

THESE DEADLY PROPHECIES

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Dedication TK

Acknowledgments TK

ONE

THE BEST PROPHECIES always begin with love stories and end with tragedies. Or so it's been said by fortune tellers and sorcerers. Do you think it's true? I wonder. I used to think it was just a clever little cliché that Sorcerer Solomon leveraged to market his fortunes to an anxious audience, and I can't fault him: Who doesn't hope to play the hero of their own love story? Who doesn't dread eventual tragedy? But lately, I'm beginning to believe that Sorcerer Solomon really lives by those words.

Lived. Sorry.

Please be patient. Toying with fate makes it hard to keep track of those hairline fractures between past, present, and future. When you spend all your time sneaking peeks at what's yet to come, getting persnickety about the precise order of time seems pretty rich. But I must, for my own sake, try to keep this story as clear and conventionally chronological as I can. A story, properly told, can save a life. This one, if I tell it right, might even save mine.

My parents say that I spend an alarming amount of time thinking about death for someone only seventeen. Honestly, it's a difficult subject to avoid in my line of work. It wasn't so long ago that doing the sort of things I do after school would have gotten me burned at some stake or another. People claim that the twenty-first century has eroded the atmosphere, mysticism, and, frankly, sheer aesthetic that

once elevated the practice of sorcery beyond the comprehension of mere plebes. I tell these people that if they want to hop into a time machine and get themselves murdered by history's most notorious anti-fun police off in Puritan-ville, Salem, Massachusetts, they're more than welcome. I'm not wild about murder, myself. Which is pretty ironic, when you consider the direction my life has taken recently.

But now I'm getting ahead of myself again. What did I tell you? Past, present, and future, all jumbled up in my head. So let's begin at the real beginning: my pursuit of sorcery. Not just any class of sorcery, but fortune-telling. Even among sorcerers, bona fide fortune tellers are a rare breed. You have your illusionists—considered petty entertainers—and your kinetics—respectable, though a bit mainstream. But fortune tellers have always been kings among sorcerers. Why not? Hollywood might have use for another illusionist to temporarily beautify a face, and the military loves its kinetic soldiers, but if there's one thing everyone everywhere wants, it's the power to screw around with the future. And no one made the future their bitch half as well as Sorcerer Solomon could.

That was really why I began working for him, you see. I told my parents it was only because I didn't get into the academic summer intensive they wanted me to take at some Ivy League school or another. Besides, I reasoned in my best Perfect Asian Daughter voice, I wanted a vacation job that I could continue working into the school year. That way, I could contribute to my college fund and develop better personal finance skills. The truth is, when the summer intensive program rejections came in, I'd never been so pleased with my own apparent mediocrity in my entire life. Because I had the one acceptance that really mattered to me: Sorcerer Solomon's.

I won't lie: an apprenticeship to the most notorious fortune teller

on the East Coast of the United States is an extremely weird after-school gig. There are many things, good and bad, that can be said of sorcery as both discipline and profession, but the one that most folks agree on is that your average sorcerer leads a thoroughly beyond-average life. That was why I wanted to be a sorcerer in the first place.

The thing is, no sorcerer can spin real prophecies without learning to tell a true fortune from the bullshit. Sorcerer Solomon taught me this lesson by lying to me on a weekly basis. And I really do mean weekly. I had it written down in my planner and everything.

More specifically, he lied to me about the future. It was half game, half training exercise—teaching me to see the truths among his lies. It's common enough among fortune-telling aspirants. Unlike the other branches of sorcery, fortune-telling has no sigils, no incantations to work our magic. We have only our minds. When we play the liars' game, and guess at which future is true, all we can do is listen to a liar's voice, empty our minds, and trust our training to show us the truth.

The Sunday where this story begins seemed the same as all the others. Eight o'clock at night, in his private parlor, just left of the sorcerer's workshop on the fourth floor of the manor. It was a cozy little space, all dramatic velvet drapes and plush cushions tucked around a great roaring fireplace. Sorcerer Solomon fit in perfectly with all that furniture, perched in his favorite armchair, blue eyes twinkling in the glow of the flames. I never actually saw him cast the kinetics to summon fire, but every time I arrived at the parlor, the fire was there, roaring bright where only darkness had lurked a moment before.

"Well, Tabatha," he said as I sat down, his voice crisp, his fingers steepled. "Shall I lie to you?"

And he did, a litany of predictions about kitchen appliances and

teen romances, exam results and bus schedules. And I got them right, every time.

Finally, he came to the end of the list, and I knew what would come next. His favorite lie went like this: “Tabatha,” he said, once he finished with his other lies, “Tabatha, here’s a prophecy for you: I will die at the hands of my best beloved. So shall it be.”

He changed the time stamp on it every time, to keep things interesting. Sometimes, his best beloved would kill him fifty years from now. Sometimes, his best beloved, apparently too impatient to wait half a century, would simply off him tomorrow. It really depended on the old man’s mood, but he told the same lie every time: his own murder, at the hands of the person he loved most in all the world.

“Right,” I said that Sunday night, unfazed and grinning. “And when will the murder be happening this time?”

He grinned back. “Seven months from now. So shall it be.”

I opened my mouth, brimming with confidence, ready to call his bluff as ever. The intention died in my throat. I don’t know if you’ve ever experienced how it feels, as a sorcerer, to spin a true prophecy. It’s as though time itself slows down for your sake. Everything swimming around inside your head sharpens. And then it begins to unfold, right there across your mind’s eye: the shape the future is going to take. The story of something, great or small, still waiting to come true.

When another sorcerer spins a prophecy, you can tell it’s real because you see that fortune the same way they do, like a secret whispered in your ear, the truth of it weighing down your bones with every word the sorcerer speaks.

I straightened my spine. “Lie,” I pronounced. Even then, the word tasted like dust inside my mouth.

Sorcerer Solomon shook his head. The smile finally dimmed a

little. "I'm afraid the only lie between us right now is the one you're telling yourself. Oh, come now, Tabatha, don't give me that look. We both know you've grown far too good at this game to miss a fortune so obvious."

"And you've been searching for a new way to fool me for months," I retorted primly, refusing to panic. "We both know I'm a better apprentice than that."

He chuckled. "Truthfully, I think you're a far better apprentice than either of us deserves. Certainly, you take to these lessons better than any of my own children ever have."

If he'd meant to distract me from our game in that moment, he succeeded. I blinked. Sorcerer Solomon almost never talked about his children, even though he had three of them. "I thought your kids were all sorcerers."

"Pah!" Solomon waved a dismissive hand. The remains of the smile snapped right off his face. "My sons and daughter may be sorcerers. They may even be good sorcerers. But a fortune teller, a prophet? Not one of them has the chops. Frankly, not one of them has the balls. Callum came closest, perhaps, but even he's not you."

Callum Solomon, the youngest of the Solomon kids. He and I knew each other, sort of. We were both high school seniors, and had shared a physics lab period once, back in freshman year. Not that he'd remember. Callum was one of those boys constantly flanked by an orbit of other students, like the poster for a cheesy high school drama, all of them casually well coiffed with those rare gifts of self-assurance and effortless charisma. Which is not to say that I'm some kind of outcast leper, but there had always been a friendly but unspoken distance between kids like him and kids like me. We nodded and smiled at each other, but up until our senior year, I don't think we'd had a conversation that extended beyond "Hey, is

the problem set Mr. Cohen assigned due Tuesday or Thursday?" I'd known in theory that Callum studied sorcery under his father, but it's not like grimoires and prophecy are the sort of thing you bring up during normal school hours.

Sorcerer Solomon leaned forward so suddenly that I flinched backward in my seat. His hands snaked out to catch mine. "Seven months isn't nearly so long as it sounds to someone your age, Tabatha. So I'm going to need you to make a promise."

My hands squirmed beneath his grip, but those fingers were like iron. Maybe they literally were. Fortune-telling wasn't Sorcerer Solomon's only magical talent, just his most famous and lucrative. I wouldn't have put it past him to transform his skin to iron, all to frighten his apprentice for a good laugh. "This isn't funny."

Sorcerer Solomon's mouth twitched. "I should hope not. I like to think you enjoy being my apprentice, and don't particularly relish my death."

"Of course not! And you're not going to die! Certainly not in only seven months!"

"Oh, my dear, but I shall." He didn't let go of my hands. His eyes, bright blue beneath the bushy gray of his eyebrows, didn't blink even once. "It's going to be a messy affair when it happens. Murder is an unfortunate business, and difficult to do elegantly. But no matter what ugliness ensues, you must promise me this: find my son Callum and stay by his side. Come hell or high water, you stick to that boy like glue, you hear? It is the surest chance we have of keeping everyone safe."

"Safe?" Now I was the one leaning forward, clutching at his hands. "From what? What's going to happen?"

He just gave me one of those opaque sorcerer smiles of his. You'd think a man would smile less, predicting his own death. "A great many things, I'm afraid. Do you promise?"

I frowned. "But what does Callum have to do with—"

"It will become obvious in due course. Everything will. But first, I need you to promise. Say the words."

"I—"

"After my best beloved kills me, you will find Callum. He's your first call. Not the police, not your parents. Callum. Do you understand?"

No, I didn't. "Yes," I lied. I swallowed the words and tried to make them true. "Sure."

"Then say it. Promise it."

"I promise," I stammered. The words climbed slowly to my tongue, clumsy with my own confusion, but I made myself say them anyway. "I promise that after . . . after your best beloved kills you, I—I'll find Callum. I'll find Callum, and I'll stay by his side. No matter what. I promise."

It's a tricky thing, a sorcerer's promise. The occult does something strange to you, and to all the words you say, when you play with magic for too long. A sorcerer's words are the source of their craft. So when we give a promise, when we speak it into existence like that, we keep it. Our words may grant us our power, but they also, at the end of the day, bind us.

