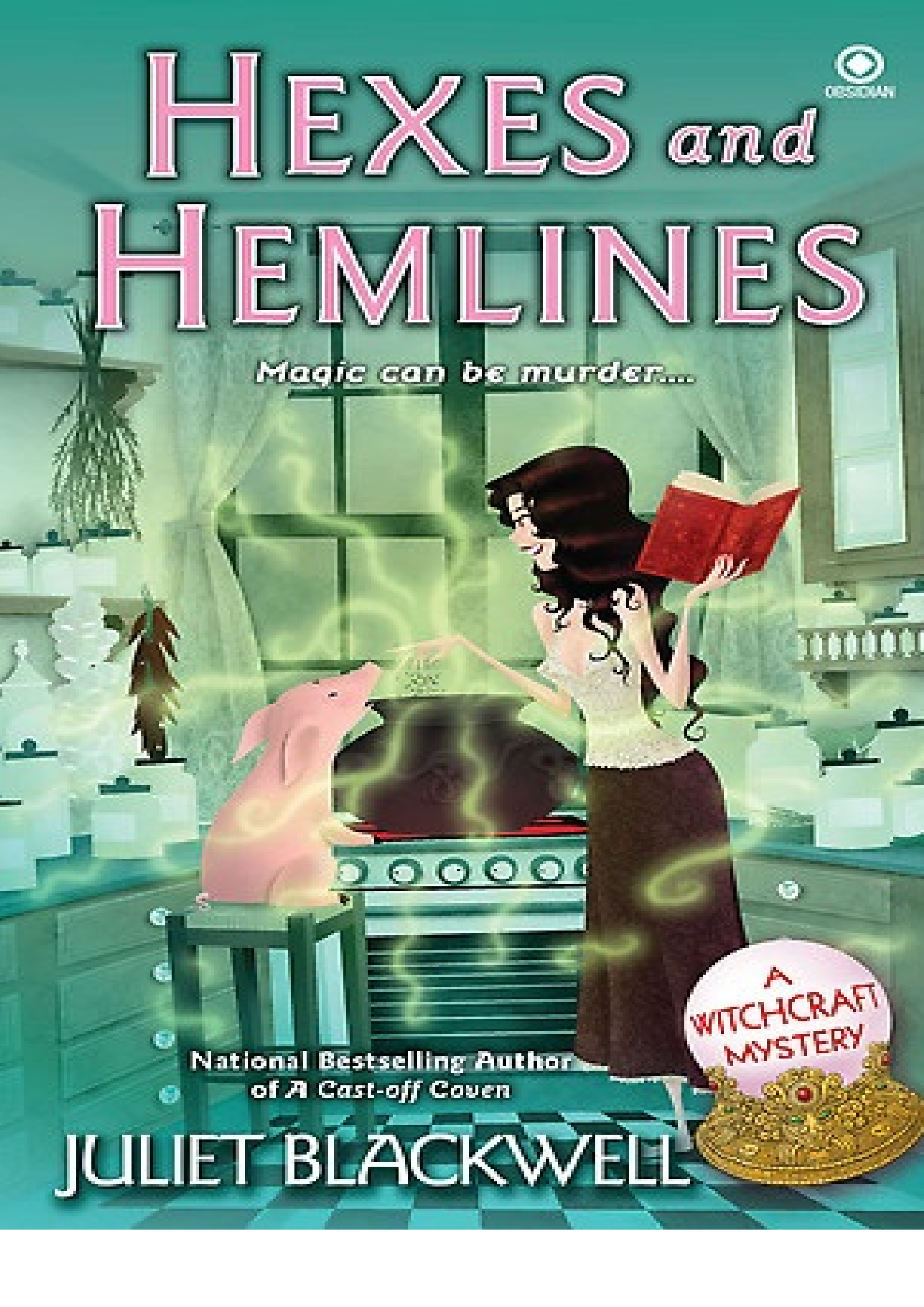




HEXES and HEMLINES

Magic can be murder...



National Bestselling Author
of *A Cast-off Coven*

JULIET BLACKWELL

A
WITCHCRAFT
MYSTERY



HEXES AND
HEMLINES



Juliet Blackwell



AN OBSIDIAN MYSTERY

HEXES AND HEMLINES



Juliet Blackwell



AN OBSIDIAN MYSTERY

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THE HAUNTED HOME RENOVATION MYSTERY SERIES

If Walls Could Talk

OBSIDIAN

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To Jane Lawes
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I miss you so.

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And finally to Oscar, my neighbor's little black cat . . . I put "smoked ham" on the grocery list.

*'Tis the night—the night
Of the grave's delight,
And the warlocks are at their play;
Ye think that without
The wild winds shout,
But no, it is they—it is they.*

—ARTHUR CLEVELAND CO.

Chapter 1

It didn't take a witch to figure out something was very, very wrong on the thirteenth floor of the Doppler Building.

It wasn't called the thirteenth floor, of course. It was the penthouse, and Malachi Zazi lived there. Or . . . *used* to live there. At the moment his body was splayed atop a long banquet table, a jagged shard from a shattered mirror protruding from his chest. Deep red blood spatter created a gruesome Rorschach pattern on the snowy white Belgian lace tablecloth.

I took a deep breath and concentrated on not losing my lunch.

Most days I deal in vintage clothing, not corpses. I may be a natural-born witch, but I'm no more comfortable around violent death than any other mortal merchant on Haight Street.

