Chapter 1

In Which Necessity Is the Mother of Infidelity

"If you don't do this spell, Charlotte is going to die!" Leo said looming over her.

"You think I don't know that!?" she irritably replied, "I told you, I can't do it – it requires 'passion acquired in a lover's arms' and I. Don't. Have. That!"

"Are you seriously going to stand there and state that after seventeen years of life, you've never once been kissed?" Leo scoffed, "This isn't the time to play the shy and retiring maiden – so stop the shenanigans and DO THE SPELL!" he shouted invading her personal space.

He was quite intimidating when he wanted to be; towering eight inches over her own not insubstantial height. The grey eyes that seemed simultaneously cold as slate yet hot with piercing contempt saw right through her soul- a sight which clearly did nothing for him. The look in his eyes almost caused her to quail but she rallied, stiffening her spine. She was made of stronger stuff than that. After all, she was descended from Abramelin the Mage on her mother's side. Her father's people traced their roots to Mekatilili, the female leader of a proud African people and renowned sorceress. She could hold her own against this overindulged, pretentious basketball star type *idiot*. Okay, maybe not an idiot, but he was undeniably overindulged. An abundance of sporting talent, a six foot four slender muscular frame, jet black hair that fell about his face like it was windblown ('*blow-dried more like'*, she thought with a sneer) and the hypnotic eyes that led him to believe he was God's gift to the universe. She, for one, wasn't buying whatever he was selling. She wasn't one to be taken in by the superficial.

Once this point was settled in her mind, she drew herself up to her full height and opened her mouth to tell him to get out of her room, because this was a clear case of trespassing. Too late, he got there before her. With an impatient sound deep in his throat, he swooped down and kissed her lips.

Leo was scared, and when he was scared he became extremely irritable. Charlotte was lying as if dead in her living room and here he was forced to interact with this…weird chick who

may or may not be a witch, in order to have the only chance there seemed to be to save her. He *had to* save Charlotte, there was no choice about that; the alternative could not be considered…So, much as he found this strange girl faintly repugnant in a 'you are completely not my type' kind of way – he would just have to grit his teeth and *get this done*.

He only meant to kiss her long enough for her to work up enough passion for the spell. After all, he had yet to meet the girl who could resist him, and this was a matter of life and death. Charlotte tended to act now and ask questions later – if at all; one could say she had poor impulse control. It came from being a privileged and overindulged child, used to get pretty much anything she desired, from her absentee parents. She was the girl every other girl envied- curly golden locks, aquamarine eyes, and dimpled smile- and knew it. It was natural then that when she saw the strange lights that looked like Aurora Borealis, shining over the pool that had materialised as if by magic, at the bottom of her garden; that she had to see if she could touch them... When she tried to though, the strange pretty lights caught her hand and pulled her into the pool, whence none but Mya's magic could retrieve her. But although Mya had managed to perform a spell that got Charlotte out of the pool, she could not stop her life force from slowing fading without the recasting spell – this she learned when Leo drove her home to consult her grimoires…and that required her to draw energy from passion's embrace.

Mya was a virgin though, and the alteration of that state was a challenge for a number of reasons. First, there was the mystique of magic that surrounded her, coupled with her chocolate complexion so rare in this rural backwater. Added to that, the fact that she lived with her grandmother in what was practically a shack in the woods; and seemed to share her wardrobe. All this tended to repel the local male population, even had she made any effort to be noticed. Before she was invited by Charlotte to hobnob with her royal circle, she had no friends to speak of. And here was the king to Charlotte's queen, with his lips on hers! Since her mouth was already open, his tongue found ready access and gently explored heretofore-unplundered depths. Their sensitive tips met in tentative greeting and conducted that ancient mating dance that is as old as love.

Her lips are so soft. He wasn't expecting that; almost unconsciously, his lips pressed down on hers. Now their tongues were intertwined, it was difficult to know whose tongue was whose.

She felt dizzy with shock and dismay like all the blood had left her head; she leaned into him to keep some sort of balance and her breast pressed against his chest.

*Bigger than they look…*was his incoherent thought as his hands rose of their own accord and circled her surprisingly tiny waist. Apparently underneath all the grandma sweaters was the body of a seventeen-year-old girl.

'*A hot seventeen-year-old girl'*

The blood in his body was pooling a little lower than his head as he sank his teeth gently into her lower lip, pulling it into his mouth and sucking with lips gone suddenly hot. "*I want her!"* He thought with surprise*.' how did that happen?'*

'This is crazy' was her last coherent thought before she was surrounded by madness. She felt a sudden draft across her chest and realized that her dress was unbuttoned all the way down to the waist and Leo's hands were everywhere – touching, caressing, squeezing, and pinching. Her nipples were painfully erect and seemed to cry out for his mouth without bothering to consult *her*. As if he heard their silent cry, his lips moved from hers and fastened themselves on her left breast. She felt dizzy and confused, as she pressed his head tight to her breast. She tried to control her breathing but it was impossible, and she was gasping like there was not enough oxygen in the whole world for a fortifying breath. Leo was making a low growling sound deep in his throat like a cat purring over a succulent piece of meat. Suddenly he picked her up and threw her onto her bed. A few seconds later, she was divested of her dress and the covering that her embarrassingly huge granny panties had afforded her vagina was replaced by his hot mouth. She froze in shock at the action and the sensation. She was torn between wanting to push him away and wanting to pull him even deeper into her. She compromised by moaning out loud.

Oblivious to her internal battles, Leo was absorbed in the sensations of touch and smell and taste that were opening up to him. He wanted…he couldn't put into words what it was that he wanted, but he wanted it *now.* His erection was so hard it hurt him, but he had enough coherence to want her wet and ready, because once he was in, there was no turning back, no slowing down, definitely no stopping. He licked the liquid that dripped from the lips of her vagina and knew that she wanted him too, but he was big, and he was hard and she had said she'd never been with a man…

But of course she must be lying; who stayed a virgin that long these days? Honestly. He was willing to bet she had strange weirdo witch ritual sex *all the damn time*. Unzipping his fly with sudden impatience, he nudged her legs apart. He thrust into her as far as he could go…which wasn't very far, her entrance was so tight. He lay over her, wrapping her legs around him to widen her entrance and pushed himself in deeper. She gasped in his ear, and he didn't know what the sound signified but he was long past the point where he could stop. One more time through the breach…and he was all the way in; the feel of her tight around him, gripping him in her wetness and her warmth was almost more than he could stand. He felt control of his body slipping from him and almost came. This shocked him so much that he came almost all the way back to himself – never, not even during his first time, had he ever come too fast. He froze into stillness to give himself time to get it together, and to give her time to get used to his size, and then slowly, very slowly, he began to move. The world seemed to spin and he thought he could actually see colours swirl in the air. His vision blurred and he let out a groan that seemed to come from inside his soul. He thrust at her a little faster and she *seemed* to give as good as she got. She was making small gasping sounds that alone were sure to have him spilling his seed like a novice and he tried not to listen. Sensation overwhelmed him. Sound, touch, heat, wetness, colour, need, urgency; a jumbled kaleidoscope that swirled around him so that he was almost blind and deaf to anything that wasn't her, that wasn't him, that wasn't them joined in the eternal mating dance united in desire and lust and need so that he didn't know where she ended, and he began.

She.

He had no name for her. He had no name for himself. In a moment that lasted an eternity, none of these mattered – then the world exploded and all thought was extinguished in a shooting flame of release.

He came to still lying over her and lifted his head to look down at her. Her eyes were closed and she was breathing really hard. He was still inside her and slid out and off her; feeling a strange reluctance that he didn't care to examine. He lay beside her on his back staring up at the ceiling and waited for her to say something.

Mya's brain was on a continuous loop of devastation and confusion.

'What just happened? How did it happen? What the hell am I to do now? Was he still here or had

he gone?' she wondered.

She opened one eye into a slit and peeped but she really didn't need to. She could feel him there beside her, a warm silent, still presence.

Is he dead? He had seemed to collapse there at the end; maybe he'd had a heart attack.

She didn't know whether she wished he had or not. All the time '*nowwhatnowwhatnowwhat'*, whirled around in her mind, the words segueing together like some mantra that might present to her a solution to this impossible situation.

The beloved boyfriend of her one and only friend in this town lay naked beside her after indulging in what she was pretty sure were acts of a sexual nature with her. She wished he would move, or speak or leave...*something*.

But he just lay there like someone had hit him over the head with a poleaxe! She sat up cautiously, waiting or hoping for a reaction she didn't know which. Either way, she was destined for disappointment – he just lay there with his eyes closed. She got to her feet and tiptoed out of the room and into the bathroom, shutting the door gently behind her. She leaned on it and let out a breath.

'Wow, what was that*?'* She thought.

She walked to the mirror and examined herself in it. Her brown eyes stared right back at her through the mirror. They tended to change hue depending on her mood and now they were the colour of well-aged brandy. She looked herself over and thought that she still rather looked the same. Not like the world had ended or anything...Her hair was still short, curly and braided into a ponytail then tied in a huge afro. She'd seen the look on one of the starlets in the movie 'Shaft' and liked it so much that she decided to adopt it. Never mind that it was like thirty years out of date; the style suited her head and she liked the African-ness of it. People avoided her because she was different, so she might as well own it, embrace it, and commit to it. The Afro added at least another inch to her height and framed her oval face, making her cheekbones more prominent. Her shoulders were rather broad for a girl, anchoring her breasts. These stood erect with the tips pointed up like a pair of attentive puppies with their noses in the air, eagerly awaiting a bone. She would have smiled at the analogy if she wasn't so shellshocked and her eyes continued their inspection. Her torso

tapered off to a tiny waist, the result of mostly living on vegetables that she grew in her garden. Her unblemished chocolate complexion was also a result of her lifestyle in spite of the challenges of adolescence. She followed her long legs all the way down to her size ten feet – long, slender and elegant; like her father's they said, though she'd never met him. He had died before her birth, according to her grandmother, but she would not tell her how. His death was shrouded in mystery.

'Looks like I'm still all here...or not – I think we're possibly less the virginity…' she thought, turning away from dark thoughts. She went to the sink and rubbed herself clean then put on her father's old bathrobe that hung behind the door. She was a witch and there was a spell to be done – a life to be saved. Everything else would have to wait.

Chapter 2

In Which a Life Is Saved

When she walked out of the bathroom which was across the hall from her room, she copped a peek to see whether Leo had stirred. He was standing in the middle of the room, fully dressed to his black alligator skin boots. Leo's family was in the alligator business – hunting them, raising them, and selling their various components; skin, meat or teeth-whatever anyone wanted. So when he wasn't wowing the school courtside crowds with his basketball skills, he was at his uncle's farm, learning the family business, or else canoodling with his girlfriend Charlotte in one of her various family properties and hosting exclusive parties for the 'in' crowd at her lake house. His life was pretty much set the way that he liked it, or so it seemed.

'Do you have what you need now?' he asked her, his voice slightly huskier than usual.

She was startled out of her thoughts by his words. She wasn't really sure that all this was happening or he was simply a figment of her imagination. Although God knows, if she was going to imagine herself in passionate embrace with anyone, his name wouldn't top her list. Arrogant, insensitive, alligator-killing son of a...gun, she thought resentfully.

'Y-yes. I have what I need.' She replied and turned abruptly away heading for the stairs to the attic where she kept her herbs, and the cauldron sat waiting in the fireplace. Sensation was still shooting through her body in disconcerting aftershocks, and there was something wet running down her legs that she didn't want to think about too much. She could feel her legs wanting to shake with reaction but she would not let them. At the same time, she had to set her mind to the spell and try to keep it on the business at hand. He was following her up the stairs. Sigh. Why couldn't he just *go!?*

She opened the little attic room and crossed straight to the herb drawer. The only way through this was through it, and she would just have to pull herself together and *function!* She pulled the herbs she needed together and then looked at the fireplace where a fire immediately sprang into being; burning merrily like it had been at it for hours. The water that was in the cauldron began to bubble and she shredded the herbs into it, keeping her mind strictly away from the figure standing silent and still across the room, watching her with eyes

that betrayed nothing of what he was thinking. She would not let him unnerve her.

When the last herbs had been added to the cauldron, the concoction was giving off a pleasant smell that reminded her of grassy meadows on a hot summer day and ice cream sundaes eaten on the porch with Grandpa George before he died. She closed her eyes and let herself relive the moment Leo's lips had touched hers in her bedroom downstairs and said the spell that would transform the concoction before her into the life-giving elixir that Charlotte needed to survive. She wondered if the tumult in her soul would affect the recasting spell but even before she opened her eyes, she knew the spell had worked because the liquid had turned the colour of a glorious sunset and its bright colours were reflected behind her closed eyelids. Leo made a sound, and she opened her eyes and looked at him straight in the eye for the first time since his lips had touched hers. His eyes were wide with shock and awe and she realised that he had probably never seen magic performed in front of him in his life. A part of her felt a little smug and pleased that she'd managed to impress him – but it was a tiny part really, not even worth mentioning. To his credit, he returned her look steadily and for a minute that seemed to last forever, neither spoke.

'Did it work?' he asked at last, his voice still a little huskier than it had been when he'd been busy accusing her of not wanting to completely heal Charlotte of whatever was the matter with her, and letting her know what an ungrateful, incompetent bitch she was as well as being completely useless if the one time that Charlotte needed her, she claimed not to have the skill to help.

'Yes, it worked. She needs to take a spoonful every hour, on the hour, for five days. She must not miss a dose or else she could suffer a relapse from which I cannot save her'. She was decanting the mixture into a flask as she spoke, which she then handed to him, face averted in apparent preoccupation with the residue at the bottom of her cauldron.

'I'll keep some on hand in case you need more but what I've given you should be more than sufficient', she continued briskly as she wiped down the spotless surface where she'd gathered her herbs together, so she had a reason to avoid looking at him. There was silence behind her, she dared not turn to see why, and then he spoke;

'Thank you...Mya.' He said, and she heard his footsteps as he left the room. It was the first time he had *ever* said her name.

Just because Charlotte had chosen to co-opt Mya into her inner circle didn't mean that the inner circle was happy to have her. She was an anomaly they did not understand; her clothes tended toward long dresses that buttoned at the front and had no discernable shape, topped with thick woolen sweaters of uncertain pattern and finish. Her jewelry was outlandish consisting of animal bone and bizarre looking stones; to make matters worse there were birds' feathers poking out of an amulet around her neck and that was topped off with the big hair and feet...she *simply did not fit.* The girls tended to be catty and the guys to ignore her. Before Charlotte's accident today, Leo had acted like she didn't exist, and when he couldn't do that, they traded polite insults or engaged in increasingly nasty sarcastic banter. Charlotte enjoyed their antagonism, certainly, their exchanges never failed to entertain. And if Charlotte was all about anything, it was the entertainment.

Their history made what just happened even more incomprehensible to Mya. She sank into the nearest chair to just breathe and her treacherous mind turned tentatively turned toward the memory that was waiting eagerly in the wings to claim her.

In a heartbeat, she was back in her room, very irritated at Leo's assumptions and preparing to acquaint him with the sharp side of her tongue. She'd just opened her mouth to do so when his invaded hers. *Invasion* was the right word, she'd never had anyone's tongue in her mouth before, it felt extremely strange. Her whole body had frozen with the shock of it and then his hands were touching her in places she'd never been touched by a man before and she was at a loss of what to do. It didn't even occur to her to resist, the whole experience was so alien to her that she did not know how to react. The next thing she knew, he was between her legs – hot and throbbing and urgent and something like fear gripped her. She felt her spirit temporarily leaving her body; she knew she left because she was somewhere up on the ceiling looking down at her naked body and his. Her eyes were scrunched shut, he had spread her legs wide, and he was on top of her; with that throbbing hot rod of pain about to enter her. She hadn't even been entirely sure what was happening and then he thrust into her, and she was back in her body, under him, feeling him stretch her beyond her limits. He grabbed her legs and wrapped them around his waist and pushed further into her. She felt plundered; conquered by the alien thing that was taking over her without so much as a by your leave. Her body was a confusion of sensation.

