . again.*

Yes, I did. I told you I was going to spoil you. Vicky rolled her eyes, laughing.

"What's so funny?" Rachael asked.

"Oh, it's nothing much. Luke was just teasing me." She pointed toward the table again. "He took the liberty of buying us lunch, so we don't have to stand in line."

Rachael stopped in her tracks, eyes wide. "He bought lunch for me too?"

"Yeah, he's a great guy, and he says his intent is to spoil me." She tugged on Rachael's arm leading her to the table. "What can I say? He's sweet, and he's doing an awfully good job of spoiling me too."

Vicky weaved her way through the cafeteria with Rachael in tow. Arriving within ten feet of Luke, she stopped so abruptly that the other girl ran into her.

Rachael grabbed her arm to keep from falling. "Vicky, why did you stop?"

"Luke, what is he doing here?" Vicky lifted a shaky finger, pointing at Chuck. Rachael peeked over her shoulder. She tugged on Vicky's shirt to try to get her attention.

Be careful, babe, he might not be able to read your thoughts, but he's part of my family, and he can read mine.

"Vicky, what's going on?" Rachael tugged on her arm again, trying to get her attention.

"Luke's cousin, Chuck, is at the table with him," she whispered.

Rachael gripped Vicky's arm, her eyes lighting up. "Chuck is Luke's cousin?"

Vicky's eyes widened at Rachael's reaction, and a slow smile appeared on her face. "Yeah . . . it appears so. Do you know Chuck?"

She sighed wistfully. "No, I've only seen him in the halls and of course at all the football games."

Luke, I think Rachael wants to meet Chuck

What a coincidence. He wants to meet her too. He just kicked me. "Hey!" he complained aloud.

Vicky laughed. *He heard you, didn't he?*

Luke reached under the table, rubbing his leg. *Yeah, he did.*

Arriving at the table, she found Luke smiling playfully. "Hi. How's the leg?" Luke pulled out a chair, and she sat down, her smile faltering as she glanced at Chuck. "Hi."

He nodded, and he pulled out a chair for Rachael. She stood behind the chair. He sat back in his chair. "Vicky, are you gonna introduce me to your friend?"

"Sure." She glanced at Rachael, who suddenly seemed about to bolt. At her encouraging wink, Rachael somewhat reluctantly sat down. The petrified look on Rachael's face told her that her new friend was scared to death, and she was suddenly angry with Sara all over again for taking away all of Rachael's self-confidence. Rachael was a beautiful girl, and she should not have to suffer just because of Sara's jealousy. "Chuck, this is Rachael Johnson. Rachael, this is Chuck Holmes.

"Well, we finally get to meet," Chuck cut in, giving Rachael a flirtatious grin. "I've seen you in the halls, but every time I try to approach you, you hurry away."

The color rose to Rachael's cheeks, and she gave Vicky a panicked glance. Vicky smiled reassuringly. "I'm sorry," Rachael remarked in a small voice, "I didn't know." She swallowed hard, refusing to meet his eyes. "Guys have made it a point to avoid me for the last couple of years, so I always assumed you were headed somewhere else."

Chuck drew his eyebrows together, frowning. "I don't understand. Is there something going on that I don't know about?"

“Chuck . . .” Luke’s low tone contained a warning.

As Rachael’s eyes dropped to the untouched food on the table, her complexion turning a little green, Vicky felt the need to do something. “She is skittish and withdrawn because of Sara.” Rachael’s head snapped up, her expression horrified. Vicky shook her head. “He needs to know,” she remarked softly. “Believe me; I don’t think he’ll care.”

“What did Sara do to make Rachael run from everyone?” Chuck asked impatiently.

“Sara was jealous of Rachael, so she cursed her,” Vicky remarked bluntly.

The muscle in Chuck’s jaw twitched. “What kind of curse?”

Rachael’s eyes reverted to the table again; she winced shying away at his tone. Vicky explained, “Well, from what Rachael’s told me, she lost most of her hair, and it took a really long time for it to grow back. I understand everyone avoided her after that. I guess they might have been afraid Sara would curse them too.”

“You’re wrong, Vicky,” Chuck challenged. “I do care.” Rachael closed her eyes, the color draining from her face. “I’m going to make sure that Sara pays for her witchery,” Chuck said. “She has been terrorizing this school with her black magic for far too long.”

Rachael’s head snapped up, her mouth dropping open in surprise. “You’re not afraid of Sara?” Relief rang clear in her voice.

“I’m not afraid of a witch,” he replied in a deep tone, looking pointedly at Vicky.

Luke locked eyes with him, pulling Vicky’s chair protectively closer to him.

“Chuck, don’t.”

Rachael shook her head frantically. “Vicky’s not like Sara.”