I was here only because SFPD inspector Carlos Romero had asked for my help. I now understood why.

"When was he found?" I asked.

"This morning," said Inspector Romero. "By his housekeeper."

"Time of death?"

"Medical examiner hasn't determined that, but the victim had guests for a midnight supper. The last ones apparently left around two thirty."

"The body hasn't been moved? The legs were pointed toward the door like this?"

The inspector nodded. "Everything's as it was found. Including the bird."

"What bird?"

As if on cue, a small brown sparrow swooped past me and landed on the table near the corpse. It chirped and hopped about, then flew away. I jumped when a black cat sprang onto the tabletop and gave chase. Feather and fur disappeared into the bedroom.

I clutched my medicine bag and whispered a quick protective chant.

Romero scoffed. "I didn't think witches were scared of black cats."

"I'm not. But a sparrow trapped in the house is a sign of death at hand."

"Yeah, well, we got a dead guy on the table."

"But the bird . . ." I shook my head. "Death is still lurking. It's a bad sign."

"That's nothing," the inspector snorted. "So far we've got a ladder positioned in front of the door to walk under in order to pass into the room. There's a broken mirror over the fireplace, an open umbrella in the corner, and a black cat. Even *I* know these are alleged signs of bad luck."

"Don't forget the thirteen chairs at the table," I mused. No point in mentioning that lying atop a table is considered bad luck, and lying down with one's feet pointed toward the door is referred to as the corpse position. "And we're on the thirteenth floor. Not that there's anything unlucky about the number thirteen; quite the opposite. But a lot of people seem to think it's cursed."

I wasn't yet ready to take a close look at the victim. Both because he was dead and what all . . . and because there was something decidedly wrong with the body.

Even from a distance, I could sense that there was something *different* about Malachi Zazi.

I took a moment to look around the apartment, sidestepping the emergency personnel, who were dusting for prints and photographing possible evidence. Besides occasional staccato camera flashes, the only light in the room was a dim amber glow from hand-blown sconces. The apartment reeked of cigar smoke and carried the slight aroma of last night's dinner. Tall windows were covered by heavy gold-tasseled red velvet drapes that blocked the afternoon sun; muted Oriental rugs covered generous sections of the dark wood floor; vivid oil paintings lined the paneled walls; and plush leather armchairs invited weary visitors to linger by the massive carved fireplace. There were vases of lilies

as well as bright orange marigolds—both were flowers of death: the lilies in many Western cultures, the marigolds in Mexico for Day of the Dead. The whole apartment looked like a stage set for a Victorian play—for some convoluted murder mystery, to be precise.

“Officially, we’re on the fourteenth floor,” Romero mentioned as he trailed after me. “Not the thirteenth.”

“Only because otherwise rational men and women pretend there’s no thirteenth floor when they build buildings. It’s such a holdover from another time. . . . It’s almost charming.”

“Charming or not, a man was in here with all these bad luck signs, and now he’s dead. Stabbed in the heart. Look, Lily,” the inspector continued with a half-embarrassed, half-weary look on his face. “You know it pains me to ask for your help, but I thought you might be able to offer certain . . . insights into this case. Can you tell me anything?”

I thought for a moment.

“You already know about the bad luck signs. But those are mostly superstitions—except for the mirror, and the ladder. Oh, and the poor bird. But even if they were potent, they wouldn’t lead to murder. Bad luck omens are more subtle than that, and they tend to work on a bit of a time delay.”

“So he was just an eccentric guy who liked signs of bad luck? You don’t . . . ‘feel’ anything?”

I took a deep breath and approached the body. “May I touch him?”

“Go ahead.”

I reached out and laid the fingertips of my left hand on Zazi’s cold, waxy forehead. He looked only a little older than I, maybe early thirties. Despite the grayish tone of his skin, it was clear he had once been good-looking. Dark hair and delicate wings of eyebrows set off even, romantic features.

Closing my eyes, I concentrated on filtering out the static caused by all the people in the apartment; their nervous energy bounced off the walls and filled the available air. I focused my powers, subsumed my conscious self, and allowed myself to be a conduit.

Nothing.

People—*normal* people—give off sensations, even several hours after death.

Malachi’s hands were soft, no calluses or signs of a man who worked with his hands. He wore a ring, a tarnished silver snake that wound around his left finger. Turning his hand palm up, I looked for the faint lines of fingerprints, the markings common to most every normal human on the earth.

The skin was slick, almost shiny. Even the palm showed no lifelines; nothing.

“Could someone roll him for prints?” I asked Carlos.

“What are you looking for?”

“I don’t think he’ll have any.”

“What, you mean like you?”

“Like me.”

Our eyes met.

Some of us are born without fingerprints. There is a documented, albeit rare, medical condition associated with the lack of such lines. Still, I sometimes wondered whether there was something metaphysical about it, as though certain folk are meant to go through life without leaving a trace . . . but then I’d decided I was just strange.

Apparently, so was Malachi Zazi.

“Maybe you should check out his DNA,” I mentioned.

“What for?”

“Make sure he’s human.”

Romero glanced around at the crowd, took me gently by the upper arm, and hustled me into the bedroom. Our sudden entrance startled the cat, which ran under the bed.

His hand still on the door, as though holding it closed by force, Romero blew out a frustrated breath.

and fixed me with his skeptical cop gaze.