Pain?

Yes, there was that, but not as much as she thought there'd be, in fact even as she thought it, it was fading away. He was frozen still inside her, and she did not know why but it stopped the pain. Then he moved, and other sensations were added to the pain. Electric shock type sensations, almost pleasurable although she thought she must be mistaken about that. She found her body responding to his rhythm, going with it, and finally glorying in it and in spite of herself she gave in to the sensation. It grew and grew like a helium balloon that is blown and blown and blown into a bigger and bigger bubble until it bursts with sound and fury. Except the bursting of this balloon was not the end but the beginning of new sensation. She felt like she had when her spirit left her body, except that she could still feel her body around her trembling with the force of whatever shook her. He made a sound like his heart was being forced through his chest and she felt something cold and wet flood her insides. The sensation seemed to ignite her again so that her inner muscles spasmed, closing tightly about his shaft like they wanted to milk him dry. She might have made a sound, she didn't know. She did know that she had never felt it's like in her life. Her heart was drumming in her chest like it wanted to run out and escape and there was no strength in her limbs. So much tumult in her head, and in the room…silence.

She came back to herself thinking, *'Is that what love is like? Being ready to violate someone else for her?'* while staring pensively at the scene no one but she could see.

Chapter 3

In Which Much Is Explained

Leo walked to his car with his head spinning. He unlocked and opened the door, placing the flask Mya had given him securely in the cup holder next to the seat. He put his seatbelt on and placed the key in the ignition, all without conscious thought, then sat with his hands on the wheel, staring ahead at nothing.

'What just happened?' he asked himself in confusion. One minute he was at his intimidating best, attempting to force the witch to perform the magic that would heal his ticket out of this life, the next, he was making mad passionate love to the woman!

'No. Not making love. Having sex. It was just sex...mad, passionate sex; but just sex all the same. In fact, it was barely sex- more like an assignment.' He nodded to himself in affirmation. '*Besides, I did it for Charlotte. The witch needed the passion for the spell, and I provided it…someone had to do it, and I was there.'*

With that firmly settled in his mind, he turned on the ignition and headed toward the Le Carre mansion where Charlotte lay hovering between life and death, waiting for her prince to save her. And when he'd done that, then she could save him right back. Just like in Pretty Woman... He smiled grimly as he thought this and dismissed Mya from his mind. His future lay in front of him, not behind.

"Was she alright though?" He couldn't quite stop himself from thinking...she'd looked a little shell-shocked when he left, definitely trying to act calmer than she was. It looked like what she'd said was true*; if she wasn't a virgin, she was definitely virgin-adjacent. Or maybe she was just naturally tight; who knew with witches? They had their spells and things, they could make you believe anything if they wanted...* Why was he still thinking about her?!

Charlotte, Charlotte, Charlotte; his future wife if he had anything to say about it. His ticket out of this one-horse town. Not that he didn't love her, of course, he did. She was hot property, she was rich, she was beautiful, and she was the most popular girl in school. What

was not to love? But if she died today that was it; back to square one. He pressed his foot down on the accelerator and went faster. Ten minutes later, he was at her gates. The guards saw him coming and let the gates up without stopping him. They knew what was at stake, and it wasn't worth their lives to impede him. His best friend Miles was waiting at the Mansion doors; pacing up and down in anxiety. He barely waited for Leo to get out of the car before asking, "Did you get it?"

"Yeah. I got it" Leo replied, streaking past him on his way to the living room, where Charlotte's still body lay on the divan.

"Thank God", he heard Miles murmur behind him. Ahead of him in the room were a number of people, milling about anxiously. There was Teddy the Bear, otherwise known as 'the bodyguard' who towered over everyone around him and who managed to top Leo's own 6'4" by a good four inches. Tina the Barbie doll sat close to the divan, wringing her hands anxiously – she was Charlotte's bestie; in her own words. Next to Tina stood her boyfriend Aaron, staring off into space in indifferent boredom and smoking a joint. At the far corner was David, brother of Aaron and rival in his affections for Tina. He leaned against one of the huge marble pillars that dotted the parlour, shooting envious glances at his brother from time to time. The other girl in the room was Ashley- dark-haired and pale; she was there because Miles was there. Hopefully one day he would notice her...

Leo sank to his knees as he reached the divan in three huge steps. He uncorked the flask and pried Charlotte's mouth open. It was hard to keep her mouth open and manipulate the flask...

"Help me!" he threw over his shoulder at whoever was there, and immediately Miles leaned down and held Charlotte's mouth open for him. He measured a spoonful of the liquid and carefully decanted it into her mouth. With Miles' help, he lifted her head slightly so she wouldn't choke, while massaging her neck muscles so that she could swallow. When they were sure she'd got it all down, they lay her head back down on the pillow and waited...and waited. Nothing seemed to happen for a long time and Leo began to wonder if Mya had given them a dud, then...

Charlotte opened sapphire blue eyes and stared around her at everyone in the room.

"W-what happened?" she whispered painfully before suddenly shooting upright and projectile vomiting all over Leo' black Levis and Tina's Jimmy Choos. The vomit was black

with slime interspersed with unidentified chunks. Leo froze in shock while Tina screamed in revulsion, but then Charlotte heaved again and they both quickly jumped out of the way. Apparently, nothing was left to come up and so she dry heaved herself into exhaustion and then lay back down. Teddy the Bear ran for some water for her to drink and David hurried forward with his hankie proffered so that Tina could wipe her shoes. Since no such solicitude was shown him, Leo took off to the nearest bathroom to affect what repairs he could. Everyone else, meaning Miles, exclaimed in relief that Charlotte was better and the room relaxed.

When Leo returned, slightly damp but feeling a little cleaner, if with a slight whiff of vomitus about him; Charlotte smiled and held out her hand to him. He did his best to smile back, and taking her hand in his, looked her straight in the eye, and said sincerely;

"I'm so glad you're better."

She smiled weakly at him and pulled slightly at his hands so he could come closer. He approached the divan and sat on the edge still holding her hand in his.

"Miles tells me you saved my life," she whispered huskily, eyes shining with adoration at him. He smiled modestly back, shaking his head in dismissal of his heroics and thought wryly to himself that that just might be the first time saving a life could legitimately be used as an excuse for infidelity.

"I know you'd have done the same for me" he replied smiling into her eyes. "Now you need to rest, shall I take you upstairs?"

"*I'll* take her", Teddy the Bear said, just like Leo knew he would. He bent down and picked her up in his arms like she was a doll. Leo let go of her hand, mouthing, "I'll see you later" to her as Teddy bore her off. Returning the little wave she gave him, he turned away from her, his mind immediately moving on to other things. Or rather, continuing the thought that had occurred earlier.

'Speaking of infidelity...' he thought, his mind returning to his last glimpse of Mya, frozen in surprise because he had said her name. What was to be done about that situation? Was she likely to talk? Maybe tell Charlotte what had happened between them?

'Unlikely' he thought derisively. First, she didn't have the guts; and second, Charlotte would

ostracise her if she knew that she'd had sex with her boyfriend. And Charlotte was her only friend, so no. She wouldn't risk it. But should he go over there maybe, make sure of it? Talk to her, so that they both knew what the deal was?

"So what happened over at the witch's?" A voice asked in his ear, startling him out of his reverie, "How did you get her to do the spell?"

He turned around to look at Miles and opened his mouth to lie to him, and then found that he couldn't do it.

"Not here". He murmured, grabbing Miles by the arm and dragging him out to his car, "Let's go". They got in his car and drove, Leo concentrating on the road until they had put several miles between them and the mansion. He drove to their favourite spot, an abandoned cabin in the woods where they came as boys to play cowboys and Indians and dream about pirate ships and fools' gold; a spot where they came now to hang out, drink beer and smoke cigarettes and dream about leaving this town in their rear view.

"Well?!" Miles demanded, "You're making me antsy; what's the big secret? Did she turn into a hag or something? Or did you sell her your soul for the cure?"

Leo could see that he was only half-joking. The anxiety in his eyes was real. He sighed aloud, looking out into the twilight.

"I slept with her." He said resignedly.

"WHAT!!" Miles practically screamed in his ear, "Have you lost. Your. Mind??"

"Don't scream at me", Leo said, wincing at the noise. Miles continued to stare bug-eyed at him, opening and closing his mouth like a landed fish so Leo decided to take pity on him and tell him the whole story.

"...so you see, I had no choice" he concluded at the end of his tale – which did not include the part where he had never wanted a woman more or exactly how fan-fucking-tastic that orgasm had been.

"You had no choice" Miles repeated in a disbelieving whisper, "the spell required that you fuck her?"

“Well, technically no... It just required passion but I didn’t think that that was the time to be taking any chances okay? I wanted to make sure she had enough. I mean, Charlotte was *dying*!”

“Yeah she was”, Miles agreed after a pause, “Are you going to tell her though?”

“Are you out of *your* mind?” Leo asked him in disbelief, “For what, why, why would I do that?” he asked a bit incoherently.

“You’re probably right, but if she finds out...” Leo said.

“She won’t” Leo replied promptly and decided that yes, he would pay Mya a return visit; just to be sure.

Chapter 4

In which there is Much Denial

Mya was out in her garden, pottering about with her plants and letting their energy infuse her with life and joy again. It had been a difficult two days. She'd heard that Charlotte was awake now, and even making short trips out of bed, but she had not *yet* gone to pay her a visit. She knew she must do it soon, or else Charlotte would wonder why she hadn't when practically everyone else in the town had. Mya also supposedly owed her a debt of gratitude for being included in Charlotte's inner circle and from a purely medical point of view, she must want to see how well her elixir worked...

Right?

Wrong.

Charlotte would know by now that passion was needed to make the spell work, and she knew that Mya was a virgin because she'd asked her who she'd been with sexually and Mya had (foolishly in hindsight) told her the truth. So she would probably be curious as to where the passion came from, and knowing her nature, wouldn't rest until she'd pried every last detail out of Mya's reluctant bosom. Considering that she was still in two minds whether 'The Incident' (as she called it in her mind) had actually occurred or whether it was a particularly realistic hallucination, complete with side effects such as aching muscles, unidentified discharges, and a guilty conscience, she was just not ready to discuss it with anyone. Particularly not the culprit's girlfriend.

Speaking of the culprit, he seemed to be walking toward her right this minute. Perhaps the hallucination continued or else she was losing her mind. She hoped that that was it, though she knew that losing your mind is not as easy as people make it out to be.

'Hi.' The hallucination said, 'can we talk?'

She considered just ignoring it and hoping it would go away, but when she looked at what she could see of him, which was simply a black silhouette because he was standing in the sun, he looked pretty solid so she decided to treat him like it...*he* was real. She stood up and wiped her hands on her skirt, then turned and headed for the porch. He followed behind her, close

enough that she could feel the warmth of his body, yet far enough away so he didn't step on her heels.

She sat down on the porch swing and he stopped a few feet away, leaning on the porch frame.

"Is your grandmother here?" he asked.

"No." She said, and then wished she hadn't said anything. Why was he asking her that?

"I need to speak to you in private," he said like he'd read her mind. If he had, that increased the likelihood that he was a hallucination because real-life, Mundane, Egotistical Leo was definitely no mind reader. And what would Real-Life, Mundane, Egotistical Leo have to speak to her about anyway? The chances of this being a hallucination were climbing by the minute! But why was she hallucinating about him of all people?

"So speak," she said boldly, now that she was fairly certain he wasn't real.

Leo sighed deeply. *This is a bit awkward,* he thought.

"Can we maybe go inside?" he asked her, "Have a drink? It's rather hot."

Okay, the hallucination wanted a drink; she could play along. She stood up and led the way into the house, crossed over to the fridge and poured some cabbage juice into two glasses. She'd just juiced it this morning so it was fresh. She handed him his glass, which he took with no problems, considering he wasn't real and sat down on the sofa. It was an old sofa with mismatched pillows, but extremely comfortable for all that. He sat down next to her and took a sip of juice...then promptly spat it out.

"What the hell is this?" he asked with a frown.

"Cabbage juice", she replied coldly, "you did say you wanted a drink?"

He opened his mouth to retort then remembered that he was supposed to be softening her up so she would do what he wanted. So he forced himself to smile painfully and take a sip. *Urgh! It tasted like snail slime or something equally revolting.*

Mya watched him forced down the juice while trying to look like he didn't want to spit it out all over her threadbare Aubusson rug, and came to the conclusion that it really was a

hallucination. The real Leo would never bother to pretend politeness with her unless there was something in it for him.

That thought stopped her in her tracks. *What did he want*? She put down her glass of cabbage juice and waited.

"Do you plan on telling Charlotte what happened here the other day?" he asked abruptly.

'*Aha',* she thought, *'here we go'.*

"Well, she's likely to ask me, and keep asking me, until I tell her." She replied.

There was a silence that she hesitated to call loaded. He stared into his cabbage juice like it contained the answers to all of life's questions. She wished he would say something. This situation was getting way beyond uncomfortable.

"So What you're saying is you're planning on telling Charlotte that you fucked her boyfriend?" he demanded in a voice that wanted to be threatening but was struggling not to be. Why did she get the feeling she was being set up for something here?

"No, I'm not planning on telling her that we may have...engaged in some sexual activity," she said quickly and a tad breathlessly "but you know as well as I do, how persistent she can be when she wants something."

"I do know." He replied, "What I don't know is what your intentions are right now. You know that however you choose to play this, *you* come out covered in shit right?"

She folded her arms, eyeballed him and then demanded, "Leo. What. The hell. Do You. Want?!"

"Now that," he replied, "is the right question."

ξ

Leo walked quickly to his car and got in driving off like he was pursued by demons. He did not look back.

"Shit" he whispered to himself, "Shitshitshit. WhathaveIdonenow?? Shit!"

'Okay', he thought, 'Plan. I need a plan'. Breathe. Breathe. Calm down, all is not lost.

The little lecture made him feel a little better, as well as the deep breaths and he thought back to the scene he'd left.

"You will say nothing about what happened between us, okay?" he had told her with the approximation of a smile, "We'll just forget it ever happened".

"Right" she'd replied with an ironic smile that was more in her eyes than her mouth, "Nothing happened. Are you leaving now?" she asked, standing up.

He stared at her, not sure whether she was serious or not. She stared right back at him, her eyes, and demeanour betraying nothing. Her hands hung loosely at her side, and she stood up straight just staring at him with that irony in the back of her eyes like he was nothing but an amusing bit of entertainment that had run its course. Kind of like the way *he* looked at girls when he was through with them.

'Can't have that' he remembered himself thinking, though why he should care, he couldn't quite say. The next thing he knew, he had covered the two steps of distance that separated them, and his lips were on hers. She froze with surprise and he took advantage of it to insert his tongue in her mouth. He was kissing her in earnest and it was a while before he realised she was struggling in his arms.