“She’s a witch!”

Rachael looked back and forth between Vicky and Chuck. “Yes, but . . . you can’t.” She shook her head, gathering her courage. “You can’t, Chuck! She’s my friend.” She stood at the table, placing herself between Vicky and Chuck and raised her chin

defiantly, her eyes dilating, the outer edges tinged in gold. "I won't allow you to hurt her!"

Chuck sat back in his chair, chuckling softly. He pointed at Rachael as he spoke to Luke. "She's a shifter." He tilted his head, catching Rachael's eyes. "You're mighty protective of your friend." He laughed harder. "I like that." He leaned forward in his seat, glancing around Rachael to look at Vicky. "You've earned her loyalty. I guess you can't be all bad . . ."

Vicky felt Luke relax and then she relaxed too.

"What's your affinity, honey?" Chuck said to Rachael.

She sat back down hard in the chair. "My what?"

He raised an eyebrow. "I can tell that you're a shifter by your eyes. What do you shift into?"

"Oh!" She quickly looked away. "I'm not supposed to . . ."

He laughed. "I'm a wolf," he whispered to her.

Her gaze scouted the room nervously, then locked with his. "Panther," she whispered back.

Vicky reached for her hamburger, taking a bite. *I would have never matched those two together.*

Luke picked up his own hamburger. *Me neither.*

Chapter Ten

Vicky gazed into the mirror, putting the finishing touches to her hair, when she heard a knock at the front door. She glanced at the clock. It was a few minutes before six.

"I'll get it, Pumpkin," her father called .

She left her room to stand at the top of the stairs. "Okay, Dad."

Mr. Phillips opened the door. "Phoebe," he remarked, sounding somewhat shocked, "what are you doing here?"

Vicky frowned, backing up against the wall out of sight. "Phoebe," she repeated under her breath. "What's she doing here?" Her eyes grew wide. "How does Dad know her?" She crouched down, spying between the spindles of the railing. She drew in a sharp breath as her mouth dropped open. "She's in street clothes. Where's her habit?"

Phoebe smiled coyly from the open doorway. "Why, Ryan, aren't you going to invite me in?"

He looked over his shoulder but did not seem to see her hiding at the top of the stairs. He let out a slow, resigned breath. "Sure, why not."

I'll tell you why not. Vicky clutched the railing, trying to keep her breaths slow and even – and quiet.

"Come on back to my study, and we'll talk," he remarked in a shaky voice, turning to walk away. "Follow me."

Phoebe brushed past him, charging into the house. "I know where the study is," she remarked in a demeaning tone. "I grew up in this house, remember?"

"Yeah, I had momentarily forgotten that."

Vicky gripped the spindles until her hands shook from the force as she observed them at the bottom of the stairs. "She grew up in this house?" She shook her head. "Mom grew up in this house." The color drained from her face. "Oh, God, we're related."

Phoebe smiled up at Ryan, took his hand. "We have a lot of catching up to do." She pulled him into the study, shutting the door behind them

Vicky paced back and forth a few times. She turned her face up to the heavens, splaying her hands. "God, tell me what to do," she pleaded.

Vicky? What's wrong?

She jumped her heart racing. *What?*

Babe, it's me, Luke. I can feel your panic. Tell me what's wrong?

Oh, Luke! Sister Phoebe is in my house right now with my dad.

What?

She's in his study right now, behind closed doors. What am I going to do?

You don't think that she's there to tell your dad about the spider thing do you?

I don't know—maybe. But here's the weird thing: she showed up here in street clothes, and I overheard them. She grew up in this house. My mom did, too. That means we must be related somehow.

Where are you now?

I'm standing like a dummy at the top of the stairs.

On my way. Sneak downstairs and see if you can overhear anything.

She tiptoed down, avoiding the squeaky center of the third step from the top, pausing at the bottom to listen. She could hear muffled voices coming from the office. Walking up to the door, she pressed her eye up to the old fashioned keyhole.

"I'll have to admit, Phoebe, I am surprised to see you," Vicky's father remarked, pausing. "Tell me, why are you here?"

She sat down in a chair in front of the desk. "Don't be that way. I can remember a time when you wouldn't ask me a question like that."

He sat down in his chair behind the desk, folding his hands in his lap. "You're right. You used to live here . . . but . . . that was then, and this is now. A lot has changed over the years, including me."

She smiled patiently. "Haven't we all."

He cocked his head to the side. "I thought you were in a convent somewhere in Utah."

Her eyes took on an icy glare. "I was for a few years," she spat sharply. "I only joined the convent because you rejected me." She stood up, pacing the room in agitation. "We had a child you know." His mouth dropped open. "The church took her from me and made me give her up for adoption. I left for the convent after the baby was born. Our daughter resides right here in this town."