“What are you insinuating?”

“I just think it would be helpful to know for sure what we’re dealing with.”

“If he’s not human, then . . .” He swore under his breath and rubbed the back of his neck. “What would he be? *Please* tell me we’re not talking about . . . a demon?”

I flinched. In my world, people don’t go around casually invoking the names of demons.

“Of course not,” I said. The inspector visibly relaxed. Until I added: “I mean, I doubt it. Could be anything, really.”

“Such as . . . ?”

“A doppelganger, a changeling . . . or maybe just odd, like me.”

Avoiding Romero’s eyes, I started poking around the bedroom. It was a masculine room, full of polished antiques like the rest of the apartment. My interest was immediately caught by an ornate cherry armoire, its doors open to reveal a bonanza of silks and satins—ladies’ gowns and gentlemen’s suits from another era. The late 1800s, I would say offhand. The clothes were gorgeous, and incredibly rare in such good condition.

“What’s all this?” I asked.

“I don’t know, and I don’t particularly care, if it doesn’t have to do with the vic’s murder.”

I reached into the closet, hugged several of the items to my chest, and concentrated on the garments.

Clothes were usually an easy read for me. They hummed, alive with the energy and whispered traces of the people they had adorned. But not these. These clothes were as soulless as the dead man on the table.

I recoiled, as disturbed as a normal person would have been to suddenly feel vibrations coming from their T-shirt and cargo pants.

“What’s wrong?” Romero asked.

I just shook my head. I didn’t know what to make of it all. “Could I . . . would it be possible for me to have these?”

Carlos gave me an incredulous look.

“We can’t just help ourselves to stuff at a murder scene, Lily. They belong to this poor bastard’s estate.”

“Oh, of course,” I said, feeling my cheeks burn. Some people say witches can’t blush. Not true. I can’t cry, and I can’t sink in water. But I sure as heck blush when I’ve got cause. And I too often have cause.

“Okay, this guy was supposedly founder of something called the Serpentarian Society—thirteen members all had dinner here last night,” Carlos said. “What can you tell me about that?”

“I don’t know anything about a society.”

“Do you know what Serpentarian refers to? Serpents, like snakes?”

“Sort of. Serpentarius is the thirteenth sign of the zodiac.”

“I thought there were twelve signs, one for each month.”

“There used to be thirteen, back when there were thirteen months in a year.”

“No way.”

“Way. Each with twenty-eight days, like February. The old English calendar was called ‘thirteen and a day.’ ” At his still dubious expression, I continued: “Think about it: Thirteen times twenty-eight is three hundred and sixty-four.”

Romero’s mouth kicked up in a reluctant smile. “You do that equation in your head?”

“Not hardly.” I returned his smile. “Math and I don’t exactly get along. Anyway, I’m no expert, but if I remember correctly, Serpentarius is the constellation in between Scorpio and Sagittarius.”

“Okay . . . how is this Serpentarius guy significant to my homicide?”

“I have no idea. The only thing I remember about Serpentarius offhand is that, unlike the other horoscope signs, he was based on a real man. A medical man. And his sign is a couple of intertwined snakes—hence the name. I’ll find out more about him if you like, and let you know.”

The little sparrow rose up from wherever it was hiding and started fluttering about the room. The cat took note. I crossed over to the window and pulled back the heavy velvet curtains. Behind them was a pair of sheers, and then a heavy-duty blackout shade. Finally I wrestled with a casement window that probably hadn’t been opened since the Nixon administration.

When the window finally swung open, I jumped back, startled by a looming, grinning gray face on the other side of the pane. I caught myself—it was merely the stony countenance of a gargoyle, protruding from overhanging eaves.

“Feeling a little jumpy?” asked Carlos.

“Fixin’ to leap out of my skin,” I agreed. “This is only my second homicide scene.”

“You get used to it after a while . . . unfortunately.”

I stepped away from the window, hoping the little bird would take note of the light and the air and leave this unnatural place.

Instead it landed on my shoulder. The cat leapt onto the regal four-poster, its green-eyed gaze fixed on the sparrow, as though ready to pounce on its prey—and on me.

“Go on now, sugar,” I turned my head and said to the bird. “Get on out of here.”

The sparrow hopped twice, looked at me once more with one bright shiny eye, then flew out the window to freedom. The cat bounded behind it, leaping up to the window ledge and looking out, yearning, after its quarry.

“Did you just talk to that bird?” Carlos asked, giving me a quizzical look.

I nodded.

“You talk to animals now?”

I smiled. “A lot of people talk to animals, but that doesn’t mean they understand. Watch: Come on down from there, cat,” I said to the feline preening on the window ledge.

The cat remained where it was.

“See, the cat didn’t obey,” I said.

“Cats never obey.”

“True enough.”

“The way the windows are covered up, maybe Zazi was afraid of the light. Like a . . . vampire.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I scoffed. “There’s no such thing as vampires.”

“But changelings and ghosts and doppel-whatzits, no problem.”

“It’s not the same thing at all,” I protested.

Still, I saw his point. How does one tease out superstition and folktales from reality? I knew from my training that all sorts of supposedly imaginary creatures are, in fact, real: unicorns and pretty much all the woods folk, elves and brownies and faeries. But others were simply inventions of the creative human mind. Unfortunately, I had never finished my education in the Craft, so I was still unclear on a lot of the details.