'Trying to get away!' he thought in surprise, and held her tighter; kissed her harder. She was trying to free her lips, say something to him, but he was done talking. For some reason, he was most mightily aroused! He picked her up and carried her to her shabby sofa, laying her down on it all the while kissing her. He lay down over her and increased the pressure on her mouth. He could feel her weakening, opening her mouth wider; in spite of herself. His hand brushed her breast and felt her nipple harden. He wanted; needed, to see her naked. Now! He tore at the buttons on her faded print dress and her body was exposed to the waist. Only then did he lift his mouth from hers, to fasten it on her left breast. His hand worked one breast while his mouth worked the other, and she was making noises that sounded like mewling and he could feel her breathing hard. He didn't know what emotion she was feeling, and couldn't spare the brain cells to wonder. All the blood had left his head anyway; oxygen to his brain was in short supply. Apart from a buzzing that was making him dizzy, not much in the way of thinking was going on up there; let alone conjecture as to what Mya might be feeling. She

was merely the Object of his Desire; a desire he needed to satisfy forthwith or die in the attempt. He tore desperately at his flies freeing his massively engorged penis and in one motion; he had pushed her skirts out of the way, spread her legs, and inserted himself in her without the bother of removing her underwear. She made a noise halfway between a scream and a moan and he wanted to follow her example but he was too busy pounding her into the sofa. His breath came like the bellows and sweat was pouring down his face. The room was silent except for the wetly slapping sound of flesh on flesh. In addition to Leo's harsh breathing and Mya's occasional moaning. As he felt his climax approaching like a murderous beast bearing down on him with intent, he came to a slight awareness that he wasn't alone in this and whispered, "Oh God, I'm coming" in her ear, moments before his seed shot out of him like a bullet from a gun and he felt something like an explosion in his mind – a nuclear bomb had gone off and destroyed every nerve and synapse in its path; leaving him nerveless and weak.

He collapsed on the sofa then fell to the floor, breathing hard and trying to pull the scattered bits of himself together. After a moment, she sat up on the sofa, looking down at him as she pulled her clothes together. Then standing up, she stepped over him and headed for the hallway and possibly the bath. She did not say a word to him or acknowledge his presence in any way. He heard her feet climb the stairs, and a door close.

He zipped his flies and straightened his clothes. Then he stood up and lit out of there like a bat out of hell.

Chapter 5

In Which Denial cannot be Sustaind

It had been two weeks since he'd seen her last. He had barely been able to draw breath in that time, waiting for the axe to fall. Waiting for her to do something about what had happened in her living room maybe by telling Charlotte about it, or, or... *something.* But he hadn't seen or heard a word from her. He wanted to go and see her; first to make sure she was okay, then to find out what was going on in her head but was terrified of going near her. Clearly, he couldn't trust himself and he couldn't understand it. She was hardly his type; she wore grandma outfits, barely groomed herself, and was apparently a witch. Seriously, she could not be less like his type. His type was blonde, had blue eyes, and belonged to a family that was rich as Croesus. *That* was his type. So the huge afro, the chocolate skin, mango breasts, long, long...long elegant legs...He lost his train of thought. This had been happening to him a lot lately and he was at a loss to explain why.

He stood up abruptly, picking up the house phone to call Miles. Operation Distract needed to be put into effect. He'd see what Miles was up to; maybe they could go shoot some hoops at the school gym or get a beer if Jon would agree to sell them some. Being underage blew, but Jon was cool people – as long as no overzealous law-abiding citizens were around. Before he could hit the speed dial though, it rang. Charlotte.

He stared at her name for a while, wondering whether to answer or not. It had been like this for the past fortnight. Dread filled his insides like molten lead every time he saw her name. He hadn't had the courage to pick up yet, but this time, he took in a deep breath and answered.

"Hi." He said, feeling that his voice was a little too high.

"Hey Stranger" her sultry tones purred down the line," Where you been?"

Was this some sort of play? He wondered. If she hadn't heard from Mya, still she should be mad at him for being AWOL for two weeks...*Just go with it? Or fess up?*

"I've missed you, babe," he said, in a better approximation of his usual gravelly tones, "it's

been a while".

"I noticed," she said, in a slightly sharper tone "Where have you been?"

He took a deep breath, all the time wondering what to say.

"This isn't a conversation that should be had on the phone, where are you now?" He asked on the exhale, stalling for time.

"I'm at Freddie's, you coming?"

"Give me five minutes," he said, instantly hanging up. *'Shit.'* He thought, '*now what?'*

'Now you go to her, and you do what you do best... spin'. A voice that he wasn't sure was his, answered him.

'Right. So, step one,' he thought, *'how do I look?'*

He went to his room and examined himself in the mirror. Navy blue shirt that brought out the grey in his eyes, his trademark black levis that showed the length of his legs to perfection, ending in 'bad boy' alligator skin boots that just added a few more inches to the length of his legs. Jet-black hair artfully mussed, falling in an elegant sweep over his eye.

'Perfect'. He thought with a self-satisfied side smile.

"Okay," he said to himself, "let's do this".

ξ

Freddie's was packed with young people, enjoying the last days of summer break before the new school year began. The whole gang was present; Aaron and David sitting on either side of Tina the Barbie who was opposite Ashley; which meant that Miles was near, though Leo couldn't see him. Teddy Bear leaning anxiously to the side, his large head bent to listen to whatever she was saying – Charlotte. A vision in brown and gold. He smiled as she turned and saw him. Teddy turned too, but he didn't smile.

"Leo," she said in that sultry voice, pronouncing his name in the Italian way that made it something exotic and foreign.

“Hi.” He replied not looking at anyone else, “Can we talk?”

“Of course”, she said standing up. Her dark brown denim skirt stopped just short of being patently indecent, hugging her hourglass figure like an ardent lover. Her golden top didn’t leave much more to the imagination. It was cut low over her luscious breasts and the gold of her top blended well with her light tan, making her look naked at first glance. She accentuated the look with gold sandals that emphasised the delicate turn of her ankle and gold jewelry graced her wrists, ears, and neck. All this topped by long blonde wavy hair left loose to cascade down her back. She looked...*expensive*.

He was treated to the full frontal view as she sashayed toward him, her hips gently swaying from side to side. He was quite sure the walk was in slow motion in her mind. They had so much in common -Leo and Charlotte- almost like they were made for each other. In the dictionary, under narcissism, was a photo of the pair of them, perfect smiles in place.

“Shall we go?” she asked as she drew level with him.

“Yes. Let’s.” He replied looking into those blue eyes that reflected his face so perfectly, “Your place?”

She made no reply but moved forward toward the parking. Teddy Bear looked like he wanted to protest but what could he say? Leo gave Ashley a look, asking with his eyes for her to pass his regards to Miles and let him know where they’d gone. Miles would know to call him up in an hour or two with ‘an emergency’. She inclined her head slightly to let him know she understood. Ashley was good people; it was a real pity Miles had no real interest...But he couldn’t think about that right now, he was on the clock.

Charlotte was standing by the passenger door of his black jeep. He had acquired it at a bargain because it had been ‘beyond salvage’ in an accident. His uncle Jamie- who was actually his mother’s on again, off again boyfriend -and he had worked evenings and weekends fixing it up in Jamie’s auto garage. Now it was the most beautiful car in town. He went over and opened the passenger door for her then got in and drove off. There wasn’t much conversation between them as they drove and he used the time to think up a strategy.

The guards let them in without hindrance and they drove straight to the side door that led off the patio. He helped her out and led her inside. The room was empty apart from a solitary

maid laying hors de oeuvres on the table. Service was efficient at the Le Carré manor; the staff was well trained. The maid finished laying out the dishes and left the room. As soon as she did, Leo turned Charlotte toward him and kissed her.

'The best defence is a good offence' was his decided strategy.

He deepened the kiss, running his hands down her body with amorous intent. He waited for the madness that had overcome him with Mya to take over him now, but although he was aroused, he was also very much in control.

He mentally frowned at this puzzle and stowed it away for future examination.

"Babe? Its been too long - I have missed you" he whispered as he kissed her face all over. She let him kiss her, and touch her but did not reciprocate. After a minute, she pushed away from him.

"Leo," she asked, unaccustomed steel in those blue eyes", what are you doing?"

"What am I doing?" he asked in surprise, "Clearly I'm doing something wrong if you don't recognise kissing," he said, leaning toward her again. But she pushed him away, giving him a look that he could not mistake. He sighed deeply and walked away from her to sit on the sofa.

"Okay babe, let's talk," he said; resignation in his voice and stance, "You wanted to know where I've been for the past two weeks right?"

She moved toward him and sat on the love seat next to him, "Yes" she replied, looking him in the eye.

"Well, just remember you asked for it, okay?" he told her with a warning look in his eye.

"Leo, you're scaring me. Just tell me already!" she snapped.

"Okay! It's like this. You were lying on your deathbed, and the only thing that could revive you was a spell –"

"I know all that" she interrupted", what's that got to do with anything?"

"If you let me finish, "he said impatiently, "I will tell you."

“Okay, sorry. Continue.” She said contritely.

“So you were lying over there, “he pointed at the divan, “at death’s door, and this spell needed to be done. But your girlfriend Mya said she couldn’t do it because of some proviso which said she needed passion from a lover to perform it. And we all know no one's ever looked twice at that girl and here was this vital ingredient missing...something had to be done – or you would die”, he trailed off, staring into the distance. She gave him thirty seconds to contemplate her premature death before saying;

“Go on.”

“Well... I was at a loss for what to do you know?” he said catching her eye for a second before looking back into the middle distance.

“If there was someone at least who was interested in her, I might have...persuaded them to kiss her, but there was no-one. So I had to resort to some drastic measures. “He broke off, looking at her as if assessing her ability to hear what these measures were.

“Tell me!” she demanded breathlessly, torn between fascination and fear.

“Okay! So there was no way that she could do the spell without the passion, and she had kind of gave up. So I grabbed her grandmother who was asleep in the other room, put a knife to her throat, and told her to hypnotise that retarded dude from the graveyard to make love to her...or I would slit her grandmother’s throat.” He said in one go, barely stopping to draw a breath; like saying it fast would lessen the horror of what he was saying. Charlotte was certainly looking horrified...horrified, fascinated, and impressed. She always was one for drama.

“You did, WHAT?!” She asked her eyes wide as saucers.

“I’m not proud of what I did,” he said, his eyes on the carpet”, but I had to do something fast and it was the only thing that came to mind.”

“So you threatened an old woman...to save my life?” she whispered.

“Like I said, I’m not proud of it.” He replied, eyes still on the carpet.

“But...what does that have to do with where you were these last two weeks?”

‘God, she was a persistent little bitch’

“I was scared. I thought she would come and tell you what happened and you would hate me. I haven’t wanted to face you, see the horror in your eyes...I’ve been a coward I know. A coward and a bastard and I don’t deserve you.” He said with a shaking and broken voice.

There was silence in the room. He wanted to look up and see what she was doing but that would ruin the effect so he kept his eyes on the carpet and waited, rubbing his eyes a bit; just for added drama. She stood up and moved from the loveseat to the sofa and her slender fingers came into view as they touched his arm. He took a deep breath of relief, which he quickly turned into a sob. Her other hand went around his shoulder as she laid her head on it. His hand crept out and touched her fingers gently and she immediately encircled his hand with hers.

‘Checkmate’ he thought.

“That would explain why she hasn’t been to see me,” Charlotte said suddenly, “I wondered”.

“Well, I imagine she would rather not run into me. And to be honest, I’d rather not run into her either...” he replied quickly.

“Well, you’ll have to you know? School starts in two weeks.”

“Yeah,” he said.

‘*Shit, that’s right’* he thought. *‘School does start in two weeks. I gotta see her before then...the sooner the better.’*

The thought of seeing her again made the blood run faster in his veins and he decided to bite the bullet that very day. Now if Miles would just call so he could get out of here...

But she was caressing his hand in a way that he knew only too well. Her hand moved slowly caressing his back until it reached the waistband of his jeans, and she pulled up his shirt so she could touch his bare back. Her breathing was deep and slow as she pressed her breasts against his arm. She began to unbutton his shirt and when she’d loosened it sufficiently, she pulled it over him and threw it on the carpet. He turned to her, cradling her butt cheeks in his

hands, and kissed her lips. She moaned softly pressing her luscious breasts closer and then moved away so she could take her top off. She was back again, her breath panting in his ear. He moved his hands up her tanned legs as he placed butterfly kisses on her neck. She was beautiful and aroused and he should have been raring to go, but nothing was happening for him. Heart rate; slow. Blood pressure: normal. Penis: flaccid...

'*God,* what was happening *to him?!'* When it was Mya, he barely had to touch her to be ravening with lust. At the thought of her, his penis gave a twitch. His mind went back to that day on her sofa, the orgasm he had had. Suddenly he was hot and ready; he picked Charlotte up and turned her over so her ass was in the air. Pausing to slip on a condom he proceeded to ram himself inside her -eyes closed - pounding into her as tan legs were replaced by chocolate in his mind and long blond hair became short, curly, and black...

'I have to see her' He thought as they lay on the carpet afterward.

" Mmm... That was incredible", she whispered into his chest, sounding satisfied and replete, "Looks like absence definitely made the heart grow fonder", he heard the smile in her voice.

"Mmmm..." he replied absentmindedly. How fast could he get out of here? Charlotte lay against his chest, body heavy with sleep after that intensely passionate session he'd just put her through. Yet although they lay so closely intertwined, their minds were distant as the stars. Charlotte was falling asleep; she couldn't believe how passionate Leo had been. The sex had been beyond amazing. Obviously almost losing her had stirred him to greater passion than ever...

Leo meanwhile was feeling...deflated. He had just had the most incredible sex with his girlfriend. The only problem was that he hadn't been fucking *her*. He'd been fucking a tall, slender, crazy- looking black witch with the strangest habits this town had ever seen. *Bad enough that she was a witch*; that wasn't the worst. The worst was that she was poorer than a church mouse and wore faded floral print grandma dresses circa 1969! How could he want her? Correction, how could he want her over this glorious golden vision lying at his side, who was his for the taking? His mind must be magnifying the chemistry that had occurred between them because she was definitely forbidden fruit – forbidden in every way; socially, financially... did he mention financially? Still, he had to see her again, just to prove to himself that it wasn't as bad as he thought it was.

Leo Devereux was the only child of Jade Evans. His father had run off when he was eight years old, leaving his wife and child at the mercy of Jade's brother, Gregory. As uncles went, he wasn't bad people, but he definitely made you work for your dinner. Leo was put to work on his alligator farm right away and Uncle Greg paid him by allowing them to live rent-free in the tiny apartment above the shop in town, where he sold his alligator derivatives. He had no sons of his own, and his daughter Sheila was grown up and married to an out-of-towner. So Leo was being groomed to take over the family business. But he had far loftier ambitions than wrestling with alligators for the rest of his life. Seeing as he had no independent income, his best bet, the way that he saw it; was to marry it. Enter Charlotte and her crush on Francis Bacon High School's basketball sensation. Certainly, Leo could have any girl he wanted, and did – but the one he *needed* was Charlotte. He'd been cultivating her for two and a half years now, and he had her just where he wanted her. He wasn't letting some random feelings get in the way of that.

But he still had to see *her*; and soon.

Chapter 6

In Which a Confession is made

He stood outside her gate, staring at the dilapidated house. There were shingles missing from the roof, and a window on the east side had been broken and covered over with cardboard. The garden though was well tended and was still a riot of colour this late in summer.

'*So are you just going to stand there admiring the scenery or are you going in?'* he asked himself grimly.

'*Stand here?'* he answered himself snarkily. He sighed in resignation. You knew things were really bad when you stood about in witches' gateways having sarcastic conversations with yourself...

Seeing as there was no further excuse for delay, Leo swung the tiny gate open and stepped into the path that led to her patio. His foot had no sooner touched the ground than a pain exploded in his head. It felt like someone had hit him really hard on the back of the head with a baseball bat. He sank silently to the ground, in too much agony even to cry out.