And that day, I suppose, I bound myself to Callum Solomon. In fairness to me and my hastily crafted bond to a boy I'd barely ever spoken to, I still didn't think his father would actually die. It had to be a trick. A joke. A particularly tasteless lesson on the dangers and vagaries of imprecise fortune-telling. After all, Sorcerer Solomon—true to the grand tradition of most rich, eccentric genius white men—was, despite his charms, also kind of kooky and more than a little paranoid. And conversely, because he was—despite being kind of a kooky, paranoid guy—also charming, rich, white, and brilliant, the world still worshipped him. That didn't mean

he couldn't be wrong. Sure, I'd never actually seen Julian Solomon making a mistake with my own two eyes in almost four years of working for the guy, but there's a first time for everything, right? Intellectually, I knew that even Sorcerer Solomon had to be fallible.

So although I couldn't fully commit to really believing it deep down, a part of me at least held on to hope that he'd finally screwed up. I really, really wanted to think that the great prophet-sorcerer Julian Solomon had lost his touch at last. It could happen. It had to happen. It happened to all of us eventually, right? Maybe once, just this once, Sorcerer Solomon would be wrong about the future. Maybe just this once, we'd see that the greatest living sorcerer on the East Coast was capable of that damnable sin: making a mistake.

And in the end, I got my wish. Just not in any of the ways I expected.



BEFORE YOU ASK, no, I did not know who Julian Solomon's best beloved was. There were a lot of solid contenders: the guy had been married twice, with three kids total, which left a lot of possibilities open. I keep kicking myself for not paying more attention to the other Solomons, back when it would have been easier, before the family started paying too much attention to me. Maybe I could have fixed this back then. I'm not saying I could have undone the prophecy entirely—I don't have that kind of hubris in me. Fate, once written into truth by a real fortune teller, can't be rewritten—no more than a historian might rewrite the past. But maybe if I'd known who Sorcerer Solomon loved—who he really loved, more than anyone else in the world—I could have found some loophole, some small way out of the whole awful mess that followed.

Instead, I found Angelique Reed.

Remember the two wives I mentioned? Angelique Reed was wife the first, and had the chip on her shoulder—not to mention the entitlement complex—to prove it. After her highly publicized divorce from her celebrity sorcerer husband, she'd avoided Solomon Manor like the plague—I'd only ever seen her portraits in the family gallery: all flame-red hair and imposing green glare. According to the tabloids, once upon a time, she and Sorcerer Solomon had been quite the magical power couple. Sorcerer Solomon may have been the renowned prophet, the fortune teller, but Angelique Reed was a witch in her own right, from a long line of them, her magic blue-blooded with old Northeastern money. The couple's separation had been a messy business, punctuated by public, screaming fights, all meticulously documented by the wagging tongues and pens alike of a gossip-loving press.

It had surprised me, when I first began my apprenticeship, to find Angelique's portraits still hanging on the manor walls. Then again, maybe it shouldn't have. My mom always says that the opposite of love isn't hate—it's indifference. And Sorcerer Solomon, although many things, was never indifferent to Angelique, even long after he'd married Callum's mother.

The day I finally met Mrs. Solomon the First in the flesh, I thought at first that I'd stumbled across an oil painting brought to life. I'd worked late the previous night—Sorcerer Solomon had insisted I practice some kinetic conjuring spell that I still didn't have quite right, even when the clock struck midnight. The conjuring had nothing at all to do with prophetic magic, and I had been extremely irritated—both at its lack of relevance to my interests and the fact that I was, evidently, extremely bad at kinetic magic.

It was, to say the least, a dissatisfying way to conclude the evening.

I might have let it go more easily, but the vibe at Solomon Manor had been weird for the past month. Sorcerer Solomon's kids had been curter than usual with me, fleeing any room I entered. They'd watched me—and their father—from a cold distance, their mouths thin and gazes fearful of eye contact. At the time, I'd just assumed that they, too, were judging my terrible kinetic sorcery skills.

So when I arrived five minutes early the next morning, seeking reluctant redemption, the last thing I expected to see was Sorcerer Solomon's workshop boarded up shut, and Sorcerer Solomon's estranged wife blocking my way, arms crossed.

I blinked up at her several times. Angelique may have been a sorceress by profession, but she probably could have been a runway model in another life—she had the bones for it, and a staggering six feet of height. Still, when she looked down her pale, perfect nose at me, an expensive French cigarette dangling from one elegant hand, I couldn't imagine her as anything other than the witch she was. A Sorceress Supreme, right out of a Marvel comic book. As I stared at her, she took a long drag on the cigarette. "And who might you be?"

"Um," I said. "Sorcerer Solomon's apprentice. Tabatha Zeng. I . . . I'm supposed to have a lesson today."

"Zeng, huh?" Angelique sounded out my surname like it left an undesirable aftertaste in her mouth that she couldn't quite place. "Chinese, if I'm not mistaken."

"That's right."

"I'd have pegged you for Korean, not Chinese. You're the spitting image of a Korean girl I knew back at boarding school."

I shrugged, the way I always did when white people made comments like that. "Sorry. Just one of those faces, I guess."

"Hmm," said Angelique. She didn't look entirely convinced. "I suppose Chinese girls or Korean girls or whatever it is you are do

tend to make quick studies. And what, pray tell, is the lesson Julian was meant to teach you on this fine Saturday morning?"

I pulled a face, as much at the incredibly awkward racism as the thought of my much-loathed lesson. "Kinetic magic."

Angelique snorted. "Kinetic magic, huh? A little ironic."

I frowned. "I don't follow."

"He's dead," said Angelique. She said it casually, jerking her head at the boarded-up doors behind her. "Most likely at the hands of"—she paused, as if for dramatic effect, then waggled her fingers—"kinetic magic."

The air in my lungs froze. I hadn't counted the time passing. Not consciously, anyway. A million little details slammed into the forefront of my brain: the tension spiderwebbing through the house in the weeks before, the abrupt manner of its inhabitants.

I felt like I'd been hit. "What?"

Angelique rolled her eyes. "Oh, don't look so big eyed and quiver lipped. Surely you knew about the prophecy, if you're his apprentice. He predicted this himself, the big asshole drama queen."

I know, I wanted to scream in her face. I was the one who heard that prophecy first, and now I wish to all the heavens above that I hadn't.

And the fact that his family had known explained why they'd all been so damn weird around him—and by extension, me—recently.

For months, I'd known he'd die this way: certainty coupled with desperate denial in the hollow pit of my belly. I'd heard Julian Solomon's fate from the tongue of the master fortune teller himself, and I'd committed the cardinal sin of prophets everywhere by hoping for any other outcome. After all, it wasn't for a prophet to want, or fear, or hope. The very opposite, in fact. Telling the future required clearing your mind of wants, of desires. Our job isn't to change the future—merely to see it.

Well, I'd wanted, all right. I'd wanted Julian Solomon to have made a mistake. I should have known better. After all, as his apprentice, I knew it best: Julian Solomon never made mistakes, at least when it came to magic.

Air resumed its flow in my lungs far too quickly. "Where is he?" My chest heaved. "What happened?"

"He was found this morning, by my scrying spell. What's left of him, anyway. That's why I'm here. It's a petty and morbid business, but I always scry for deaths in the family. It's a matter of propriety, not to mention security. You can't just let a sorcerer of Julian's caliber lie dead for a day without answering certain questions of succession." Angelique's eyes narrowed as she gave the boards over the workshop door a little knock. "Vultures gather far more quickly than you think. One can't be too careful."

"So, you came first."

Angelique studied me for a moment. A curtain of red hair had fallen over her shoulder. Outside of her portraits, it carried streaks of silver the painter had neglected, which only served to highlight her uncanny beauty. "I wasn't the one who killed him, if that's what you're worried about," she said. "I knew about the prophecy too." The smile she offered me was grim. "And although I was many things to Julian, I was never his best beloved."

"I want to see him," I blurted out.

Angelique looked at me like I'd gone mad. I probably had, honestly. What I thought seeing a dead body would do to improve the situation, I couldn't have told you. But I needed to know. I needed to see for myself that Sorcerer Solomon wasn't playing another trick.

"Fine," said Angelique after a moment, with a little shrug. "Your therapy bill." She crooked her fingers over the workshop door. "As I have bound, so shall I unbind."

The boards fell loose. The clatter was still echoing in my ears when I shoved past Angelique into the room.

I wish I hadn't. In truth, I don't want to tell you what I saw when I opened that workshop door. I've always found it gauche, you know, the way some people recount sad stories with as much gore and horror as their shock-value-starved minds can muster. But I promised you the truth, so I'll lay out the facts as clinically as I can: when I opened the door, what I saw wasn't Sorcerer Solomon anymore. It was a collection of body parts, pulled apart as neatly as a disassembled doll's. The only way I recognized the owner was by the head, staring dead and blue eyed at me.

I muffled a scream on my elbow.

"Like I said," Angelique offered from behind me, her voice rich with pity. With a casual wave of her hand and murmured word of kinetic power, she shut the door. "It's your therapy bill, not mine."

Several thoughts sprang through my head at once. The police needed to be notified. And I had to find a way to tell my parents. Had the police been notified? Oh god, what the hell would I tell my parents? Would they ever let me practice sorcery again? Maybe I shouldn't tell them. No, god, what kind of awful person was I, already planning hysterical lies to tell my parents, when someone had just done *that* to Sorcerer Solomon? Shame sharpened my misery.

The idea of him being gone at all felt wrong. He'd been here, alive, just last night—I'd been here with him. I'd nearly blown up his study with a pyrokinesis spell gone wrong, and he'd had to step in to prevent the entire manor from burning down.

"Well, you're not inherently bad at kinetic magic," Sorcerer Solomon had mused.

"I'm sorry." I'd looked morosely up at him from between my slightly singed bangs. "Does *bad* not mean what I thought it did?"

Does it not entail losing control of a rudimentary pyrokinesis spell?"

The corners of Sorcerer Solomon's mouth twitched. "I asked you to hold a fireball in the palm of your hand, not light a candle. Hardly rudimentary material. And it was nothing I couldn't extinguish."

I watched the arc of his fingers warily. "What if you hadn't been here?"

"But I was, Tabatha."

"But what if you hadn't been?"