Looked like I was going to have to check in with a higher authority: Aidan Rhodes, powerful male witch and unofficial godfather to the West Coast mystical contingent. Speaking of whom . . .

I glanced down at my vintage Tinkerbell watch. I was late for a lesson with Rhodes, who had agreed to help me complete my witchcraft training. I didn’t trust him as far as I could throw him, but I sure did need him. Among other things, I imagined he might shed some light on the identity of the late Malachi Zazi, if not on Zazi’s murderer.

“I’ve got to get going. I’ll ask around, see what I can find out,” I said. “I’m sorry I wasn’t more helpful. I can’t feel anything—and that worries me. Normally I’d be feeling too much in a situation

like this.”

“Okaaaaay,” Carlos said in a cynical tone. ~~He had asked me here himself, but he was still dealing~~ with having invited my opinion on his homicide scene, just as I was still reeling at having been asked. It’s not every day that a vintage clothing dealer gets called in to consult with the SFPD. To be fair, the police department had less interest in my expertise in antique Belgian lace than in my talents as a witch. But for that matter, it’s not every day that a witch gets called in to advise on a murder case.

I had moved to San Francisco only a few months ago and opened my vintage clothing store in the former hippie haven of Haight Street, near Ashbury. Though I had hoped to keep my witchcraft under wraps, Fate had other plans for me, as she so often does. Already I had been involved in more supernatural mayhem than I would have imagined existed in such a welcoming, friendly city.

Carlos Romero stopped me as I headed for the door.

“You want this?”

He held the black cat out to me; the animal hung limp and boneless in Carlos’s hands, gazing at me with huge yellowish green headlamp eyes.

“I can’t take it. I’m allergic,” I said.

“I thought your type loved cats.”

“Even among witches I’m a bit of a freak.”

The cat stared at me and meowed. Sort of. It was more like a raspy little squeak than a proper meow.

“Don’t *you* need a pet?” I said. “I think it likes you.”

Carlos gave me a look. “Listen, it’s a black cat, and you’re a witch. Allergic or not, you two go together like rice and beans. Why not take it home with you; it’ll keep your pet pig company.”

“I am *not* taking a cat.”

“All right,” he said and sighed.

“What’ll you do with it?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“We’ll call animal control. They’ll take it to the pound.”

“And the pound will find it a home?”

He shrugged. “They’ll try, but they usually have too many cats as it is.”

“Then . . .”

“They may have to euthanize it.”

Our eyes held again. “You are an evil man, Inspector.”

He smiled.

I took the dang cat.

Chapter 2

“What in the heck is *that*?” Oscar demanded as I placed the feline in the cargo area of my work van. I slid the heavy door shut with a *whoosh* and a *thunk*.

The purple van was parked right outside Zazi’s apartment building, but Oscar hadn’t bothered to assume his potbellied pig form since no one could see into the back. In his natural state, my shape-shifting familiar was a cross between an imp and a gnome . . . or maybe a goblin. Whatever he was, Oscar was garrulous, perpetually hungry, and opinionated. He had large batlike ears, a face that resembled a grimacing monkey’s, claws on his hind feet, oversized hands . . . and all of it was covered in greenish gray scales.

He was so ugly he went clear round the bend into adorable.

The little guy had burst into my life not long ago thanks to Aidan Rhodes, male witch. Before I knew quite what was happening, Oscar was stuck to me like white on grits.

Trust a misfit witch like me to wind up with a drama queen for a familiar.

At the moment said drama queen, Oscar, was flattened against the glove compartment, one clawed hand shielding his face, glowering at the back of the van.

“It’s a *cat*,” I told him as I climbed behind the wheel. The “duh” was implied. “It’s not radioactive.”

“Yeah, but . . . *hey*, a witch don’t need more than one familiar.” Oscar turned to me, huge luminous eyes the color of green bottle glass. “You already got me, so’s you can’t have *that*.”

“The cat’s not a familiar, Oscar.” I sneezed.

“Gesundheit.”

“Thanks,” I said with a sniff. “Poor little thing didn’t have anywhere to go. I sort of volunteered to find a home for it. I couldn’t just leave it there.”

“Don’t see why not,” he muttered.

I sneezed again. Twice.

“Gesundheit, gesundheit.”

“I’m much obliged, but you don’t have to say *gesundheit* each time,” I said as I reached for a Kleenex from the half-crumpled box in the passenger-side footwell.

“Yes, I do.”

“You do?”

He nodded enthusiastically.

“Why?”

His only reply was a shrug. This was the tenor of many a frustrating conversation I had with my ersatz familiar. I love him, but he’s downright mysterious.

“Anyway,” I said, “the cat isn’t up for discussion. And really, it’s a sweet thing.” I’m more of a do-gooder person, but homeless creatures of all kinds tug at my heart. I know what it means to be abandoned.

“It’s not sleeping on my purple silk pillow,” Oscar said, his voice petulant. “Bronwyn got that for *me*. It’s *mine*. It’s *monogrammed*.”

“I know. Relax. It’s a temporary situation.”

“That’s what they always say. Just don’t feed it.”

“That’ll be your job,” I said, ignoring his outraged expression. “*And* you can keep it entertained while I’m at my lesson with Aidan.”

“But I don’t want . . . I mean I . . . okay.”

Wait a minute. Did Oscar just agree to do as I said?