He wondered if he was having a stroke, but figured he should be unconscious by now if he was. His vision was blurry but he rolled over on the ground to try to see if anyone was around so he could ask for help. There was a figure on the porch, standing and seemingly staring at him. The figure was holding something that looked like a shotgun! He blinked a few times to clear his vision, but the pain was still blinding.

"What the hell do you want?" Mya asked. He recognised her voice and knew that it was her on the porch.

"Help...me" he tried to say, but he could hardly form the words.

She was coming toward him, still pointing the shotgun-looking thing at him. Here he was, dying on her footpath and she was threatening him with a firearm? As she came nearer, the pain in his head intensified and, thankfully, he blacked out.

He came to lying on the grass on the other side of the road from her gate. She was leaning on her gatepost, gun still in hand, and still pointed at him. He sat up cautiously, trying not to make any sudden moves. The look on her face told him that if he so much as twitched...he was dead meat.

“W-What happened?” he asked her for lack of anyone else who seemed to know.

“I spelled my gate,” she calmly said, “To hit you with a concussion spell if ever you came back”.

“So....that stroke thing I just went through, you did that?” he said getting up.

“Yes,” she replied, raising the shotgun to stay level with his face.

“That is some serious magic” he cautiously took a step toward her to see if he could walk, “How did I get to this side of the road?”

She quickly took a step back, moving behind her gate, “I dragged you there. If you try to step across the gateway it will hit you again” she said quickly.

He put up both hands and smiled, “I come in peace”.

“Well go come somewhere else, no-one is interested here”, she replied.

“Witty” his smile widened as he took another step closer, “but I’m serious. I just came to talk. What happened the other day was totally out of line”

“Out of line?” she whispered, disbelief written all over her face. Her mouth was hanging open and she stared at him like she couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

“It was wrong, totally wrong. What do you want me to say?” he asked in tones of injured resignation, “I got a little carried away, and things got out of hand. But I’m here to make amends so tell me; what can I do?”

She continued to stare at him like he was a particular unlikely extraterrestrial that had wandered across her path. He wondered if he dared take a step closer or if he was risking having his ear blown off. He took another cautious step forward with no ominous movement on the trigger finger, though the shotgun stayed level with his face and so did her light brown

eyes.

“I’m sorry Mya,” he said in his most contrite voice, “look, how about I repair that window for you? The one covered in cardboard?”

“Oh,” she said in that dangerous sounding whisper “, take virginity, repair window. Sounds fair”.

“Look-“ he began before being interrupted.

“In fact, no. Take virginity, come back, force self on girl, *then* repair her window. Sounds very fair” she said, her voice getting louder with each word, “ Very, very, very fair!” she shouted, “ Isn’t it?” the voice went back to that whisper.

“Do you know how to use that thing?” he pointed with his chin at the shotgun

She looked momentarily confused like she didn’t know what he was on about.

“Because I think you should put it down. That might be best” he said in the most placating tone he could find.

“And why should I care what you think?” she asked, voice abruptly calm and cold and eyes suddenly almost as grey-looking as his own in their fury. Her fingers tightened on the weapon. He was afraid if he didn’t find a way to defuse the situation, someone was going to get hurt. And he was not about that life. She had said that if he stepped over the gateway, his head would explode again. But the barrel of the shotgun was long and he did not need to step over the gate to reach it...there was a reason his nickname was ‘Bolt’; he had the fastest reflexes of anyone he had ever seen, met or heard of. Before she knew what had happened, he stepped forward, grabbed the gun barrel, pulled the gun out of her hand, and threw it behind him. It happened so fast she was still standing there, hands frozen in position, holding thin air when he turned back around to her. Her expression was priceless; he almost wished he had a camera.

“Now,” he said in tones of satisfaction, “Let’s start this again shall we?”

Chapter 7

In Which the Craziness Begins

There was a buzzing going on in Mya's head. She couldn't believe that Leo had the nerve to show up on her door *again!* Seriously, if he wasn't careful she would *strangle him with her bare hands.* He'd gotten rid of her grandfather's shotgun (She'd forgotten about those lightning fast reflexes...*her grandmother would kill her if the gun was lost*!) but she could totally hit him with another concussion spell and then strangle him when he was down. No, she didn't want to kill him while he was unconscious; maybe she would use a paralysis spell instead. That way, he could watch while she murdered him.

While these crazy thoughts were going through her head, she watched him walk toward her until he reached just outside her gate. The buzzing in her ears hadn't stopped, but she could see that he was talking. He seemed to be doing some more fake apologising by the way his face was arranged to look contrite.

Now? Should she do it now? She was still pondering on when exactly she should strangle him to death when she realised he was calling her name...repeatedly.

"MYA!" He practically shouted in her ear.

She started back frowning and rubbing her ear, "Why are you shouting?" she asked with a frown.

"You had the thousand yard stare", he said, waving his hands placatingly, "you looked like you were planning something that was going to be painful for me".

"You're not wrong there..." she mumbled, not expecting him to hear.

He laughed softly which maddened her and she surprised herself by shouting, "Don't you laugh!"

He promptly wiped the lingering smile from his face, which for some reason annoyed her

even more.

“Mya”, he said softly”, there is nothing I can say to make up for what I did to you. All I can say is I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Please let me do what I can to make it up to you. Let me be your slave for two weeks. Please?”

“I don’t...” she started to say then it hit her what he was saying...*slave*? *Hmmm, this might have possibilities*. “What I meant to say is, when you say, ‘slave’, what *exactly* do you mean?”

He smiled again, but she ignored it and waited to hear what he would say.

“Mya, ‘slave’ could mean just about anything you want it to”

She didn’t really care for his tone or the look in his eye, but she ignored it in favour of asking, “ So, if I tell you to run after me for the next two weeks, scattering petals in my path, you would do that?”

“Yes.” He said, but in a tone which suggested he wasn’t expecting to be asked to do any such thing. The way his eyes held hers, with the memory of the last time they were alone together shining out of them...

She turned away and asked, “Well, I can think about it right? Get back to you?”

“Of course Mya, anything you want,” he said and turned away to leave.

Almost nine months they’d hung out together and he’d said her name more times in the last half hour than he ever had in all the time they’d known each other. She snorted as she turned back to the house. Well, if he thought he could charm her into forgetting what he did...he was in for the shock of his life! She went up the porch, but turned to reactivate the concussion spell just in case he came back. She’d used his sperm to personalise it – she hadn’t been sure it would work as well as blood but it was all she had and she wasn’t leaving herself unprotected in case he came back for another round. If the concussion spell hadn’t stopped him, she had put a trip jinx on the top stair so he would trip, fall, and bang his head hopefully on all five steps going down the stoop. If that hadn’t worked, the door was spelled so that only she and her grandmother could open it. She wasn’t taking any chances. She wasn’t ready to become Leo’s...*sex thing mistress* or whatever. She knew that people thought she was

some kind of deranged, half-wit type person, just because she lived with her grandmother, practised magic and didn't keep up with the latest trends in Teen Vogue. That didn't mean that she was willing to let anyone take advantage of her, especially not Mr. Fancy Pants Bolt. He was about to find out just who he was messing with.

'The shotgun! ', She turned around and shot down the steps and across to the tall grass that grew on the other side of the road to search for it. Luckily it was lying in plain sight and didn't look damaged at all. Not that it was functional – it was about as old as her grandmother and had belonged to Grandpa George who fought in the Second World War. She picked it up and ran back into the house. Being outside the protective barrier she'd put up for herself scared her a little – '*what if he is lurking nearby?'* and she realised that she was just a little bit traumatised by the events that had happened in the last three weeks or so. Leo, specifically, was freaking her out more than she cared to admit.

She'd been trying like hell not to think about what had gone down in her living room a fortnight ago. She didn't understand *why* it had happened, whether it was something she'd said or done that had made him jump on her like that. She'd tried to resist, she thought, but he was strong, and maybe she hadn't fought hard enough. Maybe he thought she wanted him to jump on her? – The way he'd looked at her today when she'd asked him about the petal thing – clearly he assumed she had feelings for him. But did she? Was he seeing something that was there and she was just in too much denial to see? As far as she knew, the answer to that question was a huge No. But still, the questions went round and round in her head. But even though he thought she had feelings, did that give him the right to make use of her body like it was an appliance? And what was she to do about it anyway?

Mya cut off this line of inquiry as futile and she thought about a programme she had once seen where people overcome their fears by confronting them. So that one girl who was terrified of chameleons was put in a tank filled with them. It was supposed to cure her of her phobia. So maybe that is what she should do – saturate herself with the presence of Mr. Fancy Pants Bolt until he didn't unnerve her anymore. And while she was at it, maybe she could get some payback...

Chapter 8

In Which Payback Is a Witch

“Hello”

“Hi. Can I help you?”

“I’m calling for Leo Devereux. May I speak to him?”

“Speaking, who is this?”

“M-Mya.”

There was silence on the line, and Mya wondered if he’d hung up or something.

“Hello?”

“I’m listening,” he said, his voice cautious.

“I want to take you up on your offer...i-if it still stands that is”.

He didn’t say anything, and she wondered what the dickens was going on in his head right now. She hesitated to say, ‘hello?’ again, but was too shy to continue without some sort of encouragement. The silence stretched uncomfortably.

“Leo?” she said tentatively.

“Yes?” his gravelly voice replied intimately in her ear.

She sighed and bit the bullet, “Soo, when can you start?”

“That’s up to you Mya, just say when.”

“Now?”

“Okay. I’m on my way” and he hung up.

She stood staring at the telephone. She didn’t know why but she had walked down to the phone box at the corner to call. It was like she was even afraid to let his voice in her house…she hung up slowly and stepped out of the box. Her heart was going at a rate that she was sure was not healthy for the long-term well-being of her body – but she didn’t know how to slow it down. She walked slowly down the road to her house, wondering how she had got to this place. She’d been going along, minding her own business; weeding her garden, doing her schoolwork, keeping under the radar, when all of a sudden she’d walked past the ‘popular’ table at school and Charlotte had called out to her, complimenting her dress and wanting to know if it was vintage designer...first of all, she’d been very surprised that Charlotte even knew what her name was and secondly, she’d been sure she was being made fun of.

Then Charlotte had invited her to sit next to her at the table and had made a point of talking to her throughout the meal. Leo had been there, and his friend Miles. There was the blonde girl, Tina who was always flanked by ‘the brothers Grey’ as she thought of them- Aaron and David. She wasn’t sure what the deal was with them...ménage a trois? Ashley - the dark girl- was quite friendly when she bothered to tear her attention away from Miles for a minute, though he hardly seemed to know she was alive. Teddy the bear was the sweetest of them all, always nice to Mya, even before Charlotte had condescended to notice her.

Leo had ignored her the whole time, keeping his eyes on his plate. He’d started as he meant to go on until recently that is, blind to her except when he was making snide remarks about her intentions, her looks, or her clothes. She had, for the most part, tried to ignore him, not only because he clearly didn’t like her, but because he might as well have been wearing a sign that glowed ‘OFF LIMITS’ the way Charlotte behaved around him. She tended to make her displeasure clear when anyone of the female persuasion spoke to him about anything Charlotte did not find strictly necessary. And that seemed to cover just about anything from ‘pass the salt’ to ‘you look good’. If Tina wasn’t constantly surrounded by Grey, she would definitely have been expelled from the group for being overfriendly with Leo. The fact that Leo clearly couldn’t stand Mya was one reason she probably lasted so long.

Still, it was a strain for her to keep up with Charlotte. The constant preoccupation with clothes, looks, and men was wearing for Mya. She had absolutely no interest in all three, and

would really rather have been pottering quietly in her garden. She couldn't find the words to say so politely though, so she found herself ensconced in Charlotte's room of an evening trying to look interested in the earnest discussion going on between Charlotte and Tina about whether the pink shirt or green would go better with her new black jeans that she'd bought to match Leo's.

Then the pool had appeared, from where and why Mya didn't know...but now she stopped to think of it, it was a bit strange for a magic pool to just materialise like that. It had disappeared as soon as Charlotte was recovered from it too – almost like it had simply appeared so that Charlotte could fall into it, and be rescued...by Mya? Well, that seemed like an awful lot of trouble for a magic pool to go to. And why would it anyway? Perhaps she should ask her grandmother if she knew anything about the appearance of magic pools...Although she tended to be out of it most of the time these days. She was getting on for eighty...

She turned away from these depressing thoughts to find that she'd reached her door without noticing, so lost in her musings was she. She took a deep breath and turned her thoughts to what lay ahead. She didn't know what Leo was expecting when he came, but she was pretty sure he was in for a surprise...

ξ

Leo drove up to her house, coming to an abrupt halt at her gate. Was that spell still active? He wasn't about to risk having his head split open again so he hooted and waited for her to come out. Before she'd attacked him with her magic, he would have thought she'd summoned him here for another taste of Leo – '*girls* did *seem to be entirely forgiving of anything he did to them after all, no matter how callous he was'*- but now, he wasn't so sure...unless she was into some sort of dominatrix shit. Hmmm... He wasn't exactly averse. In fact, the evidence that she had a spine kind of piqued his interest. He'd gotten used to thinking of her as Charlotte's doormat- but apparently, there was some spunk to her. No pun intended…

She came down the stairs in a woolly sweater *(in this heat?)* that was kind of ragged around the edges. Her leopard print *(really? so five years ago)* dress was faded in places and reached like, her ankles. It did, however; hug her figure in all the right places so he wasn't complaining too much. Maybe it was the best she had – but the sweater would have to *go*.

She came up to the gate and unlatched it. He leaned out of the window of the jeep to speak to

her.

“Hi” he smiled in greeting

“Hi.” She replied expression quite blank, and definitely no answering smile.

“Err, so is it safe?” he asked, smile flickering a bit.

“Safe?” she asked brow furrowing in puzzlement.

“For me to come in... you know, the spell?” he reminded her.

“Oh!” she said, furrow clearing, “Right” she raised her right hand, forefinger pointed upwards like she was about to flag off a race, she flicked it downwards and whispered something that sounded like, ‘*Finit’.*

He raised his brow in inquiry as to whether he was cleared to come in, and she gestured a welcome with her hand. He parked the car and alighted, wondering how Emily Post would recommend they conduct themselves in this situation. He stood still and waited to take his cue from her. She walked past him and into the house, and after a moment’s hesitation, he followed.

There was a small foyer that led off to one side into the living room and the other, to a closed door. He avoided looking at the shaggy sofa where he had...lost control, last time. She was standing in the middle of the room, surrounded by many pillows that were strewn hither and thither on the threadbare carpet. Her arms were folded and her expression was businesslike. It was a little confusing because the surroundings could be construed as quite romantic with the pillows on the carpet, but her expression said this was a transaction. “I need you to remove a stain for me.” Her voice spoke so softly he didn’t know if he’d heard right. *‘A stain?!’*

“Excuse me?” he said, thoroughly perplexed.

“I. Need. You. To. Remove. A. Stain.” She repeated, “Did I stutter?”

“I don’t understand you” he replied, completely flummoxed.

“That you do not”, she replied, voice heavy with irony, “You left a stain the last time you were here, on my sofa. I need you to remove it.”

The blood suffused his face and he felt hotter than he had ever felt in his life. He followed the direction her finger was pointing with his eyes and saw the slight discolouration on the sofa that she was talking about.