Vicky sucked in a shocked breath, pressing her eye closer to the door for a better view.

"That's impossible! We never slept together!"

She smiled slyly. "Yes, we did. I knew you were in love with my sister and I had to put a stop to that. I cast a little spell, and you were like putty in my hands." Then the smile dropped from her face. "You were supposed to be mine! That baby was supposed to assure me of that. But noooooo! You had to sneak off with my sister in the middle of the night before I could complete my plan! Emily, that little bitch! She always got everything she ever wanted, including you! You just happened to get her pregnant right after you two left. Daddy wouldn't let me tell you about the child and made me join a convent. I eventually made him pay for that one." She held her chin up defiantly. "I'm going to tell our darling daughter, Sara, that she has a long lost mommy and daddy. Now that my little bitch of a sister is dead, I'm staking my claim!"

Vicky's body trembled. That could not be possible. Sara could not be her half-sister. She suddenly felt very sick to her stomach.

"Like hell you are!" he roared. "I don't love you! I never have."

She stopped pacing, turning to glare at him. "Once I get rid of all traces of my sister, you will be mine!"

He stood up, slamming his hands down on top of his desk. "What in the hell is that supposed to mean?" he demanded.

"I had Emily taken care of. I paved the way for you and me."

Vicky's body trembled in fear and outrage as the meaning of Phoebe's words sunk in. *She's responsible for Mom's death.* She braced her hands against the door and hit her knees, tears welling up in her eyes. *She's responsible for that mob that came after me.*

She swiped at the tears in her eyes. *Oh, God Daddy's alone with that lunatic.* She pressed her eye back up against the keyhole.

He sailed around the desk to charge toward her, holding up her hand, he encountered a force field. He put his shoulder to it, but it would not budge. He screamed in frustration.

"Once I get rid of that brat of yours, you'll be all mine, and our darling daughter Sara's! That stupid mob botched the job last night. I'll have to take care of things myself." She laughed a little hysterically. "You should have seen her in class today! It was priceless. Those spiders coming out of that pen were a great touch, if I do say so myself." She sobered. "The little brat is smart though. She figured out that it was the pen and got rid of it. I'll have to resort to more drastic measures next time."

"You touch one hair on Vicky's head and I'll *kill* you," he warned.

"Oh, don't worry, Ryan; she will join Emily very soon. I'll see to it," she remarked in a patronizing tone. She lifted her arm, waiving her hand through the air. "Sleep," she commanded, and Ryan hit the floor, unconscious.

Fear gripped Vicky's heart as she backed away from the door. She charged up the stairs. *LUKE . . . OH MY GOD . . . IT'S HER!!! SHE'S RESPONSIBLE FOR ALL OF IT!!!*

I'm almost there! Explain. What is she responsible for?

ALL OF IT! MY MOTHER'S DEATH! THAT MOB LAST NIGHT! THE SPIDERS! ALL OF IT!

Where's your dad?

She commanded him to sleep. I heard him hit the floor.

Lock yourself in your room! I'll be there in just a couple of minutes!

Vicky slammed her bedroom door, twisting the bolt. It locked with a definite thud. Her heart raced as she searched frantically around the room for somewhere to hide. *Luke, I can hear her coming up the stairs . . .*

Hide!

Her heart pounded so loud in her ears that she barely heard him. *There is nowhere to hide! I may have to face her!*

NO! NOT WITHOUT ME!

There may not be enough time! The doorknob jiggled. *She's outside my door!*

"Oh, Vicky, you must open this door right now and face your dear aunt!" Phoebe taunted. "I so want to get to know my dear niece."

"No! Go away!"

"That's not going to happen. Now open this door!" She pounded on the door. "I have to send you to your mother and make room for my own daughter, Sara. You're in the way, you understand."

"Understand?" Vicky gave a bitter, somewhat hysterical laugh. "All I understand, Aunt Phoebe, is that you are insane. You are responsible for killing my mother and trying to kill me."

"No, correction, dear child—I *am* going to kill you. You see, your father will never give himself to me willingly with you alive. I have to remove you from the picture. You are a distraction, and I have to remove *all* distractions." Four coral snakes slithered under Vicky's door. "Enjoy my pets!"

Vicky's heart slammed in her chest frantically when she saw those snakes slink into her room from underneath the door. "*Luke, help me!*" she screamed at the top of her lungs as she jumped and stood on top of her bed.

Phoebe cackled. "He can't help you now. No one can! I have magically enhanced the snake's toxins to speed the effects. Once they bite you, you will be dead in a matter of minutes!"

"*Vicky!*" Luke's frantic shout reached her ears. A loud bang kept repeating. "The front door's not locked, but I *can't* open it!"