"Tabatha." The long-suffering, almost exaggeratedly singsong drawl of my name, accompanied by the twinkle in those blue eyes, told me so much more than a complete sentence would have. The way a name fell off Sorcerer Solomon's tongue could communicate almost anything: amusement, chagrin, approval, or in certain, utterly deflating moments, true disappointment.

He wasn't disappointed. But he was definitely annoyed, which trod on territory that inched dangerously close to disappointment.

"Don't you ever worry?" I asked him carefully. "About what would happen if I lost control of a spell and you weren't here to fix it?" It's every apprentice's nightmare: losing control of a spell. Hell, it's probably every sorcerer's nightmare, fully fledged or not, training wheels on or off. Sorcery, after all, is the product of want—of willpower. If you're not the one taking charge of the spell, its magic will find a way to reestablish a purpose without your input.

I must have heard half a dozen stories of spells gone wrong during sorcery electives in grade school, and even later, during my apprenticeship under Sorcerer Solomon. Sorcery teachers always seem to spin those cautionary tales half in horror, half in macabre glee: the illusionist who casts a mirage that takes on a life of its own and destroys the creator's sense of reality, the kinetic specialist who accidentally calls down a hurricane on their own home.

Sorcerer Solomon's eyebrows climbed as his mouth puckered slightly. It was as though even the very notion of my incompetence had turned his tongue sour. "And have you ever lost control of a spell, Tabatha? One that I couldn't extinguish?"

I swallowed hard. That was the thing about Sorcerer Solomon. He had an uncanny capacity to make you feel guilty for things you hadn't actually done. Or at least, to make you second-guess whether you were even sure you hadn't done them.

"No," I said in a small voice.

He shrugged, like that was that. "Then as long as you are under my supervision, you needn't worry about it. I will be here to maintain control."

Well, Sorcerer Solomon wasn't here anymore. He would never be here again.

"Do you need a minute?" It was maybe the kindest thing that had yet emerged from Angelique's mouth. "If you're going to throw up, I'd rather not have my Louboutins in your vicinity, you understand."

"I'm not going to throw up," I told her, surprisingly steady voiced. I closed my eyes. Amidst the hysteria, a single obligation had emerged from the recesses of memory. "I'm going to call Callum."

"That bitch Rowena's boy?" Disdain warred with disbelief in Angelique's voice. "What on earth do you want with Julian's backup kid?"

I was already walking away as quickly as I could. "I have to keep my promise." Maybe if I ran fast enough, I'd stop seeing it. The doll parts. The blood. The eyes, worst of all, the eyes.

I'd never called Callum Solomon before. Sorcerer Solomon had put all his children's numbers in my phone, along with a bunch of other emergency contacts, but I don't think Callum even knew I had his contact information.

I called him anyway. A sorcerer's promise is a sorcerer's promise.

He picked up on the third ring. "Hello?"

I didn't say anything. It occurred to me all at once, horribly and hilariously, that I'd completely failed to consider what I'd say to the boy whose father I'd just found dismembered in their house. *An unknown eldritch force of dark magic just crazy murdered your dad* probably wouldn't do.

"It's Tabatha," I said instead, feeling stupider and more helpless by the second. I finally stopped, breathing hard. In my panic, I'd walked out of the workshop and straight into the family portrait gallery. As I looked up, Angelique Reed's green eyes glared down at me from the first painting. Great. "Um, Tabatha Zeng, from chem class. I, uh, work for—" *Oh no, Tabatha, don't cry. Don't cry, don't cry, don't cry.* "I, um, worked for." *Shit.* Tears began to dribble down my cheeks. "I mean. I apprenticed with—"

"My dad." Callum sounded friendly and amused, which, horrifically, only made me cry harder. "Yeah, I've seen you around the house, Zeng. What's up?"

Instead of actually saying anything, I emitted an enormous, incoherent sob.

"Zeng?" The amusement was gone. "What happened? Where's Dad?"

"I'm sorry," I choked. "I—I'm so sorry."

A long silence ensued. Then, very quietly, "He's dead, isn't he?" He paused again when I didn't answer. "Are you all right?"

I just kept crying and clinging to the phone, like it was my dad who'd died, instead of his. "He told me to find you," I blubbered. "If Sorcerer Solomon died, I was supposed to find you, and I promised, and I just—I'm sorry to call like this, I didn't know how else to get ahold of you, and Angelique Reed is here, she says she came as soon as she knew—"

“Angelique?” His tone sharpened abruptly, breath hitching. “My stepmother is back in the house?”

“She’s the one who found him,” I said, sniffing. “She casts scrying spells, apparently. To alert herself to deaths in your family. Which isn’t weird or creepy at all.”

“Zeng.” His voice still carried that sharp, wounded quality. “You need to get out of the house.”

“Why?” My heart drummed against my rib cage as I glanced toward the accusing green eyes of Angelique’s portrait. “What’s she going to do?”

“Nothing good,” said Callum in grim tones. “Listen, I’m at a fencing scrimmage right now, but it’ll take me about fifteen minutes to get home once I tell Coach McClellan there’s been a death in the family. I’ll get there as soon as I can. You should be gone by the time I’m there.”

“I can wait for you,” I protested, oddly hurt. “If she’s going to start shit—”

“Then you shouldn’t be there for it. Trust me.” Wry, bitter amusement crept into his voice. “It’s a family matter.”

“And after?” I wiped at my nose with my sleeve, absurdly glad that we weren’t on a vid chat, where he’d no doubt see how gross I looked.

“Well, if Dad’s prophecy is true,” said Callum, “then no doubt, after the dust has settled, we’ll find each other again. Just not at the house. Not while she’s there. Where are you right now?”

I sniffed again. “Your family gallery.”

“Good. That room has a bunch of doors, and it’s easy to get out of the house from any of them. Let’s see—there’s an exit into the gardens behind the house. Take the old servants’ staircase down to the kitchen, and out the back door. My stepmother won’t follow you

that way, and she won't think to scry in that direction. Hopefully, she'll forget about you."

That was when I heard it: the telltale clack of expensive heels in the hallway. "Zeng?" Angelique's voice thundered through the corridor. "Is that you? Are you talking to that little bastard Callum? Put him on the phone—I want to give him a piece of my mind."

"She's here," I whispered.

"Zeng!" called Angelique, increasingly impatient. "I can hear you!"

"Run," said Callum. "Now." He hung up.

I stuck the phone back into my pocket. And I ran.

TWO

MY MOTHER ONCE told me never to run from the scene of a crime. She's a lawyer, so I guess she'd know, right? I expected a scolding, or a lecture, or some kind of reprimand when she found out about my encounter with Angelique Reed and Sorcerer Solomon's remains. Why had I run? Why had I called some teenage boy I barely knew, and not my lawyer mother, or the police?

Instead, she pulled me into a bone-crushing hug and said, "I'm glad you got out of that house as soon as you could. I never liked you spending so much time around sorcery, if I'm honest, and now you understand why."

I squirmed out of Mom's embrace. Even now, with Sorcerer Solomon's death freshly dogging my heels, the compulsion to defend my chosen passion rose inside me like a tidal wave. "That's not fair," I said. "You can't blame all sorcery ever for . . . for what happened to Sorcerer Solomon."

"Can't I?" Mom paced our kitchen floor like it was a courtroom as she ticked off her reasons on her fingers. "One. Sorcerer Solomon was, indeed, a sorcerer—"

"Wow, keenly observed, Ma."

"Hush, dear—don't interrupt me when I'm arguing. It's not filial. Two, he was murdered by sorcery—"

"We don't know that for sure!"

“Very well, allegedly murdered by sorcery. And three, I still blame Sorcerer Solomon for convincing you to quit the Mock Trial Club to apprentice for him instead. God rest his soul nonetheless.”

“That third one isn’t even a real anti-sorcery argument!” I protested. “It’s just the downfall of your parental ambitions for me.”

From behind his newspaper, Dad gave a mournful little sigh. “I wonder why it is that in this house, we always center your mother’s parental ambitions for you and never mine. I wanted you to join the high school robotics team. No one ever got murdered by shadowy occult forces on the high school robotics team.”

“That we know of,” I muttered. “Also, I can’t join the robotics team, Dad. I hate coding in Python. The last time I tried, I almost flunked my computer science final.”

“The robotics team was going to be my second choice for her after Mock Trial Club,” Mom conceded generously, sidestepping the whole Python disaster entirely. “But that isn’t the point, Eddie. The point is that the profession of sorcery, although lucrative and debatably prestigious, has a dark and bloody history that stains its present, and that our daughter has now learned this lesson the hard way. I don’t want you going back to that house, Tabatha.”

My head jerked up. “What?” I didn’t disagree, exactly. Not even Callum seemed to think my return to Solomon Manor would be wise while Angelique Reed remained in residence. But the finality of it all jarred me. “My apprenticeship—”

“Has, with all due respect, been concluded by the untimely death of your boss. We’ll find something else for you to do. Best to steer clear of that Solomon boy in your class too.”

“Callum?” Now my jaw hung open with real outrage. “I made a promise to his father!”

“And, technically, fulfilled it when you called him,” said Mom with

litigious primness. “Sorcerer Solomon, when he made his prophecy, didn’t specify how long you had to bind yourself to the boy’s side, did he? Let’s be generous and assume that the five minutes on the phone sufficed.”

“Mother!”

“Tabatha!” Mom echoed dramatically. She sobered, expression softening. “Look. My heart goes out to the boy. It really does. I can’t imagine what an awful shock it must be to lose his father so suddenly and so . . . gruesomely. But you have your own reputation to think of. It’s a small town, sweetheart, and people love to talk. That family has always attracted more than its fair share of attention, and not always the good kind. Believe me, you don’t want to get any more entangled with their private affairs than you already are. Please don’t call the Solomon boy again, Tabatha.”

I lifted my chin. “And what if he calls me?”

“Well,” said my mother, with decisive finality, “let’s hope that he doesn’t.”



THE OFFICIAL STORY was that Julian Solomon’s death had been an accident.

Of course, any gossipmonger with two ears and more than one brain cell knew better than to take that at face value. After a week of headlines and hysteria, I did in fact receive a call from a Solomon boy. But not the one I’d been expecting.