“Oscar, listen to me: You will be kind and caring to this cat. It will *not* go missing, or . . .” I wasn’t actually sure what a creature like Oscar might be capable of, now that I thought about it. “Or sprout

horns, or a second tail, or anything else out of the ordinary. Understand me, young man?"

"Ungeoiudmfh," said Oscar.

"Pardon me?" I said, lifting an eyebrow in what I flattered myself was an imperious gesture. Oscar wasn't the most obedient of familiars. I blamed Aidan. "Did you have something you wanted to say?"

"Nothing, Mistress," he said with a sigh, crossing his skinny arms over his scaly chest and feigning a sudden interest in a wrinkled old map on the floor. He kicked at it, grumbling to himself in a low growl: "*First I have to wait in the van, and then I have to take care of a stupid cat.*"

"I can still hear you," I said, though I gave him a grudging smile and an affectionate squeeze.

When we'd first arrived at Malachi Zazi's building, Oscar tried to talk me into letting him come up to the apartment. Because apparently I wasn't odd enough all by myself, and Oscar saw no reason why anyone would think bringing one's potbellied pig to a murder scene would be considered out of the ordinary.

"*But I can help you,*" he'd whined, claiming he might be able to tell if there were ghosts or other spirits present. "*Besides, there are gargoyles on this building. I love gargoyles! They're practically family.*"

Not long ago Oscar actually had been able to assist me when I was investigating a haunted art school. Still, with the regular old police involved it had seemed like a faux pas—at best—to bring along one's pet pig. But now . . . after my lack of sensing any vibrations up in Malachi's apartment, I was thinking it might not be such a bad idea after all. Could I somehow sneak Oscar up to check out the apartment once the official personnel had completed their crime scene investigation?

I sat in the driver's seat without starting the engine, studying the exterior of Malachi Zazi's apartment building. Based on the architectural details, I was guessing it had been built in the 1910s or 1920s, a symphony of red brick and cream-colored cement. Cornices and handcrafted details swooped out from the façade in a bold blend of Art Deco and Art Nouveau styles. The top of the building was asymmetrical, with terraces and spires and Gothic-inspired gargoyles protruding from all sides. It was decidedly odd. Unique. Gorgeous.

Like all aged structures, it retained traces of the human lives that had passed through and dwelt within its walls over the years, but I sensed nothing untoward in its halls and stairwells. Of course, I had not felt much beyond the norm in Malachi Zazi's apartment, either, though my eyes told me otherwise. It was odd. Exceedingly odd.

This must be how regular people feel, I thought. They move through life without tuning in to each vibration, every wisp or echo of those who had come and gone.

Must be peaceful. Too bad I couldn't just relax and enjoy.

I did feel one strange sensation—as though I were being watched. I glanced around.

A young blond woman pushed a stroller toward the double doors; the uniformed doorman, graying and portly, hurried to help her out, exchanging pleasantries. An elderly fellow strolled into the building, a newspaper tucked under his arm and a black beret perched on his bald head. The driver of the FedEx van pulled up, double-parked, jumped down with two large packages, and handed them over to the doorman. Two uniformed cops came out of the elevator, passed through the lobby, and headed down the street.

Other than the presence of the police, nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

Behind me, the cat mewed, a raspy squeak that made me think of a cartoon character with a pack-a-day habit. I turned to find it staring at me. The guileless look in its huge headlamp eyes reminded me of the way Oscar tended to gaze at me . . . especially in the air of confident expectation, certain that I would take care of whatever and whoever needed to be taken care of.

My stomach fluttered. It was tough, living up to that kind of belief. It made a witch more afraid than ever to fail, to let everyone down. Since I'd become more open about my witchcraft, and had

helped resolve a couple of local demonic situations, I'd been feeling the pressure. Not long ago I would have blown town at the first sign of trouble. But now that I was making my home in San Francisco, flight was no longer an option.

"You are special, m'hija," I remembered my grandmother Graciela telling me.

I flashed back to a sunny afternoon, sitting at her kitchen table back in Jarod, Texas, sipping a frosted glass of her special ginger-spiked sweet tea.

"I say this with a heavy heart because such power is bound to be misunderstood. And with great power comes great responsibility. Me entiendes, Lily? Understand? You must be very careful. Learn all you can about your power, about the other world. But use it rarely, and only when you are certain—certain, alma mia, absolutely certain that it is necessary. What have I taught you? The one thing above all?"

"All things must be in balance," I said.

"All things must be in balance," she repeated solemnly. *"You must never forget that, Lilita. No te olvides. If you do, the consequences will be terrible."*

I nodded and finished my tea. "Could we go try to turn the yellow daisies purple now?"

"Seguro que si," Graciela replied with an indulgent smile. *"But of course."*

I was only now beginning to understand what my grandmother meant, to grasp just how powerful a witch I was. There weren't all that many of us. I had spent much of my life hiding from that fact, avoiding other people and the responsibility their ordinary human selves engendered in supernatural folks like me. Unfortunately, I still didn't feel in control of my talents.

Which was why I was now headed to the San Franciscan tourist mecca of Fisherman's Wharf. It was time for school. For better or worse, I had entrusted the furthering of my witchy education to Aidan Rhodes.

I started driving, weaving through a traffic snarl at the intersection of Van Ness and Lombard. Perhaps Aidan would have some insights into the death of Malachi Za—

"Stop looking at me!" whined Oscar, wrenching me from my thoughts. He was huddling against the front passenger-side door, an appalled look on his already grimacing face. The cat, sitting on the vinyl seat in between us, just stared.