“I have soap and water, there is the kitchen; you will find a bucket there and a brush. I’ll be in the garden if you need anything” she said before turning and walking out the door. He watched her walk away in bemusement then turned and stared at the sofa. He came closer to examine the stain – it could be...but then again, it could be anything. The sofa was clearly very old. Her meaning had not escaped him though. Wipe the stain from the sofa; wipe away the memory that it ever happened. Clearly, she was mad at him.

ξ

She wanted to peep back into the living room to see what he was doing, but she couldn’t think how to do it without him seeing her. She went out and tried to weed the Kale garden which was the nearest to the house, but she was too distracted. She felt dizzy like she was anaemic and there was a buzzing in her ears. Her stomach had cramped and her knees were just the slightest bit shaky. There was an air of unreality that suffused this whole situation, and she had trouble believing that she’d really left him in her living room, cleaning up after himself – albeit two weeks later...what was he thinking? Did he get the message or not?

She flung down her awl and crept back up the stairs. She opened the back door cautiously, trying not to make a sound. She listened, trying to gauge what was happening in the living room, but sofa cleaning wasn’t exactly a loud job. She dropped onto her hands and knees and crawled cautiously across the foyer until she was just next to the door to the living room. Should she peep? But what if he saw her? It would completely undermine the majesty of her walkout earlier. But she really wanted to know what was going on in that room! She was busily pondering what to do, as she crouched down near the door when she noticed a pair of black alligator skin boots right under her nose...

“Boo,” someone said from above her.

She screamed and reared backward, landing hard on her behind. Leo was staring down at her, biting his lip really hard she could see; probably to stop himself laughing.

“Are you alright?” he asked, voice shaking in what she was definitely sure was suppressed

laughter. She frowned up at him then bent her knees in order to get up. His hand appeared in her field of vision, clearly offering to help her up. She ignored it and attempted to stand up with as much dignity as she could muster under the circumstances. She thanked God for her chocolate complexion which did not show her blushes but her face felt so hot she was sure she could cook her lunch on it, no problem.

“What were you doing down there? Have you lost something? “He asked, affecting to look around on the floor for something. Her face got even hotter, and she decided the best defence was a good offence.

“What were you doing lurking about the foyer?” she demanded in a belligerent tone, “you’re supposed to be cleaning!”

“I was”, he replied quite calmly, “but I heard sounds like shuffling and I thought some animal might have got in, so I thought I’d check”

This did not help her state of embarrassment one bit and she wanted to run out of the room screaming; maybe lock herself in her room for the rest of her life and become a hysteric. She considered for a second carrying out the first part of this seemingly brilliant plan, but rallied and took a deep breath instead. She didn’t know how to get out of this but she hoped something would occur to her before too long. To her surprise, he saved her the trouble.

“Would you do me a favour and come watch while I clean? I’m not sure I’m doing it right – this really isn’t my area of expertise...” his voice trailed away as he turned away from her and back into the living room, giving her a chance to compose herself. She took another deep breath and stepped into the living room after him.

“W-what” she cleared her throat before continuing“, what seems to be the problem?”

“Well, your sofa is clearly well-preserved and I don’t want to cause damage by inadvertently bleaching a patch onto it, but I can’t really tell if I am or not.”

She looked into his eyes to see if he was making fun of her, or her sofa; but his eyes were guileless as a stormy sky just before it releases a light rain. He looked sincere...which caused her to narrow her eyes in suspicion. What was he up to?

“Tell you what, why don’t you sit over there and watch me, and if I’m doing something

wrong, you can tell me," he said before she could gather her thoughts. Before she knew what was happening, he was leading her to a chair and helping her into it. Then he crossed the room and knelt by the bucket, taking up the brush and applying it to the spot on the sofa with every appearance of earnest industry. She was bemused, and more than a little confused. Her hands clenched in instinctive reaction to the cleaning – wanting to go over and take the brush from him and clean the seat herself. She was not used to sitting and watching while others worked. It felt...wrong, somehow. But this was his punishment; she must let him do it. And do it he was, it seemed, with no complaints or snotty asides. Was it opposite day? *What the hell was happening??*

Chapter 9

In Which Mind Games are Played

Leo could almost take pity on her, she looked so confused sitting there with her hands clasped tightly in her lap and an anxious expression in her admittedly beautiful face. Well, she wasn't ugly...but no need for anyone to get excited. Big ever-changing-in-hue brown eyes, those prominent cheekbones tapering down to a mouth that wanted to be sensual but was hindered by her tendency to bite her lower lip into submission; it was a symmetrical face with classic features. Of course, they added up to a beautiful face – it did not mean anything that he had noticed.

He turned to her, and opened his mouth, not knowing what would emerge.

"Where's your grandmother?" he asked, in a tone that strove for light curiosity but ended up sounding merely exasperated.

She narrowed her eyes at him suspiciously; he noticed that they became almost black, "Why?" she asked.

"Well, I've been here three times and haven't really seen her. I just wondered..." he replied, managing this time to sound casual about it. She seemed to think about his answer as if searching for loopholes or hidden implications.

"She went to New Orleans" she replied finally", for the festival."

"Festival?" he asked, intrigued. He put down his brush and sat on the floor facing her.

"The Feast of the Dead" she replied

"The feast...of the dead?" he asked tentatively

"Yes," she replied without embellishment.

“You mean like *Toussaint*?” he asked, accenting it correctly in French.

“Yes,” she said in surprise that he knew that name.

“But…isn't that like, on Halloween?” he asked, trying to get her to speak in more than one syllable.

“It is.” She replied.

He raised his eyebrows at her and kept silence so she would be forced to fill it. After a minute of staring, she sighed and said, “My grandpa George is buried in the family crypt in New Orleans. Every year, my grandmother and…other friends gather to celebrate the day of his death which was the 17th of August, 1980. They prepare immortelles for his grave, burn candles and tell stories to remember him. It is a ceremony that starts on the day of his death and concludes on Toussaint or the All Saints Day as the Christians call it. This year is special because it’s the ten year anniversary of his death.”

This little speech brought up so many questions for him; he didn’t know where to start…

“By friends, you mean other witches?” he asked her, wondering if she would answer. She did not generally talk about her *witchiness*. If it hadn’t been for The Charlotte Incident, he probably wouldn’t have believed the stories.

“Witches, warlocks, other family members…” she replied with a shrug.

“So why didn’t you go?” he countered

“I do go. I attend the Feast of the Dead. But we can’t both go and reside in New Orleans for two months; someone has to tend the garden…” she replied.

Encouraged by her relative garrulousness, he said, “I thought your family was buried in the graveyard beyond the trees over yonder”

“My grandmother’s line is buried there. My grandfather’s family has a crypt in New Orleans” she replied.

“And why-” he began

“Why couldn’t we just bury him here?” she interrupted him impatiently,” A witch or

warlock's bloodline holds power and this power is consolidated in the place where that line is buried. A living member of that line can access that power if they are in need of it. That is why. "

He opened his mouth, wondering which question of the dozens clogging his brain he should ask next, and wondering why she was being so forthcoming about it anyway.

"So where will *you* be buried?" he asked.

"A witch follows the maternal line; therefore I will be buried here." She replied.

"Christians! You said 'the Christians call it'; aren't you a Christian?" he asked, trying to keep accusation out of his voice. While he was quite willing to acknowledge that this *was* witch country, and a lot of 'alternative' beliefs were held by the populace, they did also tend to fill the pews on any given Sunday…himself included – black though his soul might be.

"I believe in God" was her short reply.

He reckoned it was time to change the subject anyway, this line of inquiry not really being commensurate with his objectives. Though he was finding that there was a lot about her that was extremely interesting. The woollen sweater though…still had to go.

"Would you come take a look?" he asked gesturing at the sofa, "have I done it right?"

She stood up with no hesitation and came toward him. The conversation seemed to have relaxed her a little. All to the good… he wanted her relaxed. She reached his side and looked down at the sofa.

"Well?" he asked

"I…its fine" she replied.

"You don't seem sure", he said persistent. He stood up and moved nearer to her. She did not seem to notice.

"I'm sure," she said, turning toward him, and starting slightly when she realized how close he was. She took two quick steps back and her feet hit the sofa, causing her to sit abruptly.

“Are you alright?” he asked, taking a step closer to her.

“Yes!” she exclaimed, standing up quickly and moving away from him.

‘Hmm…she was scared. *Of him*. Interesting. What did she think he would do? Or was it her own reaction she was afraid of? He took a step toward her, just to see what she would do. She turned quickly, moving toward the kitchen area and put the counter between them.

“Do you want something to drink?” she asked a bit breathlessly, he thought.

“Oh, some of that green slime you gave me last time would be great”, he told her.

She turned sharply, ready with some retort but saw that he was joking and smiled reluctantly instead.

“It’s an acquired taste I guess” she murmured. She had a *very* nice smile; he mentally slapped himself for noticing it.

“As am I, ” he countered, “So I’m not really in a position to judge”

This statement got him an extremely intense stare and he could see the wheels turning behind her eyes, trying to figure out his game.

‘*Knock yourself out sweetheart’* he thought with a smile.

“Why are you smiling?” she asked in open suspicion – her eyes really did turn black…

“No reason”, he placidly replied, “just waiting to hear what my next job is.”

ξ

Considering that she hadn’t expected him to finish this one, finding a ‘next job’ for him had not occurred to her. She fumbled for a minute then inspiration hit.

“Well, you said it yourself...the window needs mending” she triumphantly exclaimed.

“I don’t suppose you have any window glass lying about do you?” he asked, leaning his elbows on the counter and placing his face in his hands.

“Err, no we don’t” she replied.

“Putty knife? Putty? Gloves?” he asked, pausing for her headshake after each question, “okay, well; this calls for a visit to my uncle’s.”

“Your uncle?” she asked, brow raised in inquiry, “what’s he have to do with my window?”

“He has everything you need to fix it. Shall we?” he asked gesturing toward the door.

“Shall we, what?” she asked in puzzlement.

“Go. Shall we go?” he replied patiently.

“Go where?” she asked, completely lost.

He sighed in exasperation, “Aren’t you like, a straight ‘A’ student?”

“Yes, but that doesn’t make me clairvoyant. Where do you want us to go?” she replied speaking slowly so he could keep up.

“To my uncle’s house, to get supplies, to repair the window”, he replied just as slowly so *she* could keep up.

She gave him a look before saying, “I don’t have money for supplies. Why don’t we just forget the window and-“ she began, meaning to dismiss him from her life.

“No one asked you for money; you asked me to repair the window and I’m gonna do it. But I need equipment and tools, and my uncle has them. So are you coming?” he interrupted firmly.

“Do I have to?” she asked, shoulders slumping in defeat.

“Yes.” He replied shortly

“Why?” she countered

“Because. I want you to.” He replied.

“Why” she answered

“How old are you? Five?” he asked exasperated, “get your ass in the car; we’re going”.

She was tempted to ask ‘why’ again but saw it was an exercise in futility. So she got in the car with bad grace and waited for him to start the engine. He got in, throwing a random smile her way that made her frown with suspicion. But all he did was start the engine and reverse down the driveway.

It felt strangely intimate being alone in a car with him, sitting in the front seat next to him like they were...friends or something. She felt curiously shy, which was ridiculous considering the things they had done together. The thought of that made her blush, and he looked at her a bit strangely. She wondered why because he surely couldn’t see how flushed her face was, seeing as how she was dark-skinned. But maybe she was looking embarrassed! She thought frantically, trying to make her face as blank as possible.

“Everything alright?” he asked, looking closely at her.

“Of course” she replied briskly in order to distract him from her discomfiture, “shouldn’t you be watching the road?”

He snorted briefly, “what, against the bumper to bumper traffic you mean?” they were barrelling along a dusty road that barely qualified as such – it was more like a nature trail flanked on both sides by the forest that bordered the land on which she lived with her grandmother. She looked out the window and didn’t reply. Leo’s uncle lived near the swamp, where the alligators gathered. This dusty road was the back route to his alligator farm and not many knew about it, nor bothered to use it especially since it was not kind to shock absorbers. She wondered why Leo would risk his car on this road – everyone knew how much he loved it. Maybe he didn’t want anyone to see them together.

Yes. That’s must be it- he was ashamed of being seen with her...so why did he make her come? All these assumptions and suppositions were giving her a serious headache so she closed her eyes and shut down her mind. Whatever...

ξ

She was sleeping...he saw as he glanced over at her, which was remarkable considering how bumpy this ride was turning out to be. It had been a while since he had used this route – he

hadn't known it had gotten so bad. He sighed; I guess that's what he got for ignoring what they said about shortcuts...

How could she sleep!?

She looked rather beautiful with her eyes closed; lashes brushing her prominent cheekbones. Her eyes looked slightly slanted when they were closed like she had some Chinese blood or something – and her lashes were *really long!*

He realised he was staring and looked resolutely back at the road- not a moment too soon because a fox was just making its leisurely way across the road and he was about to run into it. He braked hard, flinging his hand out to prevent Mya's head from hitting the dash. His hand brushed her breasts and she drew back rather quickly.

"Sorry," he said apologetically", looks like I really should have been watching the road"

"No problem," she said with a strained smile. Did she sound a little breathless?

The fox had disappeared, so he re-started the engine and drove on.

His uncle's farm was a hive of activity when they drew up into the driveway. His aunt Leyla was taking a delivery of raw meat from the slaughterhouse. They saved any meat that had gone bad or didn't meet the standards for human consumption for the alligator farm. Decomposed flesh was an alligator staple and luckily, not too difficult to obtain. The Evans' didn't feed *all* the alligators they traded in, just the ones they had domiciled on the farm. These were usually those alligators that were injured and therefore being looked after or those born on the farm. Their eventual fate was always going to be shoes or bags; exotic jewellery fashioned from teeth, and sometimes, voodoo rituals. Uncle Greg also did a brisk trade in local tourism as well as holding alligator hunting expeditions for those who would pay for such things. The farm ran to fifteen acres that spanned the length of the local swamp. The farmhouse was an old wooden building circa 1865 and had been built as a manor house when sugar cane was still grown in the area, farmed by slave labour. The slaves were gone, but some sugar cane remained, the bargasse produced was used to power the farm's energy needs and Aunt Leyla processed her own sugar. The Evans' believed in self-sufficiency.

"Hey, Aunt Ley!" Leo shouted as he alighted from the car and swung round to open Mya's

door. He ignored the surprise on her face at his gesture and introduced her to his aunt;

“Aunt Ley, this is Mya. Mya, Aunt Ley.”

“Hello” Aunt Ley replied looking curiously at her, “You’re Matia’s granddaughter, aren’t you? Matia Andrewes?”

“Yes,” Mya replied looking unsurprised that his aunt knew who she was. Well, they were the only black family in town, and witches to boot. Besides, they were kind of neighbours, Leo supposed, seeing as there were no other dwellings between the Andrewes’ and Evans’ residences.

“I know your grandmother very well”, Aunt Leyla said, “She’s helped me out now and then.”

Considering the one and only spell Leo had ever seen done, his curiosity was heightened by this statement. What could she *possibly* have needed help with?

“What kind of help did you need, aunt Ley?” he was asking before he realised he’d decided to do so.

“That’s none of your concern Curious George, now what are y’all doing here?” she asked. Aunt Ley was a child of the south and her accent tended to thicken in the presence of emotion.

‘Hmmm,’ Leo thought, *‘to be continued’.*

“We need some supplies from your store Auntie,” he said, “May we?”

“My store is your store Leo, you know that” she replied, turning to supervise her rotted meat storage.

“Thanks, aunt”, Leo answered, kissing her cheek before heading off.

Mya followed meekly behind, reverting to the shrinking violet Leo was used to. Which was the real Mya he wondered?