I guess I haven’t told you yet about Felix. And no wonder. Talking about Felix even before Sorcerer Solomon’s death used to tie my tongue in knots. The eldest of Sorcerer Solomon’s children, Felix was a bit of a local heartbreaker and seemingly, cheerfully oblivious to

that. He had all of Angelique Reed's striking, redheaded good looks but none of his mother's embittered venom. He was, well, nice. *Nice* always seems like such an insipid thing to say about a person, but on a guy with Felix's particular set of privileges and accomplishments—good-looking rich white boy, firstborn son of a famous magical dynasty, two-sport varsity athlete and Princeton grad—"nice" was probably the most surprising thing about him. He never seemed to feel entitled to anything, he listened to people more than he spoke, and whenever I saw him, he always had a smile to share and a favor to offer, whether it was a ride home from Solomon Manor or an extra set of hands on workshop cleanup duty.

I didn't have a crush on him—at least, not like you'd think. For one thing, handsome and accomplished as he was, I also knew he was far too old for me. For another, as much as I relished his small kindnesses in that big, cold house, I also nursed a complicated jealousy for his station in life: the easy, jovial charisma, the money, the conventional good looks, and oh, the doors that being Sorcerer Solomon's son opened. The entire concept of a family full of occultists, where an interest in sorcery wasn't just encouraged but practically assumed a birthright. How much easier would it have been to chase my ambitions if I too had been so all-consumingly born into magic?

I felt guilty for my jealousy. Like I said, Felix was nice. So when he called me, I didn't have reason to suspect anything amiss, beyond the obvious. Maybe he needed my help cleaning up the workshop one last time. Maybe he wanted to offer an exit interview for my apprenticeship. Maybe he just wanted to know that I hadn't been completely scarred for life by his father's death.

"Felix," I said as I picked up the phone. "How are you holding up?" He didn't answer immediately.

"Felix?"

“Tabatha!” He sounded distracted. “I’m so sorry—my sister came in just as I called. It’s total chaos here at home, as you might guess.”

I frowned. “Is she doing okay?” Circe Solomon, Felix’s younger twin and Julian’s only daughter, was the Solomon sibling I knew least. More reclusive than either of her brothers, whenever she was at home, she seemed to spend the majority of her time lurking up in her childhood bedroom with the door locked. I’d seen her portrait: a hollow-faced girl, her mother’s green eyes eerily luminous against Circe’s gaunt features, but so far as real life went, I’d only caught fleeting glimpses of her curtain of corn-silk hair, usually as she went stomping up to her room like the sullen teenager she’d probably once been.

“I’m not sure, actually,” said Felix.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not sure either of us are okay.” Usually so full of good cheer and optimistic energy, Felix sounded uncharacteristically tired. “We . . . well, there’s been a lot of confusion since Dad’s death, and I—we were wondering if you might be willing to return to the house.”

“Why?” The question came out more aggressively than I’d intended. I winced. “Sorry. I just meant, I assumed your family would want time to process your own affairs. I don’t want to intrude on a private moment.”

“You won’t, believe me.” His voice, still tired, warmed all the same. “Dad practically considered you one of our own. Which actually brings me to our current dilemma.”

“Dilemma?”

Felix paused. “You know my mother came home this week, right?”

“I met her, actually. It . . . could have gone better.” The understatement of the week, probably. I gripped the phone a little tighter, remembering the odd, dark urgency in Callum’s voice when he’d

spoken of his stepmother. When he'd told me to get out of the house. *Run. Now.* I licked dry lips, trying to keep myself calm. "How's your brother? Your mom didn't sound, uh, happy with him when I saw her."

Felix emitted the sigh that only the long-suffering eldest child of high-maintenance parents can produce. "Oh, she's not happy with anyone, and she probably won't be for some time. At least, until the question of my father's legacy is settled. Sorcerers always leave behind an inheritance—personal spells, grimoires, and in Dad's case, probably the most highly valued collection of prophecies and fortune-telling formulas in the country. My mother assumed—as the most experienced occultist in the family—that they'd be bequeathed to her upon his death."

My eyebrows climbed. "Let me guess. They went to someone else."

Felix sucked in a breath. "Not exactly."

"No?"

"They didn't go to anybody at all."

"How is that even possible?" Sorcerers always ink wills, to prevent division among covens and families in the event of an untimely demise. I couldn't believe Sorcerer Solomon wouldn't have made one of his own.

Felix's voice turned testy. "Here's a fun little plot twist: Dad used to have a formally inked will, all right, but he destroyed it in the hours before his death. A delightful discovery, on top of the death itself."

"He *what*?" I squawked.

"Burned the only copy of his will to ashes. Using a conjured fire in his workshop, to be exact. We scried the whole damn house, just to make sure. No one else could have conjured that fire except him, and no one else could lift the protections on that will long enough to destroy it that way."

“But why?” I rubbed a hand over my face, leaning the back of my head against my bedroom wall. Sorcerer Solomon was an unconventional guy, sure, but so are most occultists. Eccentricity doesn’t equate to self-destructiveness. “I can’t imagine he’d ever do that to himself, much less his own family. Not something so—”

“Crazy?” My heart twinged at the misery in Felix’s voice. “I don’t know. I’m starting to wonder how well any of us knew him. Mom wants to take over the inheritance anyway—says it’s the only sane thing left to do, to preserve his legacy as befitting the Solomon name, but . . .”

“But?” I pressed him.

“There is one recourse when a sorcerer dies before his time without a formal will,” said Felix. “It’s old school, but real traditionalists still abide by it.”

I sucked in a breath. “You’re talking about a *séance*.”

Séances are a staple of the craft’s oldest origins. This isn’t your garden-variety Ouija board game, played by bored girls at slumber parties to practice their Intro to Sorcery basics from middle school electives. *Séances*—true *séances*, performed by and for true sorcerers—link us to our dead, and through our dead, our history. The roots of our power. Inked wills have largely supplanted their practice, but in the event of an unexpected death, summoning the dead sorcerer’s ghost from his grave—in a formal ritual on the full moon—is the one way to preserve their legacy. Their singular, unique link to our collective roots in the occult.

“It was Rowena’s idea, of all people.”

I blinked. “Callum’s mom?”

“It surprised me too,” Felix confessed. “She’s the only member of the family who’s not a sorcerer of some stripe, so I didn’t think she’d get involved with this side of things, but I guess . . . well, he was still her husband. She wants to see his work appropriately preserved and

built upon for future generations. Or so she says.” His voice turned wry. “Though I don’t think the chance to stick it to my mother hurt much, either.”

“And whose side do you support? Rowena’s or Angelique’s?” I swallowed. He’d chosen to call me. His father’s apprentice. It didn’t take a genius to guess whose reasoning had won out with Felix. “No judgment either way. I swear.”

“Thanks.” He sighed again. “It’s complicated. I love my mother. But when it comes to this, I can’t . . . it’s just . . .”

“You’re also your father’s son, at the end of the day,” I said softly. “A traditionalist. A sorcerer in the old, true sense.”

“My mother has agreed to wait for a full moon,” said Felix. “She’s enough of a traditionalist herself to grant that much. She may hate Rowena, but she’s confident that Dad’s ghost will still grant her the inheritance. The *séance*, if anything, will solidify her claim.”

“Then what’s the holdup?”

“At a *séance*, all members of the immediate family must be present, but so must anyone who directly partook in the dead sorcerer’s magic. Rowena pointed out that . . . well, that includes you.”

My heart dropped into my belly. “Felix, I’m just an apprentice. A half-trained student. I couldn’t.”

“Oh, I know you’re far more than half trained,” said Felix archly. “You forget that I clean up after your workshop sessions with Dad. Cleaned.” Then, slightly wetly, “Oh, hell.”

“It’s okay,” I said softly. “I keep forgetting he’s gone too.”

“Guess that’s why we need the *séance*,” said Felix. “Your presence at the ceremony would mostly be for show, if that takes the pressure off at all. You wouldn’t need to do anything to prepare. No one would expect anything of you. Just . . . it would mean so much to the family, to all of us, if you could be there for this.”

My breath hitched. *That* shouldn't have meant so much to *me*. I knew better than to think my relationship with the Solomons—any of the Solomons—was anything other than transactional. That's the way of sorcery, you understand. Commodification is how our kind has always survived through the centuries. It's no coincidence that people stopped burning witches once we turned our craft into a legitimized profession. *Come on, Zeng, don't go getting all maudlin now.* "Somehow," I said wryly, "I don't think 'all of us' includes your mother."

He granted me a chuckle at that. "Maybe not. But the point stands. As do the ancient rules of sorcerous tradition."

I closed my eyes. "Ugh." Gently, I beat the back of my head against the wall. "My own family will hate this, you know."

"Do you have to tell them?"

"Ha," I scoffed into the phone. "See, it's when you ask questions like this that I remember that your family is white. Chinese parents shalt not suffer a daughter to practice deceit under the roof they pay for. It's not filial."

He laughed. "Touché. How good are you at lying?"

"Excellent, to an audience of anyone other than my parents."

"What about obfuscation? Concealing an unpleasant truth with a smaller, more palatable truth?"

I hummed, thinking of all my summer school rejections. "That one's a little easier."

"So you'll come?"

I bit my lip. *No. I should say no.* Callum had told me to run. Callum had urged me to escape Solomon Manor when I'd had the chance. And wasn't Callum—according to his own dead, dismembered father—key to keeping us all safe from some infuriatingly unknowable horror? Maybe I had to stick by Callum's side,

but I could do that just as well in a high school hallway or a well-lit park. Callum wouldn't want me to return to the manor, of all places, especially not while Angelique Reed remained there. It was the sort of idiot thing girls in scary movies always did. By all means, walk right back into the haunted house you just escaped. Can't imagine anything could possibly go wrong.

I wasn't a horror movie heroine. I wasn't stupid. I would say no.

But instead of saying no, I asked Felix: "How long before the next full moon?"

"Two days."

I chewed a little harder on my lip, then opened my mouth before blood could stain my teeth. "My mother's a lawyer, you know. She sniffs out lies for a living."

"She may be a lawyer, but you're a sorcerer," countered Felix. "I'm sure you'll think of something."