"The cat's not hurting you, Oscar. Get a grip."

"Mistress, make it stop looking at me!"

I pulled up to a stoplight and assessed my posse.

"Cat, stop it. Oscar doesn't want to be your friend." At the sound of my voice the feline shifted its gaze to me.

"There," I said to Oscar. *"All better."*

Keeping its eyes on me, the cat moved with stealthy determination, climbing onto Oscar's lap.

"Mistress!"

"Stop it, both of y'all," I said as the light changed.

I spoke in the severest voice I could manage, but it was pretty hard not to laugh. As someone who has been allergic to felines all her life, I knew one absolute truth: Cats had an unerring ability to detect the one person in the room—or van—who least desired their attention. And then they showered that person with affection.

Or with dander. Sneezing again, I drove around until I spotted a parking spot in a residential neighborhood off Bay Street, not wanting to worry about feeding parking meters, or using my powers to find a parking spot and cast a spell over a meter. Lately I was trying to focus all my power and strength on the important stuff.

Easy parking, according to Aidan, did not qualify.

I grabbed my leather satchel from the back of the van, and since the fog was likely to roll in off the

bay by the time I left Aidan's office, I also carried my vintage cocoa brown wool coat over my arm. But at the moment it was a gorgeous Northern California spring day, breezy and sunny. As I walked I reveled in the fragrance of pink jasmine and fruit-laden lemon trees . . . trailed by a potbellied pig and a cat.

Together we formed quite the parade. Heads swiveled as we passed, but I held my chin up and nodded serenely, trying my best to channel a dark-haired Grace Kelly. I probably more closely resembled a cross-dressing Doctor Dolittle.

One of the best things about being a vintage clothes merchant was having a huge closet to choose from every day, and I had gotten in the habit of advertising by modeling my own merchandise. Today I was wearing an outfit from the late fifties: a wide-skirted, knee-length, yellow-and-red madras plaid sundress topped by a persimmon-colored cardigan. Though I adored the look of vintage shoes, they didn't really suit my active lifestyle—working at the store, investigating murder scenes, running from demons and what all. Instead, I favored Keds. Today's were orangey red, with a hint of sparkle. Looking down, I enjoyed the way the shoes caught the light as I walked the several blocks to Jefferson Street.

San Francisco's Wax Museum is an ever-popular tourist destination, but in my opinion it is creepy on its best day, which no doubt explained why Aidan Rhodes kept an office here. I believe he thinks it's funny. The wax figures, however artistically rendered, made me decidedly uncomfortable; they reminded me too much of puppets, used in many magical systems as stand-ins for humans. As if they were a reserve army of mindless automatons, I feared they could be transfigured, if desired, by someone with enough power.

Like a certain male witch.

There was no denying one fact: I feared Aidan's power . . . but I envied him his mastery. Though my innate talents might rival his, I was nowhere near as in control.

Just as my little entourage approached the museum entrance, a man strode out of the building. He wore heavy-looking black motorcycle boots. Faded jeans. Leather jacket. And a really bad attitude.

A fellow I knew only too well.

A fellow named Sailor.

Chapter 3

Upon spotting me, six feet two inches of muscled man reared back, on guard and wary.

This was the sort of response I'd become inured to as a child in Texas, when my neighbors got the notion I was a witch. But Sailor wasn't unfamiliar with witches; on the contrary, he worked for Aidan—albeit reluctantly—and was himself a powerful psychic. Still and all, he'd been assiduously avoiding me ever since he'd helped me drive a demon out of a building not long ago. Unlike most psychics I've known, who enjoy their abilities to communicate with the beyond, Sailor was not what you'd call at home in his psychic skin. He was also one sorry excuse for a human being. For some reason, I really like him.

"Hello, Sailor," I said as I approached him. "Lookin' for a date?"

"That wasn't funny the first hundred times. What are *you* doing here?" His dark eyes swept over my vintage outfit before shifting to my animal entourage. "And do you think you could cause a bit more of a scene?"

Passersby were starting to take note of the pig.

I gestured to Oscar to go on inside the museum. He herded the cat over to the old-fashioned kiosk that served as a ticket booth. The lethargic young attendant, Clarinda, glared at me, but nodded. Clarinda loathed me—and by extension my pig, presumably now also my cat—but she respected or feared Aidan more. So she cooperated. After a fashion.

"I'd better be going, anyway," Sailor said.

Having been shunned for most of my life, I had developed a fairly thick skin when it came to personal slights. But it still rankled that Sailor was always so anxious to get away from me. After all, we were . . . friends. Sort of. I didn't have all that many, so I figured he counted.

"Wait," I said. "What are you doing here?"

"Asked you first."

"I'm here for a lesson. Aidan's helping me hone some of my skills."

"What?"

"You told me yourself I should get a better handle on my powers. Remember? So I talked to Aidan and—"

He gaped at me, aghast. "You're letting *Aidan* train you? Good *Lord*, woman."

"He's a pretty powerful fellow."

"Uh, *yeah*. That's the freaking understatement of the year. Sure as hell doesn't mean you should trust him to train you."

"Hey, Sailor, know what I've noticed?"

"I have the feeling you're going to tell me."