They collected the supplies and headed back to her place. Mya showed a basic understanding of the identity of tools and equipment and Leo wondered why she hadn’t repaired the window herself since she seemed to know her way around the procedures. He debated on whether it

was worth the aggravation to ask her, but decided it wasn't. She was still shooting suspicious glances at him, and answering in monosyllables to any conversational overtures he made; so better not. Was she uncomfortable around people or just schizophrenic? She was like two completely different people when they were alone, and when they were around other people.

Chapter 10

In which Things are figured out

Mya watched Leo spread putty along the window frame, carefully patting it down so it could stick and anchor the glass in place. If she was being very honest with herself, which she wished she wasn't, she really had to admit that he was a major piece of eye candy. To add coals to Newcastle, he'd taken his shirt off so as not to mess it up.

'Too bad he's such a jerk' she thought.

Not that he'd been that today; in fact, he was being suspiciously nice to her, and she didn't know why. It was making her more nervous than if he was his usual snotty self. Still, nervous or not, she couldn't help lurking around the corner to peep at him as he worked. The punch line was taking too long if this new Leo was some sort of elaborate practical joke.

Shaking herself, she resolutely turned away and marched off to the attic where the grimoires were kept. She had come across a spell to assist the growth of sunflowers in the absence of sunlight when flipping through it some time back and had been meaning to go back and have a proper look. This seemed like the perfect time – perhaps it would keep her mind off the boy in her backroom who alternately confused, excited, and scared her to death.

The secret to selection of the best sunflower seeds lies in their colour. To the naked eye, there seems no difference between one seed and another but seen under the light of a full moon through the purple mist of a boiling elixir of Echinacea Purpura and Honeywort, the difference is apparent. When the full moon has reached its zenith, the difference in colour of powerful sunflower seeds and the weak ones shows a different hue between them. Plant the next-

"Hey", a deep voice interrupted her reading from the doorway.

She jumped about a foot, and the grimoire flew across the room and almost fell in the hearth.

Luckily the fire was out. She put a shaking hand over her chest because her heart rate seemed to have doubled and screamed at him, “Don’t do that!”

“Do what”, he asked in a rather mild tone, all things considered...

“Sneak up on me like that. God! You almost gave me a heart attack” she exclaimed, still quite disconcerted by his abrupt appearance.

“Sorry,” he said, not sounding, or looking, sorry at all, “I just wanted to tell you that the window is fixed.”

“Oh. Well, thank you.” She said, her voice trailing away uncertainly...*’now what?’* he didn’t say anything, just stood there looking at her, making her extremely uncomfortable.

“Erm, well you can go now”, she told him – hoping to break the stare.

“What are you doing?” he asked her, shifting his gaze to the grimoire and ignoring her statement.

“Who me? Err nothing, just...reading” she replied a bit flustered.

He walked over to the grimoire and picked it up; studying the page it was open at. She made a V with her hands and snapped them closed and the grimoire snapped shut in his hands, making him drop it in startlement and turn around to stare at her in surprise.

“Sorry. For witches only.” She told him with a shrug and a half- smile.

“I...see” he murmured, staring at her with speculation in his eyes. She did not like the look one bit; it did not seem like it was a good look for her. He broke eye contact and looked around him. There was a lot to see. She guessed that the contents of her attic were not standard for many homes. There was the huge cauldron that sat in the hearth, waiting. One entire wall was a bookshelf holding hundreds of books, from family records to grimoires to stories of magic, mystery, and monsters. They were the culmination of centuries of collection from antecedents spanning from Abramelin the Mage in the 15th century right down to her grandmother Matia. From the ceiling hung various herbs that were most efficacious when dried; the window in the roof providing enough light for the plants. And on the opposing wall were drawers containing all types of herbs from fresh flowers kept in containers of water, to

dried herbals kept in pouches to leaves, twigs, and mineral elements such as copper, manganese, and zinc. There were also the occasional animal parts such as bat wings, crocodile teeth and the long bones of big cats. In the corner was a miniature fridge where perishables such as the entrails and livers of toads were kept. The feathers of various animals resided in a glass cabinet, from the black feathers of a rooster and crow to the completely white pelt of a snowy owl.

It was a strange room to be sure, not really designed to excite empathy in the average breast. She watched him as he looked around the room, waiting for revulsion, or fear or disgust. What she saw instead was curiosity, maybe even fascination. He moved over to the drawer with the bones and touched the crocodile teeth.

“Did you get these from my uncle?”

“No... Those are crocodile teeth, not alligator; they came from the West Indies.”

“What do you use them for?” he asked

“Oh, this and that” she replied vaguely.

“Another witch’s only secret is it?” he asked, with a slight twinkle in his eye.

“Well, to be quite honest, I’m not sure *what* they’re used for,” she said rather sheepishly, “I haven’t practised for long enough to know what even half these things are used for.”

“Hence the reading?” he asked

“Well, that and I really wanted to know how to grow sunflowers,” she said with another side smile.

“So why not use a horticulture book? Why a grimoire?” he asked

“Well, ‘Curious George’,” she said with a smile,” it’s because I’m growing it for magical purposes and I need them to grow to a particular size and yield a certain amount of oil.”

He hooked the stool that usually stood near the hearth and plunked onto it, “What do you do with the particular size and yield of sunflower oil?” he asked, settling in for what looked like a long natter.

“It’s an ingredient in many salves and creams”, she said while heading out the door, “Coffee?” she asked him on her way out.

“Sure!” he called, not following her.

She turned back and peered around the door at him. He was still sitting on the stool, looking around.

“We could maybe go have it downstairs?” she said, eyebrows raised.

He looked around at her startled, “Oh. Yeah sure. Whatever you say” he said, standing up to follow her.

Chapter 11

In Which a Change Occurs

“Hello, Evangeline here, how can I help you?”

“Hi Tata Evangeline, can I speak to Grammy please?”

“Mya, petite amie! How are you doing?”

“I’m good, how are you?”

“Great! The preparations are going really good. Will we be seeing you soon?”

“I’ll be down in October. Is Grammy close?”

“Yes, let me get her”.

That peculiar silence that accompanied a hanging phone assailed her ears. She sighed resignedly, thinking that Tata Evangeline was a sweetheart but she talked too much and was rather scatterbrained. She’d probably forget to tell her grandmother that she had a phone call. Mya really needed to speak to her; not only did she need a friendly ear to help her work through everything that had happened recently but she also needed to find out about magic pools. There was something strange about that whole business and she wanted...

A loud honking startled her out of her thoughts. She pulled the phone cord as far as it would go so she could peep out of the living room windows that faced the front garden. Leo’s car was at the gate, and it was he who was hooting. She stared at it until she realised the flies were gathering outside her open mouth. Then she hung up the silent phone and went outside

to see what he wanted.

“Hi!” he shouted from the car, “is it safe?”

“Safe?” she called back, puzzled.

“For me to come in,” he said.

“What do you want?” she asked, arms folded and legs akimbo.

His brow furrowed as he said, “I thought I was your slave for the next two weeks?”

Her brows rose in surprise and she opened her mouth to say something, and then discovered that she had nothing to say.

“It’s safe” she stated before turning around and walking back into the house. She wondered if she should try to call her grandmother again, but figured she would call back. *If* she got the message. Besides, she couldn’t exactly talk to her grandmother with one of the main subjects of the conversation hanging on every word. She couldn’t quite believe he came back after yesterday. Not that it had been so bad – in fact, she would have gone so far as to call it fun. A little embarrassing being caught spying on him, but he’d been cool about it, and they’d gone on that ride and she’d met his aunt...He’d seen her attic and not run away screaming. And afterward, they’d sat talking on the bar counter in the kitchen until their coffees were stone cold. The conversation had somehow managed to flow so easily and she’d hardly noticed the passing time.

‘*He’s easy to talk to when he’s not being a dick.*’

But just because she’d enjoyed herself, didn’t mean he had, and she hadn’t assumed that he’d had the same kind of time she did. But here he was, back again.

What, to make of it?

The door slammed behind her and she whirled around to look at him.

“So, what’s on the schedule today?” he asked.

“The roof’s leaking if you wanna try your hand at that” she replied, expecting him to turn

around and leave.

“Okay, you got a ladder?” he asked

“Umm, yeah I think so. Not sure about how stable it is – we haven’t used it in a while. You might be better off free climbing over the porch. “

He snorted and murmured, “Good thing I’m a tall guy then...” before heading out to the back porch. He examined the structure of the house from the wooden frame that surrounded the veranda to the pipe that snaked up the side of the house up to the roof. If he stretched his hand out to its full length, he could just touch the tip of the ceiling. It wouldn’t take much to pull himself up. She watched bemused as he climbed athletically up the porch frame then up the pipe and over the roof. He really was quite graceful; she had to give him that. His heavy footsteps tramped across the roof above her and it occurred to her that she hadn’t told him where the leak was. She wondered whether she should try shouting up at him or leave him to figure it out. With a mental shrug, she decided to go try her grandmother again.

The phone rang and rang and she wondered if they’d all left the house. Just as she was about to give up, someone picked up.

“Hello”, a male voice answered this time.

“Hello, may I speak with Matia please?” she asked in a whisper.

“Just one minute, I’ll get her for you.”

“Thank you,” she said.

She tapped her foot impatiently, keeping an ear out for a bump that would tell her that Leo was back on the ground.

“Helloo”, her grandmother’s voice came down the line.

“Hi, Grammy. How are you?” she replied with relief.

“What’s wrong honey?” her grandmother asked.

She laughed shakily thinking fondly that she could never fool her grandmother.

“I hardly know where to start” she replied a smile in her voice.

“Well, like the rabbit said in Alice in Wonderland, start at the beginning, go on till you reach the end, and then stop.”

So she did. She told her grandmother everything. Considering that she felt like she had lived three lifetimes in the last three weeks, it didn’t take that long. Just talking about the whole thing gave her such relief that she didn’t really mind if her grandmother had anything useful to tell her about it all or not.

“First honey, about the pool – you are probably right about that; this is the first pool I have ever heard about that appeared without being conjured by someone. Unless...was there a witch in the vicinity or a warlock?”

“Not that I know of Grammy”, she replied

“We need to find out more about it. I’ll ask around here and get back to you. About this boy though...I’m not sure what is going on. You say he practically jumped you – twice. And now he’s repairing the roof? What do you think you are up to Mya?” her grandmother’s tone was concerned.

“I don’t think I’m up to anything. I was trying to help a friend, and next thing I know, I’m on the bed with her boyfriend on top of me. I don’t know what is going on Grammy. He kept coming back, and I just wanted to feel like I was in control of my life again. I wanted to feel *safe* again. “Mya told her.

“And do you?” she asked

Mya was silent for a while and then said, “Sometimes...”

ξ

Leo did not mean to eavesdrop; he’d come back into the house to collect some tools and find out where exactly the leaks were and heard her talking. He hesitated in the doorway, wondering who she was talking to and then heard his name. She was telling someone about what had happened between them. He heard the name ‘Grammy’ and realised she was talking to her grandmother. He couldn’t believe she was sparing no detail in telling her what

happened. Wasn't the woman like 95? This seemed like a good way to give her a stroke if you asked him; not that anybody was...

Should he enter the room or not? After some thought he decided to go back out the back door and slam it so she would know he was in the house – he thought that she'd probably had enough of him catching her out. He crept quietly back out to the back door and slammed it as hard as he could. Then he walked forward to the living room door. She was just hanging up the phone and looked up at him with a look on her face he couldn't quite interpret. It was like she was close to tears, or afraid or vulnerable. He wanted to ask her what was wrong, but she spoke before he could.

"Yes? You've finished?" she asked a little breathlessly he thought and wondered why she would be.

"No, I haven't. I need to replace some of the shingles and I wondered if you had any lumber?" he replied, watching her intently.

"Well, yes there's some lumber in the shed, but, what are you planning to do?"

"Plane them to the right size and then replace the leaking ones", he said with a raised eyebrow, "isn't that what you asked me to do?"

"Do you know *how* to do that?" she asked, looking sceptical.

"Well, we'll see, won't we?" he said, turning to head out again, "want to come help me out!?" he called to her as he walked out into the back garden.

Would she come? He wondered. He hoped so - he needed her to relax enough around him so they could talk and sort things out. From what he heard of her conversation, she was clearly affected by what had happened and he needed her not to be; not just because she might decide to take this further but because upon listening to her talk to her grandmother, she finally became a human being to him. Not just a pawn to be manipulated for his own ends, but an actual separate person with feelings and emotions of her own. One who had been deeply affected by his actions.

Leo was selfish, but he was no monster. He did not deliberately go around trying to make others suffer and seeing that she did suffer, made him feel remorseful about his treatment of

her. Maybe he could have done better by her...

'What is wrong with me? Since when am I concerned about random women's feelings?' he thought. Another thing about Leo was that he didn't spend time analysing past behaviour. He was a strong believer in bygones being bygones.

He heard her footsteps on the porch stairs and turned around to smile at her. Whatever the reason, he was glad she had come.

Chapter 12

In which a Conversation is Held

Mya was afraid of heights. She hated to say so, especially since she could see that this really was a two-person job they were doing on the roof – but her insides were frozen with fear. And she was trying to look anywhere but down. Leo was busy banging nails into the new shingles he had made. The roof looked so careworn from this viewpoint. Many of the shingles were waterlogged and rotting. Leo said they needed to clean the shingles with wood cleaner and water and then scrub it down to remove the mildew and mould. It looked like this job would take him the next two weeks to even make a dent in. Strangely enough, he wasn't complaining.

"Next shingle?" he yelled from his perch on the attic roof. She picked it up and stretched up as far as she could so she could pass it to him without actually moving.

"Thanks," he told her with a grin as he reached for it "Do you wanna get down? I'll manage on my own if you do"

"No, I'm fine" she replied, voice a little higher than usual, maybe a slight shake to it.

He laughed at her; his laugh was quite delightful, it chimed with joy, yet was deep and soft with delight. This was the first time she'd ever heard it, and she was surprised that such a purely joyful sound could emanate from that black and miserable heart.

"Why the surprised look?" he asked, watching her face.

“Surprised look? “ She asked, wondering what the hell...

“Your face...” he said, staring at her.

“I was just...this is the first time I’ve heard you laugh”. She replied, feeling a little awkward, “it’s a good sound, you should do it more often” she continued, not quite believing she had the nerve to say such things to him.

His eyebrow went up but he said nothing, just bent to his work and continued with his hammering. She took a breath then said, “I’m hungry – you want to...get down and maybe find something to eat?”

“Thought you’d never ask”, he said, ceasing the hammering immediately and getting up, “Don’t move, I’ll get down first and help you”.

“I can man-” she began, the protest coming automatically to her lips before he cut her off.

“I know you can manage, I’d like to help you though – if you’ll let me”. He replied as he stopped moving and gave her a look.

She was silent for a while then said, “Okay”.

He jumped off the roof onto the veranda roof with no sign of fear or hesitation, and then he turned around and reached for her. She took his hand, and closed her eyes and let him lead her gently down to him, catching hold of her waist to lift her down from the main roof onto the veranda roof.

“I’m going to climb down to the porch, you climb on my shoulders, and I’ll help you down”.

“Okay. You’re the boss”.

“No. *You’re* the boss” he replied with a grin.

It was a bit nerve-wracking but they managed to land with no broken bones. Mya whipped them up some chicken and tomato soup with homemade buns, and Leo had three helpings.

“That, was delicious,” he told her, “all this and you can cook too?” he said smiling.

“All this my ass”, she said smiling.

He stopped smiling and looked at her seriously for a long time.

“What?” she asked.

“You don’t smile nearly often enough”, he said pensively.