"An apprentice," I corrected him, ignoring the tiny glow in my chest at being counted a true sorcerer, even if it wasn't technically true. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves."

"A sorcerer-to-be, then," said Felix. I could hear the grin in his voice. Then, a little more quietly, "Thank you. Truly. I know it's not easy on you. Any of this. But I really think . . . I believe it would have pleased my father. You being at his *séance*, I mean."

I shrugged. Despite the nonchalance, my heart was thundering beneath my rib cage. Stupid, stupid, stupid. I knew I was being a foolhardy idiot, even then. Yet like a moth drawn to the flame, I couldn't seem to resist the call of Solomon Manor, or the ghost of its master. Never again would I be able to make fun of a horror movie heroine. "I guess there's only one way to find out."

And two days later, I did. But not in the way any of us—least of all myself—expected.



SOMETIMES, I TRULY think the art of fortune-telling and the art of necromancy are two sides of the same sorcerous coin. One allows us to sneak a peek behind the future's curtain, and the other—pretty literally—digs up the underbelly of the past. I bet there's some kind of joke to be made about summoning a fortune teller back from his grave.

I could never think of a good one, though. I still can't. And the night I returned to Solomon Manor—full moon hanging fat and bright in the ink-dark sky—I wasn't thinking of jokes. I was thinking of stupid girls who walked right into the plots of scary movies.

The house was still dark. That should have been my first clue that something had gone wrong. I squinted at the shuttered windows, the blackened glass of the familiar French doors to the garden. Utter quiet permeated the property. Calling it silent as the grave might have been too on the nose, but at the very least, it sure didn't look like anyone was home.

I double-checked my phone. Felix's text, with all its neatly typed-out timing and location details, blinked up at me, a perfect match for the date and hour. I scowled at the shuttered windows. If this was the eldest Solomon's idea of a prank, it was in pretty bad taste.

I was ready to turn on my heel and walk home when long fingers clamped claw-tight over my shoulder.

"Jesus Christ!" I whirled around, fists flailing, only to have both wrists caught by a wax-pale Felix Solomon.

"The séance is off," he said tersely.

I snatched my wrists out of his grip. "Excuse me?"

"Shh," he hissed. "We don't want to make this into a bigger mess

than she already has. If she sees you, she'll want to question you."

I frowned. "She?" In the generous glow of the full moon, I caught a glimpse of the getup Felix was wearing: a full ceremonial sorcerer's robe, black as a void in the universe. The exact sort of thing you'd wear to a *séance*. Without thinking, I snatched a handful of it. "What do you mean, the *séance* is off? Why are you still dressed like this, then?"

"Again, lower your voice, please." Felix's eyes shut. Moonlight threw the dark circles under his eyes into sharp relief. He looked awful. "My mother, it seems, is a step ahead as ever."

I froze. "What did Angelique do?"

"Pretty much the only thing that could get a *séance* postponed. She called the cops."

My blood, if possible, ran colder still. "You don't mean—"

"I do," Felix rubbed a hand over his face and raked it over his head, mussing his product-slick russet curls. "I'm sorry, Tabatha. But figuring out the inheritance business is going to have to wait. We've got Elena Chang on our asses now."

I groaned. Of course it had to be Elena Chang. The occult crimes unit at our local police station was, for all intents and purposes, a one-woman operation, but oh, what an operation it was. If the good Detective Elena Chang could have revived the Salem witch trials for the twenty-first century, I'm pretty sure she would have. Any whiff of magic on a local crime, and Chang was on it like a bloodhound. She'd been a thorn in the side of the town's occult community for as long as she'd been a detective, but there hadn't been much she could pin on a family headed by a man as powerful and wealthy as Julian Solomon.

But now Julian Solomon was dead. And all bets were off.

I could guess why. I looked Felix right in the eye. "She's not buying the tragic magical accident story, is she?"

"Is anyone?" he asked tersely. His hands found their way back to my shoulders, his fingers tight enough on my body to bruise. It was a jarring sensation from the young man I'd long thought of as the warmest, most cuddly member of the Solomon clan. Then again, jarring was a good summation of this whole awful night. "Tabatha, this is serious business. She's looking for a murderer. And you can bet her first inclination is going to be to pin it on a sorcerer."

"So why in hell would your mother call her?" I hissed at him, my voice a furious whisper. "If she wants to take a stab at Callum's mom, this is the wrong way to do it. Detective Chang hates magic. And Angelique is the sorceress of the family, not Rowena."

Felix shook his head, shoulders still trapped between those great long hands of his. "This goes way beyond some petty rivalry between my father's wives. My mother, at the end of the day, wants the inheritance of my father's power. More than wants—believes she's entitled to it." He met my gaze. Felix's eyes were darker than his mother's, hazel more than emerald green, but they were hard as gemstone here beneath night's cover. "And believe me, Tabatha, she'll do whatever it takes to ensure that any other sorcerer who might be in her way is . . . no longer an obstacle."

As if on cue, the front door of the manor slammed open. Felix and I both started. His hand dropped from my shoulders.

Angelique Reed emerged, bright smiled, at Detective Chang's side. "Why, Felix," she purred. "We wondered where you'd run off to."

Subtly, Felix's entire demeanor changed. His body, so taut with worry a moment before, relaxed. He raised a languid gaze toward his mother's. "Just taking some air. No big deal."

"Taking some air with Miss Zeng, there?" Angelique squinted pointedly through the dark, emerald eyes glittering in triumph when they locked on mine. "It is Miss Zeng, isn't it?"

Beside me, Felix's shoulders slumped. I tried to look a little less defeated. "Just Tabatha is fine," I told his mother.

"Tabatha Zeng?" Detective Chang spoke up for the first time. She was a sturdy-looking woman I suspected was probably close to my mother's age but could have passed for twenty-eight in a dimly lit bar, with her fashionably bobbed black hair and smooth, lightly freckled skin. "You're the apprentice?"

"She is," said Angelique, practically crowing. "She was with Julian in that workshop nearly every hour of every day."

"Bit of an exaggeration, that," Felix put on dryly, "given that she's a minor, and, you know, goes to school."

His mother glared at him. "You know what I mean. In any case, Detective, I'm sure Miss Zeng will be able to answer a great deal many more questions than most of us about Julian's activities before his . . . untimely passing. Particularly regarding young Callum."

My head jerked up at the mention of Callum's name. So did Felix's. "What's that supposed to mean?" I asked, probably a shade too harshly. "What does Callum have to do with any of this?"

Detective Chang put a hand on Angelique's arm before she could reply. "I'll take it from here, Ms. Reed, if you don't mind. Tabatha, I'd like to ask you a few questions."

"About what?" I blurted out. "Callum Solomon—"

"Is a young man you were reportedly in contact with shortly after you and Ms. Reed discovered Julian Solomon's remains," said the detective in crisp tones. "There's no need for worry, Tabatha. It'll only be a few minutes, and then you can go on your way. Can you handle that?"

My brain spun through the implications of the setup. One: Angelique had shut down Rowena's séance attempt by calling down

a known magic hater on all our heads. Two: Angelique wanted said magic hater's interest solidly pinned on Callum. Which, three, meant Angelique had a good guess for whom Julian's ghost would be bequeathing his inheritance to—and it wouldn't be Angelique or her children. Which, four, meant she needed to get the likeliest heir out of her way.

Hence, five. She thought I would be her vehicle.

Well, she thought wrong. I may not have known Callum well back then, but I wasn't about to stand by and let his stepmother set him up. He didn't deserve that. No one did. "Sure," I said, forcing brightness into my voice. "Anything to cooperate with your investigation, Detective."

"Tabatha—" Felix began in a low voice.

"Splendid," said Detective Chang. "If you'll come with me, then?"



IN HINDSIGHT, I realize I did several things wrong in that moment.

First of all, I should have had a lawyer present. Even as I obediently trotted after the detective's heels amidst Felix's protests and Angelique's smirking triumph, the thought swam through my head. In my imagination, a little shoulder angel shaped like my mother sat beneath one of my ears, yelling at me for my foolishness and brandishing her law degree. That voice only got louder as Detective Chang led me to her car and drove me to the local police station instead of questioning me at Solomon Manor. Maybe I was innocent, but that didn't mean I couldn't get myself into a world of trouble answering a sorcery-hating detective's questions unsupervised.

But not nearly the amount of trouble Callum would encounter

at Angelique Reed's hands if I didn't do my part to set the record straight as quickly as possible.

That assumption was the first mistake I made. The second was my next assumption—that I'd be in and out of Detective Chang's interrogation like it was nothing. That all I would have to say was that Callum Solomon was, to my knowledge, just as innocent as I was, and we'd both go free.

I was, in hindsight, pretty stupid.

The occult crimes unit is, unsurprisingly, a weird one. They have their offices way off in the back of the police station, almost like they're not a part of the police proper at all, which honestly, most of the police would probably prefer. You actually have to walk outside the building, take a path through a little garden, and go through the door to what looks, ironically, an awful lot like a witch's cabin in the woods. It's actually Detective Elena Chang's private office. Maybe that was another reason I followed her there. She's always felt like some sort of weird frenemy to all things sorcerous, a threat, sure, but one that could and should be contended with on our own terms, free from the shackles of bureaucratic law enforcement. The occult crimes unit feels so much like a world apart—from the police, from everything, really—that it's easy to forget that Elena Chang, scourge of the occult world, is just another cop.

I had, at the time, no idea what she needed a private cabin in the garden behind the police station for. Concocting anti-sorcery conspiracy theories, maybe.

But she didn't ask me about the evils of sorcery, as I'd expected. She didn't, in fact, ask me about sorcery at all, at first. Though what she did ask me was probably worse, in some ways.

"Are you sleeping with Callum Solomon?"

I blinked once, twice, three times at the detective. Well, that wasn't the kind of question I'd been expecting the police to open with. "Uh," I said. "Are you allowed to ask minors that kind of thing? Also, why do you care?"