"You're happy to cast aspersions on Aidan, yet you never explain why. So do you have an actual, you know, *reason* for distrusting him, or are you just still twelve years old?"

Sailor's eyes slewed to the side, looking around us surreptitiously, as though only now realizing we were still standing near the entrance to the Wax Museum. With an agitated quirk of his dark head he strode out into the busy street, looking neither left nor right, assuming the cars would stop for him.

Which they did.

I trotted along behind him. On the opposite sidewalk we were immediately engulfed by hordes of chatty tourists rushing to and from bay cruises, seafood restaurants, and the assorted attractions of Pier 39, the Cannery, and the Ghirardelli Chocolate factory. Their vivacious energy swirled about us, creating a virtual cone of silence.

"Look, if you need training," Sailor said, still surveying the crowd, "which you *do*, why don't you

go back to your source? Who started you out?"

"~~My grandmother, Graciela. But she's back in Texas, where I grew up. She won't come out here—~~ you know how old-school witches are. Attached to the land."

"So move back to Texas. That sounds like a really good idea, the more that I think about it."

"You're saying you wouldn't miss me?" I smiled coquettishly, or at least as close as I could come. I'm not what you'd call a natural-born flirt, and I've never had much chance to practice.

Apparently I still wasn't much good at it. Sailor's mouth pulled even tighter in irritation.

"I'm saying if you're smart you'll get the hell out of Dodge."

"San Francisco is my home now," I said, as much to myself as to him. "I love the Haight, and I have no intention of leaving. Besides, there seems to be a lot of . . . 'activity' in this town lately. I think I'm needed."

I could see the muscles in his jaw working, as though he was biting back words.

Giving him a moment, I inhaled deeply and relished the scenery. The salt off the bay mingled with the aroma of steaming seafood. A child ran past, trailing a bright red balloon. His father followed, laughing, a little girl perched atop his broad shoulders. Two teenage girls in brand-new Alcatraz sweatshirts slouched by, clutching bags of saltwater taffy and loaves of sourdough bread. A small crowd milled around a man whose clothes, skin, and hair were all painted a shiny silver color; when money was dropped into his bag, he performed a jerky, robotic dance.

I love tourists. So normal. So happy. So blissfully unaware that witches and whatnot lurk in their midst.

"I might know someone who could help you," Sailor said finally, bringing my attention back to our conversation.

"Help me how?"

"Train you."

"Rather than Aidan?"

He nodded.

"Sailor, I know Aidan's . . . unpredictable sometimes, but surely he's good at what he does. He's talented, and seems to be in full control of his magick. Other than not liking him personally, is there reason you're waving me off?"

Sailor finally met my eyes. I knew he couldn't read my mind, a fact for which I was profoundly grateful. But there were times . . . odd moments when I felt as though he really did understand what I was thinking and feeling, even though there was nothing psychic about it. This worried me. Sailor was undeniably intriguing; but when all was said and done he was a bitter, misanthropic shell of a human being. Why should I feel such kinship with him?

"Fine, princess, have it your way." He shrugged. "Just be careful. And don't say I didn't warn you."

He turned on his heel and stalked off toward his motorcycle, parked illegally on the sidewalk. His back was as stiff and as unrelenting as his icy gaze.

Still, I couldn't just write him off. He had helped me not long ago. A witch like me, accustomed to flying solo, didn't forget something like that.

Besides, every once in a while a glimpse of something else shone through Sailor's bitterness: a searching, yearning loneliness that reminded me, too much, of my own.

That topic bore further scrutiny, I supposed. But right now I had an appointment with the male witch Sailor had just warned me about.

I gathered my animals from the sullen Clarinda, thanked her with all the warmth I could muster, then led my entourage up the floating central stairs to the second floor. We passed wax replicas of the Mona Lisa and Elvis—both the young, curled-lip version and the Las Vegas, jumpsuit-wearing edition—walked by the sinister Chamber of Horrors, and proceeded through a small exhibit of European

explorers to an arched mahogany door that appeared almost invisible to the throngs of casual visitors who enjoyed the museum.

But to me it beckoned.

Aidan opened the door before I knocked. Though I was prepared for what I would see, the breath still caught in my throat at the sight of him.

Aidan Rhodes, male witch, possessed a kind of soulmelting good looks. Too good. I had witnessed women, and a fair number of men, quite literally stop in their tracks to stare as he walked by. Tall and broad-shouldered, he had golden hair that curled slightly at the nape of his strong neck, while his square jaw held just a hint of manly whiskers. His long-lashed eyes were a captivating periwinkle blue, his crooked smile showed white, even teeth, and his easy laugh was accompanied by a slight duck of the head that gave him an endearing sense of aw-shucks, little-boy vulnerability—an openness that was sheer veneer, of course.

But over and above his physical appearance, Aidan sparkled with power. He gave off twinkly, almost blinding vibrations. Even those who never sensed auras felt his.

And to add to it all, he was capable of using witchcraft to help others attain their desires. Was it any wonder the man had so many admirers? Poor long-suffering Clarinda was charged with screening his potential visitors, he had become so popular.

“Lily, it is always *such* a pleasure,” Aidan said, his eyes sweeping over my vintage outfit with a warm gaze just this side of impolite—the kind that left a woman in no doubt as to whether her figure was appreciated. “Don’t you look just lovely in that dress? Let me see . . . 1960?”

“Round about there, yes.”