“Well, neither do you”, she replied, her smile disappearing temporarily and then reappearing a bit more wistfully.

There was a small silence and then he said, “I *am* sorry” in a very quiet voice.

“What for?” she asked softly.

“Everything”, he replied.

“Well, that’s...specific”, she said, her smile widening.

“Mya, what happened between us; I was just as taken by surprise as you. I didn’t set out to seduce you or coerce you. I kissed you so that you could get what you needed. What happened after that well...I was just as surprised as you were. My emotions took over and I got carried away. But I did not mean to hurt you and if I did, then I’m sorry.”

She stared at him for a full minute, eyes wide and mouth set. Then she smiled and said, “Forgiven.” her mouth twisting wryly. She took a deep breath, smiling”, Phew! That was intense. Ice cream?”

“Please” he replied, smiling back and still staring at her.

She got up and went to the fridge to get the bowl of ice cream which she served into two smaller bowls. It was her own flavour, a mix of chocolate, vanilla and just a pinch of mint. The whole thing was interspersed with slices of apple which added a tangy taste to the mix. She hadn’t been sure it would work but somehow it did. She’d been dying to try it on someone for days and here was a ready-made guinea pig! She handed over his bowl and waited with bated breath for him to taste it. He took a spoonful into his mouth and closed his eyes but she couldn’t tell whether it was in ecstasy or pain.

“Well?” she asked

“It’s...an unusual flavour,” he said, opening his eyes.

“Unusual disgusting, or unusual delicious?” she asked anxiously

“Definitely delicious. Can I have some more?” he said.

She smiled broadly, took his bowl, and refilled it.

“Lemme guess, you made this too?” he asked mouth full of ice cream but managing to smile all the same.

“Yes, I did,” she said.

“So you’re like, a cooking aficionado or something?” he asked, stuffing his face.

She laughed out loud at that. “I don’t know about aficionado – but I like to cook”.

“Hmm, that’s a funny coincidence because I like to eat.” He replied smiling.

Were they flirting? She wondered disbelievingly. *If they were, then they should probably stop.*

She stood up and began to clear the table of dishes, and he stood up as well to help. He took his dishes to the sink and collected all the pots and pans running them under the hot water.

“Soap?” he asked her

“Oh, are you planning to wash the dishes?” she asked in surprise

“Noo, I want to eat the soap.” He said with a smile.

“Oh, haha. It’s on the window sill.” She replied

He took the liquid detergent and poured some into the sink full of water and put in the dishes. If he was going to wash, she might as well rinse she thought. They stood side by side, cleaning the dishes and it felt a little surreal to her. Sometimes she felt like she was going crazy. *‘Washing dishes with Leo Devereux; Town Hunk, Basketball Sensation, Charlotte Le*

Carré's boyfriend…it was ridiculous!'

Leo washed the plates and put them in her water to rinse, hands brushing against each other as they worked and awareness growing with each touch. Their hips brushed against each other intermittently as they stood side by side and the sexual tension increased exponentially. Mya felt like the room temperature had achieved 'steamy' by the time all the dishes were clean. As she rinsed the last dish, she hoped he would move away so she could recover her equilibrium but he just stood there, watching her a little more intently than was comfortable for her. She placed the last dish on the rack and took a deep breath, turning toward him and opening her mouth to suggest that they adjourn to the living room for coffee. Before she could say anything though, he leaned over and kissed her.

As their lips touched, she felt a hot ball in her stomach and her legs felt like jelly. His lips were very gentle on hers and his hands barely held her waist. He held the kiss for no more than a few seconds before pulling back to meet her eyes.

"May I?" he asked

"May you...what?" she answered, barely hearing him.

"May I kiss you", he asked, not breaking eye contact

They stared at each other for a long time, and she tried to think coherently but she was drowning in his eyes; stormy and turbulent as the sea on an overcast day.

"Didn't you do that already?" she said at last.

He laughed with that joyful sound again before fitting his lips once again to hers. They kissed for a long time, standing in the kitchen, barely touching apart from their lips. His tongue gently explored her mouth, and she returned the favour. Slowly, she found herself leaning into him, and her breasts swelled against his chest. He took hold of her waist and pulled her close, deepening the kiss. Almost against her volition, her arms snaked around his neck and she pressed her entire length against him. His erection dug into her stomach and she felt herself responding to his arousal with her own. He picked her up and carried her to the sofa, where he laid her down gently, not breaking the kiss for a single second. They fell backward together, he on top. Her blouse was unbuttoned she knew because his hand had snaked into her bra to cup her naked breast. His other hand was working the buttons on her jeans even as

he deepened the kiss.

Andrewes, are you going to stop this? She asked herself as her lips opened wider to let him in, and her legs seemed to part on their own as he pressed between them. His lips left a trail of kisses along her cheek and jaw and fastened at last on her ear, making all the breath leave her body in one whoop of pure ecstasy. Then he let go and whispered in her ear;

"Mya, I want you".

'Okay, stop. Why did he say that? And what should I *say?'* She wasn't much for lies and looking into her soul, she could see only one answer to that statement. She hesitated for a moment that seemed to last a lifetime then gave it;

"I want you too."

The admission seemed to act like a trigger that released any restraint he might have been maintaining. He sat up and tore off his shirt, falling upon her immediately afterward and kissing her passionately while divesting her of her blouse and bra. His lips left hers only to fasten on her breast while his hands worked the jeans off her hips. She lifted her hips to help him and her own hands found their way to his rather ripped torso and she ran her hands up and down in fascination. He stilled to let her explore as she would and her hands travelled down over his slim hips. She thought about unzipping him but she didn't have the nerve. Somehow he divined this, and unzipped himself, pulling his Levis off as quickly as could be managed. Then he took her hand and placed it on him, breathing quite quickly and shallowly as he did it. She closed her eyes and ran her hand up and down his shaft, marvelling at the feel of it, soft to the touch, yet hard as steel. It seemed to grow bigger in her hand, and she sneaked a peek at it. Although they'd done this twice before, she had not actually seen him en déshabille. Her eyes opened wide at the actual size of it and she wondered how it had ever fitted inside her. She closed her hand around it, and he made a strangling sound like he was choking.

"Are you alright?", she asked, taking her hand away in case she was hurting him.

"Yes," he said in a strangled voice, "Don't...feel like...you have to stop," he said stopping to take a deep breath after every other word.

"Okay," she replied tentatively, returning her hand to his hip, but not touching his penis

again. She ran a finger lightly down his thigh and he made another sound like the life was being squeezed out of him.

“You’re sure you’re alright?” she asked again.

“Yes” he whispered

“You’re all lean and hard; bone and muscle – but your skin is so soft...” she told him as her hand traced patterns on his thigh.

“Good...skin care...regimen”, he replied breathing hard but managing to grin at her.

She laughed at him, and he took her hand and pulled her to him so he could fasten his mouth to hers. Looked like the talking portion was done...

Chapter 13

In which we are at a Loss

"Are you freaked out?" he asked her, as she lay on his gleaming chest, eyes closed.

"No", she replied, not opening her eyes or otherwise moving.

"Why not?" he asked, twisting his head to a very awkward angle in order to see her face.

"I'm a fatalist. Que sera, sera and all that" she replied, a smile in her voice.

They were silent for a while, and Leo thought that she might have fallen asleep by her breathing, so he was surprised when she spoke.

"Are *you* freaked out?" she asked, eyes still closed.

"Yes," he said

She laughed softly, making him shiver from her breath on his naked chest and the sound of her laughter.

"What's so funny?" he asked in a mock hurt tone.

"Nothing...it's just...well, I wasn't expecting you to be so honest" she replied.

"Why wouldn't I be?" he asked, genuinely puzzled.

She shrugged her shoulders but said nothing. He couldn't really blame her for not having the energy to talk – that had been a hell of an orgasm if he did say so himself. He closed his eyes and relaxed into sleep.

He was walking down a dark maze, and couldn't see a thing. He knew he was in a maze because he could feel the walls on either side of him interspersed with pockets of air that indicated side passages. In front of him it was blacker than a witch's pussy but on the ground at his feet was a luminous blue line that led down the maze ad infintum. He decided to follow the line because it was the only source of light in the dark. As he walked, he realised he was

not wearing any shoes. In fact, he realised that he wasn't wearing anything! *He stretched his arms out to the sides moving with his hands on the wall in order to keep his bearings and kept walking. He closed his eyes because the darkness was oppressive, opening them only occasionally in order to check that the luminous blue line was still in front of him. He stepped carefully because he had no shoes. He felt like he'd been walking forever when there was a glow in front of his closed lids. He opened his eyes and realised that there was a light at the end of the tunnel. And in the light, was a silhouette. From the frame, he guessed that it was a female, tall, and slender with some sort of pouf crowning her head. She stood with her legs apart and her arms stretched out to each doorpost. From the slight curve on the side of her upper torso, he could see that she had perky breasts. He quickened his footsteps, wanting to reach her; to touch her. He didn't know why though. As he neared her, he realised that he knew her – her aura glowed around her with a pulsating blue light and though he did not know her name, he knew* her. *He came closer wanting to touch, but just as he reached her, she dissolved into mist, making his heart ache with loss.*

As he saw the blue light in his dream, he turned on the sofa and wrapped his arm around Mya, pulling her toward him and nuzzling her neck. Then he turned her onto her back and entered her, waking to realise his dream and reality had somehow segued, and he was thrusting hard into Mya – wanting he knew not what, only knowing he had to have it. Her eyes were open, but not lucid. She was making tiny screaming noises which drove him over the edge. He edged his hand between them, pressing his knuckles against her clitoris, to bring her to climax with him – because he knew he could not wait much longer. The release when it came caused him to double over and cry out, and he was glad to hear her cry out too. Such ecstasy was definitely much better when shared. He lowered his body over hers, closing his eyes, and breathing deeply. He could feel her breath go in as his went out, and he realised they were breathing in harmony – which made him smile.

"Are you okay?" he asked, not lifting his head from her shoulder.

"No." she replied, but he could hear the smile in her voice.

He was still inside her, and although he was only half-hard, he took hold of her shoulder and pushed himself still deeper into her- compelled to make a connection- and making her gasp. He smiled and did it again, and she made another sound that sounded liked, 'ooh!' He wanted to see just how many types of sounds she could make and did it again. This third one sounded

more like a strangled scream. He thought he could seriously do this all day and thrust as deep as he could possibly go.

“Ahhh!” she exclaimed.

He put his head near her ear and blew, thrusting at the same time and then biting her ear.

“Ooaah,” she said quite, quite breathlessly.

He put his mouth right next to her ear and whispered into it, “Do you want me to stop?” as he thrust hard into her again.

“Ooeerahh” was her incoherent reply. With every thrust, he got harder and harder and his urgency grew as well so that he thrust faster and faster, his breath also coming faster and he was breathing right into her ear which was clearly making her completely crazy. As he came closer and closer to climax, he tried to clear his head so he could gauge how close she was to her own climax; he did not want to do this alone. From the sounds she was making, he guessed that she was close.

“Mya...Oh God, Mya” he whispered in her ear, before releasing his seed into her. He felt her pussy muscles spasm and close upon him, and he knew they had come together. It was strangely gratifying.

He fell onto the sofa beside her and blacked out.

ξ

Mya edged out from under Leo’s arm, falling off the sofa so she could get up. She crawled away from the sofa, gathering her clothes to her as she went. She thought ruefully that if these trysts were going to continue, she might have to get some new underwear...

She got dressed quietly, watching him sleep as she did so. He looked like a baby folded up on the sofa like that, with his head on his clasped hands. Without the cynical look in his eye and the smile that hinted at countless evil thoughts, he looked quite innocent and sweet. She finished dressing then stood for a while, staring at him...she started out of the trance she’d managed to put herself in and decided that emergency measures were called for. Yep, time for chocolate fudge cake. She crept to the pantry so as not to wake him, and collected some

salt, flour, baking soda, brown sugar, and vanilla. She set some water to boil in the kettle then got out the eggs, butter, unsweetened chocolate, and sour cream from the fridge.

She poured the hot water into a curved container, dropping the bowl with the chocolate on top of it to melt and cool. While this was going on, she greased two baking pans and floured them, then sifted in flour, baking soda and salt. She was so intent on her chosen task that she hardly looked up. She put the butter in a bowl to beat it but then worried that the noise would wake him. She glanced up to gauge how soundly he was asleep and was startled to see that he was sitting up, staring at her his head cupped on his folded arms, which were perched on top of his drawn up knees. *God, he moved silently*, she thought irritably, *what was he? Half cat?*

“Hi,” he said softly to her with a smile.

“Hi” she replied, voice higher than usual and breathless-sounding. Her heart was fibrillating...she felt like she was about to have a heart attack and thought that she really should have written down her recipe for chocolate fudge cake so someone else could finish baking it should she expire *right now.*

“What are you doing?” he asked staring at the counter and its contents curiously.

“Err...I’m...making a cake” she replied shyly, with a slight shrug.

“Why?” He asked her, smile widening.

“Because...” she said and shrugged“, it’s what I do – when at a loss on how to proceed; I cook.” She said taking up the whisk to beat the butter into submission. It also gave her something else to look at and an excuse for the glow in her face precipitated by all the blood rushing there.

“Why are you at a loss?” he asked smile disappearing and a frown showing in its place.

“Aren’t you?” she asked as she added the brown sugar and eggs to the butter, taking the whisking into high gear.

He stood up and walked toward her, prompting her to whisk even faster to avoid looking at his naked body. He seemed completely unselfconscious in the altogether and came up to her on the other side of the counter and leaned his hands against it. He stretched his head forward

and to the side so he could meet her downcast eyes.

“Why would I be at a loss?” he asked.

The mixture was light and fluffy, so she added in the vanilla and the melted chocolate. She stirred in the dry ingredients alternating with sour cream and beating with a wooden spoon after each addition. This gave her an excuse not to speak until the batter was smooth.

“Ooh, I don’t know”, she said, “maybe the fact that you have a girlfriend, and you just had sex with me...*again”,* she replied not looking at him but stirring in the boiling water into the mixture. She judged its thinness and added her secret ingredient before emptying the mixture into the waiting tins. She set the oven to 350°C and set the timer before slipping the tins into it. Having run out of excuses to look at him she turned around to find him staring at her.

“Yes but this time, I didn’t just have sex with you...*we* made love. Didn’t we?” he asked her.

She stared at him for a while then took the dirty dishes to the sink and began to wash them.

“Where does Charlotte think you are?” she asked with her back to him.

He didn’t say anything and she heard his footsteps approaching. He took the dish she’d just finished washing from her and put it under the tap to rinse it.

“She knows where I am”, he told her, looking at her as she concentrated on the dishes in the sink.

“*Really??”* she said in disbelief.

“Yes,” he said looking right at her.

“And she’s okay with it?” she asked, forgetting about his nakedness and looking right at him in her disbelief.

“Why wouldn’t she be? I told her what I was doing” he stated matter of factly

“You told her-“, she began in alarm

“That I was helping you out to make up for...you know”, he finished for her.

“YOU TOLD HER?!” she yelled.

“I...may have changed a few details,” he said evasively.

She snorted, torn between curiosity and not wanting to know.

“So...you told her you’d be here? With me? Alone? And she was fine with it?” she asked, going back to the earlier conversation.

“Asked and answered”, he replied.

“I don’t know whether to be insulted or relieved” she murmured

“Insulted?” he asked with a puzzled frown.

“She goes crazy if a female even looks at you wrong, but she’s okay with you spending your days with me? What? I don’t qualify as temptation?” she asked chagrined.