I'll admit now what I wouldn't have back then: some perverse little corner of my soul was kind of flattered. Not particularly because of Callum himself, but because of what he represented. I wasn't the kind of girl who dated much—too focused on magic, on school, on becoming the next Julian Solomon. I liked that someone thought I had it in me to fool around with one of the hotter, more-talked-about guys in my grade.

Even if the someone was, you know, probably trying to pin a patricide on the guy in question.

"Romantic relationships compromise judgment," said Detective Chang. "Especially among young people. If you're involved with the Solomon boy, I'll have to interpret your answers about him accordingly."

"You mean you think I'll lie for him." I folded my arms. "But then, wouldn't I lie about theoretically sleeping with him in the first place?"

The detective chuckled. "You tell me, Tabatha."

I glared at her. Her expression—mildly amused as it was—didn't even flicker. "No," I said. "Believe me?"

Her head canted. "Yes, actually, I think," she said slowly. "For all your obvious resentment of this situation, you strike me as an honest girl."

"Lucky for me," I muttered, leaning back in the chair.

"Lucky indeed. I don't often trust sorcerers—nothing personal, you understand. But magic tweaks a person's head, in my experience." The detective's mouth, so amused a moment ago, pursed

with distaste. "It makes them do what they otherwise might not."

I couldn't help rolling my eyes. Maybe a dumb thing to do in the current circumstances, but it happened before I could stop my face from doing it. Great. Another "magic makes people crazy" zealot. "Yes, our darksome rituals are responsible for all the ills of the world. Definitely haven't heard that in some eighteenth-century screed."

"Oh, it's not the rituals themselves," said the detective, conversationally enough. "The way magic drives its practitioners is not, in my experience, so different from the way money drives those gambling traders on Wall Street that our prophet-sorcerer Julian Solomon so loved to count among his clientele." Her eyes glinted at me. "Magic makes you hungry. Hungry turns into greedy. And greed, Tabatha, is a dangerous force when it drives the heart of a sorcerer. At least New York traders can't bend the physical universe to their will."

"Can't they, though?" I shot back, eyebrows raised. "I think you're giving sorcerers a little too much credit, Detective, and the rich white men of Wall Street too little."

Chang glared at me, but I could swear a vague, reluctant sense of amusement lurked behind the frustration on her face. We may have been an anti-sorcery crusader and a sorcerer-in-training, stuck on opposite ends of an ideological spectrum, but hell, if two daughters of Asian immigrants can't bond over the shared recognition of rich white dude entitlement, what hope is there for any of us?

"Did you know that Callum Solomon was present in his father's workshop the night before Julian Solomon was found dead?"

I hadn't. It must have shown on my face, because the detective leaned forward a little. "He went into the workshop, perhaps half an hour after you left."

My heart dropped into my belly.

“Yes, Tabatha.” Her voice was soft. Sympathetic, almost. “It’s all right. I know that you were at that workshop the night he died too. Don’t look so alarmed. You had every reason to be—after all, I’m given to understand that you were his apprentice. But it does mean that you two were the only people known to be alone with him that night—the last two, in fact, before we found the body, according to Ms. Reed. What was left of it, anyway.”

Angelique Reed. The recognition of my own stupidity washed over me in a hot tidal wave of shame and panic. Hell below, of course Angelique Reed had tossed me under the bus along with Callum. Why not? She clearly hated him, and so far as she knew, I was probably his friend, in cahoots with the Solomon she was most eager to rid the family of.

And I had played right into her hands. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Why did I keep making all the wrong choices? First, accepting Felix’s invitation to the séance in the first place. Second, allowing his mother to get me in her crosshairs. And third, talking as much shit as I already had to a police detective already inclined to dislike me on the basis of my career ambitions. It was like Sorcerer Solomon’s murderer had also murdered every last commonsense brain cell in my own damn head.

“You’re not in any trouble, if that’s what you’re worried about,” Chang continued. Like she’d read my mind. Her hands spread, cajoling. “I’m just trying to get a sense of the situation, Tabatha. You have to admit it’s a little messed up. Help me out here.”

How very good-cop of her. I could only imagine what her bad-cop routine would look like. Well, I didn’t plan on sticking around to find out.

“I don’t have to admit anything, actually,” I said, a little strangled.

I looked down at my hands and flexed white-knuckled fingers, a decision made. The one I would have made in the first place if this whole murder business hadn't so thoroughly addled my wits. Still, I had time to fix it: "You're going to have to find someone else to help you, Detective. I think it's time for me to call my mother."

Who was 100 percent going to kill me. But better my mom than my own damn mouth.

THREE

CALLING DOWN YOUR overprotective lawyer mom on the occult crimes unit of the local police station is kind of like dropping an atom bomb. It'll get the job done, but, well, the less said about the fallout, the better.

I'd expected Mom to start yelling as soon as she descended on Elena Chang's office. Instead, she arrived pursed-lipped and prim, briefcase in hand, hair pinned back in a rigid chignon at the nape of her neck. She had gold-framed glasses on and was wearing one of her nicer suits, the dove-gray one with the pencil skirt so precisely tailored that it looked like it could have cut through opposing counsel like a razor blade. I'd never seen a parent, much less my own, emit such perfectly cultivated murder energy. Mom didn't even bother sparing me a glance. Instead, she looked straight ahead at my interrogator, dark eyes glinting over the tops of her glasses. "Detective." The syllables dropped out of her mouth in clipped tones. "This is a bit of a low blow, even for you, wouldn't you say? Dragging my teenage daughter—a minor—in here because of some ridiculous grudge against me?"

Chang sighed. "Hi, Anne-Marie. Nice to know you're as much of an arrogant bitch as ever."

My gaze darted back and forth between my mom and the

detective. I was pretty sure my mouth hung slightly, comically agape. "Wait a minute—you guys know each other?"

"Our parents did," said Chang. The look she had fixed on my mother was less a glare and more a resigned simmer of resentment. "It turned us into something like childhood rivals."

"Don't flatter yourself, Elena," scoffed Mom. "You never had my grades."

"Wow, how very seventeen years old of you. Anne-Marie, one of these days, you're going to have to wake up to the fact that regardless of what our parents thought, grades as a metric—"

"I *am* seventeen," I interrupted them both plaintively. "And I would like to go home, please."

"Yes, I think that's quite a good idea," said my mother, snatching me by the wrist. "I think we're done here, unless the good detective would like to see us in court from a different perspective. Let's go, Tabatha."

Chang didn't seem to have anything to say to that until we were halfway out the door. "This isn't about you or me. I really am trying to solve a murder. You could help, Tabatha."

"Detective," my mother began in a warning tone.

"You don't owe Callum Solomon anything," Chang interrupted.

My mother fell silent at that. Maybe because it was, of all things, the one matter on which she agreed with Elena Chang.

I turned around. The detective was looking at me dead-on, straight in the eye, with an expression almost like pity. "You don't owe him anything," Chang repeated. "Whoever killed Sorcerer Solomon is going to get what's coming to them, one way or another. It's not your job to protect a murderer."

With an effort, I met that dark, determined gaze of hers. "I know it's not."

"Tabatha!" The admonishment cracked like a whip from my mother.

For once, I ignored it. “But it is your job to catch the right person,” I said.



IT WASN'T THE greatest of parting lines. But it fed that reckless, fiery thing inside me, the same thing that had leapt to defend Callum in the first place and driven me right into Detective Chang's clutches.

My mother didn't want me talking to Callum after the incident at the occult crimes unit. Obviously, she hadn't in the first place, but the sentiment was understandably more stringent after the whole detective questioning thing. I was pretty sure that childhood nemesis or no, she agreed at that point with Detective Chang and didn't want me consorting with what she perceived to be a more-than-just-maybe murderer.

So, naturally, I called him.

Don't go judging me. I need you to understand that at this point, nothing I did was really about Callum himself. It was an idea, a fixation, almost an obsession: that last promise to Sorcerer Solomon. The idea of something owed, not to the son but to the father. To the man who'd taught me, guided me, opened up a world previously untouchable to my ambitious, occult-itchy little fingertips.

And maybe if I kept my promise to him, that world would remain mine. So I called his son.

“Tabatha Zeng,” he said when he picked up, like he'd been expecting me all along. “Fancy hearing from you. Why exactly are—”

“The police think you murdered your father,” I interrupted, and immediately wished I could perish on the spot.

An agonizingly awkward silence followed.

“Oh,” said Callum.

“They questioned me,” I continued, feeling smaller and slower and stupider with every passing nanosecond. “I shouldn’t have agreed to it, but Detective Chang said—”

“Elena questioned you?” Callum interrupted.

Now it was my turn to succumb to the awkward pause. “Yeah, she did. Is it weird for me to be thrown off by the fact that you’re apparently on a first-name basis with the local police precinct’s designated witch-hunter?”

“Ouch. Touché.” He chuckled, but the hint of a real wince lay beneath it. “I guess it’s only right that I answer honesty with honesty: she questioned me too. About you, in fact.”

My belly went cold, then hot, then cold again. “What? Why?”

“That’s the thing, Tabatha,” said Callum, even voiced. “The way she told it to me, she seems to think that you were the one who murdered my father.”



IN THE END, I really should have been less shocked that Detective Chang had been aiming to play me and Callum against each other the whole time. I mean, why not? We were both sorcerers, both present in Sorcerer Solomon’s workshop the night of his death. I couldn’t imagine it would have mattered much to a wannabe witch-hunter like Detective Chang one way or another which one of us she managed to pin the crime on—just as long as one of us turned out guilty. And naturally, the chances of pinning a murder on a teen sorcerer-in-training got a lot easier if one was willing to rat the other out.

Well, I knew I hadn’t done it. And—given that Sorcerer Solomon had made me promise to stick to Callum like glue—I was pretty sure Callum hadn’t done it either. Sorcerer Solomon could be a little

kooky at times, in the way that all famous geniuses in their fields tend to be, but even he wasn't kooky enough to bind his apprentice to a guy who'd commit patricide.

Unfortunately, esoteric sorcerer's promises and your own good word on your innocence weren't exactly the kind of evidence that would hold up in court.

Callum's incredibly terrible solution to this problem was also, unfortunately, the only one that I could see making any sense: he and I would have to meet in person to sort the whole mess out. "Don't sound so suspicious," he said cheerfully to my affronted silence over the phone. "I'm not going to kidnap you and murder you or anything."