Phoebe threw her head back, cackling. "I told you he can't help you. You are as good as dead, so be a good girl and die."

Luke! There are coral snakes everywhere!

Oh, God, listen to me, and listen carefully. I can't breach her magic to get in there. You have power over the elements, don't you?

Uh huh.

Burn them.

She took a calming breath, then lifted her chin defiantly. "Serpents, I command you to burn!" They instantly flamed.

"No!" Phoebe shouted. "I felt that. This doesn't mean anything, you little brat! You still have to deal with me!"

What do I do now?

You're going to have to face her! I can't get past her magic to help you!

What? I can't do that! I can't use my magic to harm someone. I've never done that. I might accidentally kill her. Besides, she's my aunt. Unfortunately, she's family.

You're related? Never mind the kinship; you're going to have to stop her, Vicky. She's insane. She will kill you!

The tumblers of the lock slowly clicked into the unlocked position. The door crept open. Phoebe stood tall and looming in the doorway. Her hair hung in unruly strands about her face and shoulders. Her blue eyes were glassy. "My dear niece, I see that you managed to kill my babies." She looked down at the charred snakes, shaking her head and clucking her tongue. She looked up into Vicky's eyes. Vicky could see the insanity raging behind her overly bright eyes. "How unfortunate for them, and for you," she remarked calmly. "Now you're going to have to die a much slower death. More is the pity. I was hoping that this wouldn't have to be messy, but you're not cooperating."

"Forgive me, Aunt Phoebe, for not cooperating with you," Vicky took a couple of steps back on the mattress. "I'm not that easy to kill."

Phoebe shook her head making a "tsking" sound. "Pity . . . pity . . ." She raised her hand. "On your knees!"

"White witches don't succumb to black magic, Aunt Phoebe. Didn't my mother ever tell you that?"

Phoebe squealed in frustration, charging at her in a scowling and red-faced rage. Vicky threw back her head, holding out her hand. "Stop!" she commanded.

Phoebe sailed across the room, slamming against the wall, striking her head. She fell to the floor in an unconscious heap.

I did it! Try the door!

Vicky heard the front door slam against the wall and the frantic thumping as Luke raced up the stairs, skidding to a halt at her bedroom door. "Are you okay?"

She gave him a weak smile. "Yes. Please go downstairs into my father's study and check on him, but do it quickly. I need you to bring back the duct tape. We need to tie her up and duct tape her mouth. She practices black magic. Her hands need to be bound and she needs to be silenced so that she can't cast any more spells. Hurry!"

Luke flashed her a grin, and ran back downstairs. He was back in record time with her father in tow.

Ryan grabbed her, pulling her into a fierce hug in relief. "Vicky! Did she hurt you?"

"I'm okay, Dad." She exhaled wearily, her shoulders slumping. "We really need to have a talk."

Luke knelt down and secured Phoebe's hands together behind her back and placing a piece of tape over her mouth. Her head still lolled on the floor.

She gestured toward Phoebe. "What are we going to do with her?"

"I'll call Father Thomas. The Church will deal with Sister Phoebe."

"Don't you mean Aunt Phoebe?"

Her father's eyes took on a hard gleam. "She was your mother's sister, but don't call her your aunt. Phoebe is dead to you. Do you hear me?"

Luke took her into his arms, hugging her close. She relaxed, allowing him to comfort her. "I heard you crystal clear, Dad. This woman is just a bad memory."

"Good." Ryan bent down, hoisting Phoebe up, off the floor. He threw her over his shoulder, and toted her downstairs.

She watched her father leave. Looking up into Luke's eyes, she gave him a sad smile. "Two days in a row, I almost lost my life." A lone tear trailed down her cheek. "She's responsible for my mom's death. She has to be insane."

"Well, at least she's been dealt with," Luke remarked softly.

Vicky shook her head. "Nothing's been dealt with, Luke. We have an insane witch on our hands."

"We'll let Father Thomas deal with her tonight."

"Luke . . . you don't know . . . how . . . furiously tempted . . . I was to destroy her. Does that make me a bad person?"

Luke shook his head. "No . . . it just makes you normal." He grinned. "Let's go downstairs and order a pizza. I'm starving."

She rolled her eyes. "It's just like a guy to be thinking of his stomach at a time like this."

He whispered, "I'd rather be kissing you, but that would get me kicked out. So I vote for pizza instead."

She giggled. "Pizza it is!"



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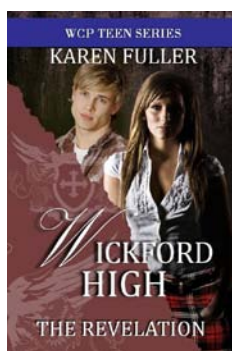
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