“You see, I’m learning something new simply by being in your company. One of the many things I adore about you.”

He stepped back and gestured to me to enter. Not unlike Malachi Zazi’s place, Aidan’s office seemed like a holdover from the Victorian era of the old Barbary Coast, featuring a red-and-gold color scheme, dark wood, velvet, tassels, and wall-to-wall bookcases jammed with magical tools and books. A snowy-white lace doily atop one small table made me think of Zazi’s body lying so still upon his dining room table, his life’s blood staining the tablecloth. Maybe his death had nothing whatsoever to do with bad luck symbols—broken mirrors and trapped sparrows and black cats. Perhaps it was a simple crime of passion, stemming from jealousy or greed. Weren’t most murders, ultimately?

I yanked my thoughts back to the present as Aidan closed the heavy door behind us. Oscar dropped his potbellied pig façade, but as usual around Aidan, he remained uncharacteristically silent.

Upon spying the black cat, Aidan’s white long-haired familiar leapt into his arms. It glared, then hissed, at the orphaned feline, which ran behind the grimacing Oscar.

I sneezed. Repeatedly. With each *achoo* Oscar whispered, “Gesundheit.”

“Who’s this?” Aidan asked, eyebrows raised.

“I was hoping you might want another cat.” I sniffed. “But it looks unlikely.”

“I’m afraid my familiar would object,” Aidan said, handing me a monogrammed linen handkerchief. “You know how females are. They like to be cherished, to be the only one.”

“So, now we’re adding sexism to our long list of faults?” I blew my nose into his soft handkerchief. “Seems to me most men have a problem with sharing as well.”

He laughed. “So, have you been doing your reading?”

“I’m up to ‘H’—Hauntings, Healing, Heaven, Hell, Hermetics . . .”

I envied Aidan his control in the long run. But at the moment what I really lusted after was his musty, rarified library. Bound in crumbling leather, these thousands of parchment pages held the secrets of the ages. There were thick volumes concerning ancient and contemporary sacred paths, magickal and alchemical grimoires, manuscripts of paganism and Christendom, and books of the

dead. Writings of magi, sorcerers, Gnostics, chaos magic priests, alchemists, scholars, and—of course—witches. Encyclopedias of ritual magick from around the world, obscure as well as celebrated secret societies, power brokers, masters of corruption, and healers. Testaments, charts of symbolism, and the complete roll call of angels and demons. Folklore and the foretold, the divine and the defiled, the creators and those whose hunger will never be satisfied, the lost technologies and manifestations . . . and more.

This was the sort of rarified information that still couldn't be found on the Internet—and I had spent many, many hours looking. It was a tempting, somewhat overwhelming world of arcane but essential knowledge. If I could take it all in, memorize it and learn to work with it, I might be able to control my own powers more efficiently, as well as to overcome my frequent cluelessness when it came to other magical traditions.

In the last week I'd made it through the "F" section: Faeries, Financial conspiracy, and Freemasonry. I then moved on to "G": Ghosts, Glamoury, Gnosticism, Goddesses, Gods, Golden Dawn, Grace, and Grimoires. As I persevered in reading the tomes, my mind had started to feel numb and my eyesight blurred. But I was determined.

Aidan chuckled. "I never suggested you should work through the shelves alphabetically."

"It seemed the most straightforward approach," I said. "And as long as there's no math involved, I'm a fast reader, so it moves along pretty quickly. Especially the healing and botanical writings—though I wrote down a few instances where the books got it wrong."

I handed Aidan my notes. He looked down at them with a quizzical expression.

"You're correcting my sourcebooks now?"

"As you know, botanicals are my strong suit, so as I read I compared the books with the notes and recipes in the Book of Shadows I inherited from Graciela." Aidan kept studying the papers in his hand, making me nervous. "Just a few changes," I hastened to add. "Mostly minor."

He acknowledged me with a little lift of his chin. "All right, I'll have to take your word on all this."

"So." He set his cat on the desk and rubbed his hands together in the way of someone getting down to business. "What's on the agenda today? How about taking another shot at scrying?"

I groaned. Scrying was hard.

"I know you must hate to be separated from me," Aidan continued, "but you're supposed to stay in the cloister until you see something. Last time you lasted all of five minutes."

The "cloister" was a windowless five-sided room off the main office, not much bigger than a closet. It was used for the sole purpose of meditation and scrying—or "seeing" with the mind's eye, as in gazing into crystal balls or black mirrors. The cloister was constructed as a magical portal, with a variety of charged stones, mirrors, and charms set up to create magnetic fields sympathetic to the needs of the supernatural.

"I always feel as though I should be *doing* something instead of just sitting there."

"What you're supposed to be *doing* is opening the portals so that you can communicate directly with your helping spirit. You don't even know who, or what, it is. I've never heard of such a thing. No wonder you aren't in control of the magic you're stirring up."

"My spirit comes to me when I brew, not when I stare at black mirrors."

"And crystal balls . . . ?"

"They're even worse." I thought of the beautiful jewel-encrusted crystal ball I had been given, years ago, by one of Graciela's wealthier colleagues. It gathered dust on my bookshelf at home, exquisite and useless as a pampered, dim beauty queen.

Doubt shone in Aidan's too-blue eyes. I feared I wasn't the stellar student he was hoping I would be. I had a lot of power, but it was locked up strangely.

"My grandmother didn't believe me, either."

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