"That's exactly what someone planning on kidnapping and murdering me would say," I informed him. I was kidding, the joke falling naturally off my tongue, but it left a weird aftertaste in my mouth. Detective Chang no doubt thought that at least one of us was, in fact, capable of kidnapping and murder.

I didn't want to ponder the implications too deeply, though.

"Maybe," said Callum. "Then again, maybe not. Only one way to find out." More seriously, he added, "Also, probably the only way we can stay a step ahead of Elena."

Privately, I wasn't at all sure, back then, that Callum was especially interested in staying ahead of the good detective. I still didn't like the way he referred to her by her given name, like they were old buddies or something. But if she'd been feeding Callum suspicions about me the same way she'd clearly been trying to feed me suspicions about him, I wanted an end to it. On a practical level, I didn't need to make an enemy of Callum Solomon: rich, popular, well connected, socially and magically powerful, probably entirely capable of making me miserable should he have chosen to do so. On another level, for reasons I couldn't entirely parse for myself at the time, I just really didn't

like the idea of Callum thinking poorly of me. The idea of it just sat unpleasantly in the pit of my belly. Which meant that I really, really didn't like the idea of him thinking that I'd killed his dad.

Besides, there was still the matter of the promise I'd made to Sorcerer Solomon. Always, always, that damn promise. I had agreed to find Callum. And I had agreed to stay by his side. A sorcerer keeps their promises.

And I was, come hell or high water, a sorcerer-to-be.

So I followed Callum. Hopefully not to my own demise.

We met over lunch, on a weekend. He'd chosen the venue and its circumstances with a deliberation clearly designed to earn my trust: a popular café, daylight hours, a sunlit outdoor table in plain view of plenty of witnesses. If he planned to kidnap and murder me, he'd have a hell of a time, sorcerous talent or no, and he plainly meant to convey as much. I found this all rather considerate, especially given how he still, at the time, probably thought I might be a murderer.

He was already waiting for me at the table he'd reserved, smack-dab in the center of the trendy patio, his monogrammed fencing pullover clinging over his shoulders, its navy dark against the bright gold of Callum's hair.

Callum both did and didn't look like his brother. They had the same sort of pretty, clean-cut white boy handsomeness, no doubt bestowed upon both boys by their father's genetics. But where Felix was all sharply hewn, camera-ready angles like his mother, Callum bore softer edges. Even at eighteen, glorious Ivy League—destined high school senior that he was, the faintest suggestion of youthful baby fat still clung to his cheeks, and a slight downward slope to the corners of those bright blue eyes suggested a kindness to his nature.

Or would have, anyway, if he hadn't been leveling the douchiest, most shit-eating smirk at me as he pulled my seat out for me.

My heart sank a bit, though the smirk didn't surprise me, exactly. Callum and I didn't know each other well, but I'd seen how he was among his friends sometimes: the way he wore that smirk like a mask, as if an air of vaguely entitled self-satisfaction came part and parcel with the uniform of running in certain social circles. Even from a distance, it had always looked just a little forced on Callum's features, the mask ill fitted to the suggestion of the personality beneath, yet he insisted on wearing it all the same. It was one thing, I thought, that had always set him apart from his brother. Callum had a tendency to mold himself to his surroundings, like an eager-to-please social chameleon, for better or worse. Felix had never seemed anything other than himself.

Anyway, I couldn't help wrinkling my nose just a little as I sat. A promise was a promise, but that didn't mean I had to love the attitude that came attached. "So, this business with the detective," I said, in what I hoped was a crisp, don't-mess-with-me tone. My imitation of my mother wasn't perfect, by any means, but I liked to believe I did Anne-Marie Chou Zeng's bitch lawyer persona better justice than most. "What exactly did she say about me?"

"Oh, Elena?" Callum waved a menu lazily at me. "All in good time. Have you had the crab cake appetizer here? It's divine."

"No, I haven't," I said, irritation mounting.

"We'll have to change that, then. You're not allergic, are you? Or otherwise violently opposed to crab cakes?"

"No," I repeated, "but I'd really like to—"

"—cut straight to the point?" The shit-eating grin widened. "I imagine. Dad always said you had a drive in you."

Had his voice just faltered? He grinned so wide, so convincingly, it was hard to tell. "I'm just trying to clear up any misunderstanding between us," I told him.

“Sure, sure,” he said, the way a half-defeated parent might say “sure, sure” to a toddler who’d been throwing a tantrum for the past twenty minutes, barely conscious anymore of what they were promising to quiet their spawn. “As am I. But I don’t deal with misunderstandings on an empty stomach. That’s a rule I’ve learned to set for myself, dealing with two siblings.” He squinted at me, pointing a fork in my direction. “Let me guess: only child.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Ah, got it in one,” he crowed. “Only child.” He waved the fork about my face. “You’ve got it written all over you.”

I scowled. I couldn’t help myself. You see, I’m not lying when I tell you that I’d known Callum Solomon, tangentially, before his father bound us with a promise to a dead man. But I’ll tell you this too: I hadn’t remembered Callum Solomon being nearly this annoying.

The server assigned to our section—probably one of the local college kids or grad students stuck in a crummy part-time side hustle—barely batted an eye when she arrived at our table. “Let me guess,” she drawled. “You’re here for the crab cakes.” She hadn’t so much as looked up from her notepad.

Callum beamed at her, all his father’s good old-fashioned Solomon charm shining at full wattage. “You know it, Desiree.”

The waitress—Desiree, apparently—rolled her eyes at him, but her mouth twitched with reluctant amusement. “Don’t you flirt in front of your date like that, Callum Solomon,” she chided. “It’ll land you in nothing but trouble.” To my horror, she winked at me. “Have fun with this one, girl.”

I felt myself go pink. “Oh no, I’m not—”

“We will, thank you,” Callum cut in smoothly. With a truly absurd amount of cheek, he slid an arm over the back of my chair. There must have been at least three layers of fabric between his arm and my

shoulders—that stupid preppy fencing sweater, the windbreaker I’d thrown over my T-shirt that morning—yet I swore every molecule of my skin could sense every molecule of his.

When the waitress had left, I kicked him hard under the table.

“Ow!” he yelped, cradling his shin, blue eyes wide with shock. “What the hell was that for?”

I ignored the question, leaning across the table toward him. “Listen,” I hissed. “I don’t know what you’re playing at. But I need you to know that I didn’t kill your father.”

“That’s nice of you,” he said plaintively, rubbing his shin.

I ground my teeth at him.

He relented. “For what it’s worth, I didn’t kill my father either.” He tapped his fingers against the table. “Which seems to leave us in . . . well, kind of a conundrum, wouldn’t you say, Tabatha? You don’t mind if I call you Tabatha, do you?”

“What else would you call me?” I shook my head as he opened his mouth. “Never mind. Don’t answer that, I don’t want to know. And I don’t think so. We just have to explain how it is to Detective Chang.”

Callum’s eyebrows climbed so high, they nearly vanished into his hairline. “Simple as that, huh?” He held up his hands before I could snap out a retort. “Look, for what it’s worth, I wish it were that simple too. But Elena isn’t just going to let this one go.”

I took a moment to observe Callum—really observe him. He still wore what I thought of as his mask: the resting almost-grin teetering halfway between douchey and charming, the wide blue eyes full of slightly affected innocence. But there was an edge to it all that I couldn’t quite put my finger on, a loose seam under the mask, which, if tugged, might just unravel him completely.

I tilted my head. “Did she and your dad ever meet?”

“Did she and my dad ever meet.” Callum rolled my words around

in his mouth like he was trying to savor them. “Well, that’s one way of describing their relationship. When I was a kid, I used to think they were having an affair. Oh, don’t worry, spoilers: they weren’t,” he added, upon seeing the look on my face. “Kind of the opposite, in fact.”

“And what, pray tell, is the opposite of an affair?”

The side of Callum’s mouth tipped upward. “Zeng, do you have any idea what it’s like to be a member of the most notorious family of sorcerers on the East Coast, in a town that employs a specific detective for the sole purpose of ferreting out magical crimes?”

Well, when he put it that way.

Callum continued, “I don’t think I remember a point in my childhood when Elena wasn’t on our asses in some form or another. Hell, even when she was still some rookie wet behind the ears and freshly hired by the force to witch hunt—pretty literally, I might add—she was always coming by the house. Anytime something went awry in the occult world, guess who showed up on our doorstep, badge in hand?” He shrugged. “I don’t remember when it stopped being scary. But at some point, Elena was just part of the background of our life, like, I don’t know, some seasonal cold blowing through between fall and winter.” He hummed thoughtfully. “You know, at one point, my mom started inviting her in to tea. And then my dad got in on it, and that was that.” His hands flapped about with a dramatic flourish. “A brand-new Solomon family tradition: witches inviting the witch-hunter to tea.”

“Why?” I asked, boggling.

Another shrug. “At that point, why the hell not? She clearly wasn’t going anywhere. And if she wasn’t going anywhere, and we weren’t going anywhere, well, all parties involved might as well have our fair share of caffeine and freshly baked biscuits. My mother studied abroad in England, you know, so her tea game is excellent.”

The waitress returned and deposited two platters at our table. “Crab cakes. You and your lady friend enjoy.” With a wink, she sauntered off again before I could protest.

“Appreciate it, Desiree,” Callum called merrily after her retreating back. He sighed, a little dramatically, at my scowl. “Come on, Zeng. Desiree thinks every girl I bring here is a hookup.”

“Aren’t they?” I deadpanned, unmoved.

“No, in fact.” Callum’s mask slipped again, just a little, but I saw the flash of vulnerability—and what might have been a hint of hurt—flicker through his eyes. “But I feel like it’s easier to just play into assumptions sometimes. Makes everyone’s life easier, you know?” He grinned at me. And just like that, the mask was back. “Now stop looking so cross with me, Zeng, and try the crab cake.”

Reluctantly, I tried the crab cake. To my fury, it was in fact delicious.

Callum must have seen it in my face too, judging from the delight smeared all over his face like cream on a cat’s whiskers. “Good?”

I scowled around my mouthful of crab cake. “Good,” I confirmed reluctantly, and swallowed. “Now, about this suspected murder business.”

Callum heaved a sigh. “Oh, very well.” Flopping backward in his seat, he folded his arms. “Here’s the deal, Zeng. Thanks to all those hilariously awkward afternoon teas, I know Elena pretty well at this point in my life, which means I’ve got a pretty good idea of what she’s playing at.” He picked up the butter knife and pointed it at me. “Elena needs a culprit—preferably a sorcerous culprit—to pin my father’s murder on. So far, she’s got two options she can build a case off of: you, the backstabbing apprentice, or me, the resentful second son.” His mouth twisted just a little as he spun the knife between his fingers. “You’re no idiot, so you probably see where this is going already. You’ve done the math. You and I have all the right attributes:

we're both sorcerers, we were both close to my father, and we were both in his workshop during the right time frame. So far, the good detective doesn't have anyone else who matches that description." He dropped the knife back onto the table. "Which means that it behooves us to find someone who *does*."

I hadn't expected that turn. "What?"

He spread his hands. "Think about it, Zeng. Why did she question us separately and act like she needed you as a witness against me, me as a witness against you? Why did she try to convince us each that the other was so damn shady? It's because she's hoping one of us will turn the other in."

"Obviously," I snapped. "But I know I didn't do it."

"And I know I didn't do it," said Callum. "But that doesn't change the fact that *someone did*. If it wasn't you, then who?"

"I don't know, I'm not a detective," I began, and was cut off when Callum shook his head at me with startling vehemence.

"Neither am I," he said, "but I'm not as stupid as people think I am either."

"No one thinks you're stupid," I said, annoyed. "We're just tired of you pretending like you're a brainless jock from some eighties movie when everyone also knows that you've been on honor roll since freshman year."

I had not been on honor roll since freshman year, thanks to that time I had almost flunked computer science as a second-semester sophomore, and harbored no small amount of bitterness over this cold hard fact.

Callum's cheeks pinked. "Whatever. Look, this is all to say I'm pretty sure I know who really did it."

I searched his face for signs that he was joking, and found none.

I swallowed hard. “You couldn’t have just led with that?”

“I thought the fact that you were a lead suspect in the actual detective’s opinion was a bit more pressing,” said Callum archly.

Okay, fair. I glowered at him but didn’t retort.

“It’s pretty obvious what Elena’s gambit is,” he continued. “She’ll keep questioning us until one of us breaks, and whoever caves first basically does her job for her. She gets to pin my father’s murder on one of us, proving yet again that the occult is an evil influence upon the hearts of man and is probably also corrupting the youth to boot.”

I snorted. “So your answer is to pin his murder on someone else?”

“No,” said Callum patiently. “My answer is to pin his murder on his actual murderer, so we can both go home, book therapy appointments, and carry on with our lives.”

“So you still want us to do Detective Chang’s job for her.” I said it dismissively, but I couldn’t help the way my heart rate sped up just a little at the thought. Dad—who, true to his roots as an engineer, read old-school murder mystery novels because he liked the puzzle-solving aspect of trying to beat the author’s main character to the solution—had introduced me to the likes of Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers back in middle school.

I didn’t quite take to the logic-gaming side of the genre the same way Dad did—after all, my interest was sorcery, not STEM—but those books had cemented in me a bit of a romantic fascination with private eyes and detective heroes. A daughter of suburbia, I’d grown up watching crime shows on TV and reading whodunits, just like every other moderately sheltered middle-class kid I knew.

I’d never fancied myself the much-romanticized amateur sleuth popularized by the books Dad had gifted me for Christmases and birthdays—I was too busy fancying myself an admittedly equally

romanticized master sorcerer—but it was hard not to be a little excited by the concept.

I doused that excitement as best I could. Now was not the time for daydream-sanitized thoughts of adventure. Julian Solomon was still dead. Callum was still under suspicion, and so, apparently, was I. We still needed to clear our names, first and foremost.

But god, Callum was right, wasn't he? If we wanted to clear our names, we legitimately had to figure out who the real killer was—and I had genuinely no clue where to begin. Obviously, this was scary. But—and I should be a little ashamed of this, because it's pretty unhinged—it was also weirdly kind of thrilling.

"You say you think you know who the real murderer is," I said slowly.

He took another bite of his crab cake. "Yep."

"How?" I leaned forward, hungry despite myself. "Did—did you cast a prophecy spell?"

It was strictly forbidden, of course. Sorcerers' apprentices are usually kept on a pretty long leash, but the leash still exists—especially for prophets. We're allowed to start practicing illusory and kinetic magic on our own once we've mastered the basics—but prophetic magic is different. Messing around with the future is a more dangerous business than most, and we're not supposed to risk it without supervision from a full-fledged prophet-sorcerer.

Unfortunately for us, the only full-fledged prophet-sorcerer within several states had been horrifically murdered just last week.

"No, I didn't cast an illicit prophecy spell without supervision. Even I'm not that much of a rebel," said Callum, as if reading my mind. "You don't have to use magic for everything, you know."

"Then how—"

"It's called," he said with a flourish, "deductive reasoning." He punctuated this brilliance with another mouthful of crab cake.

“Uh huh,” I said, deliberately unimpressed. “And?”

He swallowed. “I’m guessing you already know about Dad’s last prophecy. The one that foretold his death.”

I swallowed. It was as if the oxygen had been sucked from the air around us. “He said he’d be killed by his best beloved.”

“Right.” Callum’s expression was brittle. “Which narrows down our field of suspects considerably, doesn’t it?”

“I don’t take your meaning.”

“All right, then.” He glanced from side to side, then said, low and carefully neutral in the way only the truly angry can sound, “Let me put this another way: if my father was truly murdered by his best beloved, then we should start by investigating my brother.”

“You don’t mean—”

“I do mean,” said Callum. Those blue eyes had gone flinty. “Felix. Felix should be at the top of our suspect list.”

“No,” I said immediately. I couldn’t have heard that right. “Felix is—”

“Too charming? Too sweet? Too pure as the driven snow to be guilty of harming a fly, let alone his father?” Callum sat back in his seat, expression full of dark amusement. “I thought so too. But the words of the prophecy said *best beloved*. Who could that be but Felix?”

I hated that this was actually pretty hard to deny. Of the three Solomon children, Felix had always been the one whose name was spoken in the fondest tones by his father. Maybe Sorcerer Solomon didn’t do it on purpose. But it was tough to avoid. Felix was simply so much more warmly, well, *present* than his siblings. While Circe hid up in her bedroom, and Callum largely ignored the quiet, nerdy kids like me to hang out with loud, jovially popular varsity athletes at the high school, Felix paid attention to everyone. He always wanted to know how your day was, what was going on in your classes, if everything

was okay with your family, if you needed help with anything, anything at all.

To that end, it wasn't just Sorcerer Solomon who'd so instinctively favored Felix. It was everyone who encountered the Solomon family. If I hadn't known better, I'd have said that Felix went out of his way to ensure that he was beloved.

Which, I realized with a pang, was exactly the sort of thing a murderer might do to evade suspicion.

"Do you think Detective Chang has any other suspects?" I asked Callum halfheartedly.

"Doubtful," he said around a mouthful of crab cake. He swallowed, and added, "Confirmation bias, you know? She's got it in her head that it's got to be one of us, so she's probably ignoring evidence that could point to someone else."

I deflated slightly. "So we really will have to do her job for her."

"Absolutely," said Callum cheerfully. "What do you expect, that she'd do it herself? Let's be real: we can dress it up in all the modern red tape and respectability and legalities or niceties we want, but at the end of the day, a magical crimes unit detective is just another iteration of a Salem witch-hunter from the 1600s." He shrugged. "Just with the power of technology and the internet paving their way."

"A cheery perspective," I observed dryly.

"Ah, it's not all bad." Callum made a dismissive sound, flapping a hand. "At least if we do the good detective's job for her, we have some say over whether we wind up on trial for murder or not." That bright blue gaze, so like Sorcerer Solomon's, flicked toward me. "And for what it's worth, I'd like to look my father's murderer—his real murderer, mind you—in the eyes, just once."

That actually did give me pause. Callum's face hadn't really changed. But the fingers that had been toying with the knife were

drumming against the table now. I knew a fidget when I saw one. He was scared. Or angry, maybe. Probably both. Who wouldn't be?

And for what it was worth, in this particular matter, I was on his side. Not because of Sorcerer Solomon's warning, or prophecy, or that bizarre promise he'd extracted from me to stick to Callum like glue, no matter what. It wasn't even because I particularly believed his theory about Felix—in fact, I was still reasonably sure that Callum was jumping the gun on that one.

I was on his side because I knew, deep in my bones, that if it was my own father left dead and dismembered in our home, I'd want to look his killer in the eyes too. And then some.

That much, Callum Solomon deserved.

Besides, I knew that I hadn't killed his dad. And I wanted to prove it to everyone else too.

I tilted my head at him, put down my fork, and folded my arms. "Callum Solomon. Are you trying to ask me to be your girl Friday?"

He stopped drumming his fingers. The side of his mouth lifted again. With a grin, he took another bite of his crab cake. "Mmm." He settled back in his seat, eyes closed in contentment as he swallowed. "If that's how you want to think of it, sure. Or maybe I can be yours. Aren't you the one with the lawyer mother? You'd probably be better at crime solving than me."

My shoulders wilted at the mention of my mother. "That might be more of a problem than anything else, actually. My mom . . . kind of doesn't really want me associating with you. So it's going to be tough to meet up together regularly, much less, you know. Solve murders together."

"Oh, I thought of that too," said Callum without missing a beat. He took another bite of crab cake. "I haff a plan," he said as he swallowed. He stared lovingly at his plate. "Goddamn. These really are good."

I snapped my fingers under his nose. “They are. Do they have anything to do with your plan for how we’re going to run around playing badge-less buddy cops without getting caught by my mom?”

Callum set the fork down and grinned at me. “Tell me, Zeng. How does your mom feel about women’s self-defense classes?”