He laughed with that joyous sound again then said, “Well, under the circumstances, I’m inclined to take it as a good thing.”

“Humph!” she said

Just then the oven timer went off, startling them both. She went over and opened the oven, taking out the cakes and pressing lightly with her fingertips to see if the centre would spring back. It did so she placed them on the wire rack to cool.

“What did you tell her happened?” she asked, face turned away toward the windowsill where she’d put the cake rack.

“I...told her that I made you sleep with the retard from the graveyard,” he said, not looking at her.

“And how did you say you managed to pull that off?” she asked, amused in spite of herself.

“By putting a knife to your grandmother’s throat”, he replied, smiling at her.

She stared at him, mouth open in stupefaction, “My grandmother’s not here.” was the only thing she could think to say.

“You know that, and I know that...but Charlotte has no clue”, he said.

“True.” she replied, “Unless someone tells her...”

“And who would that someone be?” he asked, opening his eyes wide at her.

“I don’t know, now do I?” she replied, she took a deep breath, “Are you going to put on your clothes or what?”

“Does my nakedness bother you?” he asked with a smile.

“Yes,” she replied baldly.

He moved toward her as she stood by the window, coming to stand right in front of her, and looked down into her face. His erect penis pressed against her stomach, and his mouth descended slowly toward hers. He looked her in the eye as their lips touched and she looked back at him. Her mouth opened and he touched his tongue to hers. Then she was held tight against him and his tongue was so far down her throat she felt she might choke, yet still, it wasn’t enough. To her eternal chagrin, she wanted more...but she pushed him away.

“No” she whispered, with barely enough breath for the word.

“Why not?” he asked, hands reaching for her.

“You know why not”, she replied, moving out of his reach.

He sighed, ruffling his hair in frustration, “Mya, what do you think we are doing here?” he asked her.

“Damned if I know”, she replied.

“Do you think that this is some kind of game for me? Really?” he asked her.

“I. Don’t. Know” she answered slowly like he was perhaps retarded.

He stared hard at her and then said, “Mya, You are not my type. You’re poor, you’re strange and weird, and you’re practically an outcast. I have a life; I have ambitions, – I’ve spent two years working toward this relationship that I have with Charlotte. Do you think I would

jeopardize that, for a bit of tail?!!?

“Which is why I’m wondering why you are here!” she shouted back, stung by his description of her.

“I’m here...because...I...” he trailed off, staring off into the distance, “I don’t know why. I just know that I try to stay away and yet I keep finding myself back here – it’s like, fate or something.”

She stared at him, at a loss on how to take that.

“Put on some clothes!” she shouted at last.

That broke the tension, and he laughed and crossed back to his clothes. He put on his boxers, then his jeans, coming to stand in front of her as he buttoned them up.

“Better?” he asked, still buttoning, eyes cast down at his flies, naked chest at eye level.

“A bit” she bit out, crossing over to the kitchen from the window and pulling to herself ingredients and a bowl to make frosting for the cake.

“Are we at a loss again?” he asked watching her, “what happened to not being freaked out?”

She laughed wistfully but didn’t say anything – just picking up the spatula and slathering the layers of cake with chocolate frosting.

“Mya-” he began.

“No!” she interrupted, “No,” she said more quietly.

“No, what?” he asked.

“No. We are not discussing this anymore. No, we can’t change what has already happened, but we can control how this goes from here. So no, we are not doing this again.” she said firmly“, here, have the cake. Maybe you and Charlotte can share it, make up for your absence these past two days”.

She held out the cake to him, avoiding his eyes. He stared at her for a long while then took the cake. She ran out of the room and clattered up the stairs, going to her room and slamming

the door behind her. She leaned on it, breathing hard – trying to contain the pain that seemed to have taken up residence in her chest. It hurt every time she breathed. She should probably see if the grimoire could recommend anything for it – but she had a feeling there was no cure for this. She lay down on her stomach, burying her face in her pillow and tried very hard not to cry.

Chapter 14

In Which We See Just How Persistent He Can Be

She was dreaming about death, and falling off cliffs towards depths that were never reached. There was just a persistent sinking feeling she could not get rid of, and all around her were bodies –dead bodies. Some were human, many were not. She could see the corpse of a wolf, yellow sharp carnassials gleaming in its half-open mouth – the corpse of its prey lay eviscerated nearby. Blood was everywhere, and she looked at her reddened hands, flecked with bits of innards in horror. She ran screaming from the scene, only to fall off another cliff, and fall, and fall, and fall...

She jerked awake, heart beating painfully fast in her chest. She looked around at her darkened room, and then out the window. It was extremely early, or extremely late, depending on how one chose to look at it. Her body was bathed in sweat and she did not think she would fall asleep again. She got up, shedding her cotton nightie on the way to the bathroom, checking on the heater to see if there was any hot water. But she'd switched it off at night. Mentally shrugging her shoulders she slipped naked into the shower and turned it on. The water was lukewarm, and she stood still, letting it run over her as it would. Her heartbeat slowly returned to normal, but the misery that seemed to have descended upon her on the previous day persisted.

'*What shall I do today?'* she wondered to herself, trying to get her mind off...him. She thought about her grandmother and what she had said about the pool. Perhaps she should take a trip down the river, to see Mama Ruth. If anyone had any idea about what, or whom could have caused the appearance of that pool, she would.

She switched off the shower, and went to her room, sitting on the bed to dry off in the wind from her open window. The cold would distract her, she thought. She wore some jeans and her Grandpa George's old shirt and went downstairs to start the coffee.

'Pancakes.' She thought, '*I'll make some pancakes'.*

The coffee was percolating and she was just cooking her last pancake when she heard the

knocking. Wondering who could be out this early, she walked to the living room door and peeped out into the hallway. He was standing at the door, lifting his hand up to knock again. He saw her peering around the door and stopped.

“Open the door Mya,” he said.

“It's 6:30 in the morning Leo, what are you doing here?”

He leaned his head to the side and smiled, “I have a roof to finish, in case you forgot” he replied.

She stared at him, at a complete loss as to what to do.

He smiled at her and asked, “You want to go cook something while you figure it out?”

That surprised a laugh out of her, and she came and opened the door.

“Nice shirt” he commented wryly as he walked by her, “Are those pancakes I smell?”

“Leo, what are you doing?” she asked quick and biting.

“You know, I don’t think I’ve ever heard you say my name before” he replied turning his head to glance at her.

“I have too.,” she replied,” When I called you the other day?”

He paused in his rummage of her kitchen to say, “Oh yeah”, before picking up a cup and pouring himself some hot coffee.

“Honey?” he asked her.

“I beg your pardon?” she replied, confused.

“Do you have some honey?” he asked

“I...yes. Top shelf on the left” she replied, wondering how they’d gotten here again.

“Cheers,” he said, reaching up to the shelf and getting the jug. He put a pancake on a plate and slathered it with the honey before folding up the whole lot and putting it in his mouth.

“Mmm,” he murmured through the mouthful of pancake, managing to swallow eventually, “Delicious! Is there more?”

She glared balefully at him and said nothing. He stared back at her over his coffee cup, unfazed.

“Okay, I’ll just look for myself.” He said, turning around to peer at all the plates on the counter, “Ah! Here they are...and more coffee too. Hmmm” he murmured, helping himself to another cup then seating himself at her counter like he owned the place.

She marched over to the counter and plucked a few pancakes off the plate before he demolished the lot, and poured her own cup of coffee.

“So...you’re up early,” he said.

She looked over at him slowly then asked,” Is that a question or a statement?”

“Its...an opening gambit” he replied grinning at her.

“Gambit? Really? I’m surprised you know the word” she answered wryly.

“Hey!” he replied offended,” I’m not a complete idiot you know?”

“Oh, I know.” she replied with a grin of her own,” Some parts are definitely missing...”

He stared at her uncomprehendingly for a minute before his brow cleared “A-ha-ha”, he said, “witty”. But he was smiling into his cup.

“So I’m guessing that in spite of your resistance, you’re glad that I’m here...” he said after a short silence.

“Whatever gave you that idea?” she replied, avoiding his eye.

“Oh, I don’t know, the not-so-witty jokes maybe? The fact that you’re up at the crack of dawn, making enough pancakes to feed an army even though you’re all alone? Were you depressed at our little break-up yesterday? Planning to misery eat? Trouble sleeping?” he replied brows raised in smug inquiry.

“Well, you’re the one with all the answers Dr. Freud; you tell me” she replied.

“I...think, that this thing that is between us...well. I’m just saying if you had anything like the night I had last night...you’re glad I’m here” now it was his turn to avoid her eye.

There was silence for a while.

“So”, she eventually asked,” how *is* Charlotte?”

“I don’t know” he replied shortly.

“What do you mean you don’t know? Didn’t you share the cake with her?” she asked in surprise.

“Err, nope. My mom and I had it for dessert last night,” he said smiling, “Delicious!” he exclaimed as he waggled his brows at her, “You should be at a loss more often”.

She laughed in spite of herself. He really was impossible. But she must not let him charm her out of bringing Charlotte up. Whatever was going on between them, he was not a free man, and she was not interested in being the other woman.

“Leo...” she tried again

“Okay, Charlotte. I haven’t seen her since I started coming here. I told her not to expect me, because I was trying to make up for what I did, and I planned to be busy with you the whole time. She calls me sometimes. I’m not home. That’s it. Happy?”

“Not really. Why are you avoiding her?” she asked, not knowing why she was even asking...

“Because I don’t want to see her.” he replied, “Not right now.”

“Why? She’s your girlfriend”, she countered, wondering why she was going to bat for Charlotte like this anyway.

He sighed, “I...like Charlotte. She’s pretty, and she’s popular...and she’s rich...”

“Wow”, she said her eyes wide, “that is...effusive”

“My dad left us when I was eight,” he said abruptly “and my mom kind of checked out after

that. She was depressed for a long time, and somebody had to keep things moving around the house. Since I was the only one around, that somebody was me."

"O-okay. Soo, why are-" she began.

"Shut up and listen" he interrupted " I went to work at my uncle's place, learned how to cook and clean and fend for myself because my mother was too busy sleeping eight hours a day and crying into her whiskey to remember that she had a son. At the same time, I'm trying to keep up a front at school that everything is hunky dory because I don't want social services to come knocking...it was exhausting."

"I see that" she murmured sympathetically.

"I'm not telling you this so you can feel sorry for me. So don't" he said curtly, "anyway, the struggle to survive was a pain in the ass – and hanging out with people who had everything handed to them on a silver platter did not help one bit. But once I got over being eternally jealous, I decided that this struggle wasn't going to last forever and that I was going to get out..."

"Enter, Charlotte" she interjected.

"Exactly. She'd wanted me for a while when it hit me that humouring her might not be such a bad thing – and it hasn't been. My life has gotten a lot easier since I hooked up with her; my wardrobe has certainly taken an upward turn in quality and label, I don't have to worry about how I'm going to pay for field trips, holidays or party favours. She takes care of me."

"Touching," she said.

"You don't understand. You think I'm a cold-blooded son-of-a-bitch, don't you? Well it's easy for you to sneer – you didn't have to live my life"

She laughed derisively, "Look around you, Leo. This isn't exactly Buckingham Palace. "

"Maybe. But you've always had people who love you, taking care of you." He countered, looking her straight in the eye.

She stared back at him, before dropping her eyes, "I'm...sorry. I didn't mean to be judgemental. I'm sure you do what you have to. But in that case, why jeopardise it all like

this?" she asked.

"Who said anything about jeopardising anything?" he replied with his brows almost touching his hairline, " the way I see it – this...thing...that's going on between us is a whole different ball game from what I have with Charlotte. So why not...explore it, see where it goes?"

"Explore...?" she asked sceptically.

"Yeah, you know, we converse; we...repair roofs...maybe more, maybe not." He said, looking into his cup.

"Leo, I am not going to be your mistress" Mya stated

"I did not ask you to be my mistress.", he countered. "I just want to get to know you. I can talk to you. I've never told anyone about ...you know, my mum and what not. Only Miles knows – and that's because he was there. Besides, "he laughed, "mistress? Really? I'm sorry is this 1890 or 1990?"

"You know what I mean", she said, her face getting quite hot.

"Yeah, I do. You're scared that I want to use you for sex then discard you like yesterday's news. That is not what is happening here. I just...like being with you."

"Being with...as in sleeping with?" she asked, looking him in the eye despite her flaming face.

"Sleeping with, sitting with, talking to, repairing roofs with, eating your food...name it", he smiled at her.

"Well I'm not sleeping with you anymore", she answered.

"Can I eat your food?" he said.

"I guess" she replied uncertainly. 'Unless that's a metaphor '

"It's not so we have a deal?" he said, his smile widening "Okay then, shall we get to work? The roof won't repair itself."

"I-I can't today. I need to take a trip downriver" she said, not wanting to test her resolve not

to touch him so soon.

“Downriver? To do what?” he asked, “Can’t I come with?”

“No.” She said shortly and quickly, “Mama Ruth doesn’t like visitors.”

“So what are you?” he countered.

“I’m...almost a colleague” she replied avoiding his eyes.

“Ah...witch business,” he said with a wry smile.

“You could say that. And I have to get going so...” she said standing up and moving toward the door“, wash the dishes for me?” she threw over her shoulder.

He watched her walk out the door then murmured, “Sure”.

Chapter 15

In Which Some Mysteries Get Deeper

The river was peaceful and quiet. The birds were having loud conversations in the trees and other less friendly creatures were slithering about beneath. She had a small boat which she used sometimes to go fishing down the river, other times she just liked to row. It helped her to clear her mind and calmed her down when she was agitated. Like now.

She had left Leo in her house. Alone. The curious intimacy of that gesture was making her feel a little breathless. Everything seemed to be happening so fast – one day, Leo was the boyfriend of the girl who made her life hell with all the Princess Patra crap she pulled, the next day she's compelled to have illicit sex with him to save the life of the very same girl and now...apparently they were friends – or something. She thought with nostalgia to the old days where her biggest worry was whether two dresses were enough to take her through the school term. Her grandmother was old, ill and did not get a pension. Their only source of income was the garden from which they derived most of their food, the surplus of which was sold to the green grocer's. And the potions and spells that her grandmother trafficked in, to various townspeople who snuck in through back roads to find magical solutions to their problems. The forest yielded the occasional source of meat when her snares caught a rabbit or possum, and the river had fish. It might not be the most opulent lifestyle – but it was hers, and she loved it. But now, that lifestyle seemed threatened by all these intrusions from the outside world and she was feeling a little exposed.

Before she knew it, her destination was in sight. She slowed her boat down and turned it to glide to the side of the river until it bumped against the end of a low-lying branch. She caught hold of the branch and ground to a stop then stood waiting. She did not get out of her boat but stood in the middle so she was visible. Soon she saw a creature making its way through the forest. It was a grey wolf, and it was trotting toward her with purpose. She stood absolutely still and waited for it to reach her. The wolf stopped a few feet away from her and stood staring at her nose twitching. She looked back at it, her own nose feeling a little itchy in response to all the twitching.

"Mama Ruth around?" she asked it, "I need to talk to her."

The wolf turned around and began to trot away, stopping briefly to check she was following. She was grateful for the hiking boots she was wearing because the forest floor hid many things that crept and crawled and she was not interested in being bitten by a water moccasin or a rattler – though rare in these parts, they weren't exactly extinct. The wolf was going faster and she was too preoccupied in keeping up to worry about creatures on the ground. The birds were singing in the trees anyway so it was unlikely that danger was near. Well, out of the ordinary danger anyway.

The wolf disappeared around a corner. She turned the same corner and almost ran into a woman of indeterminate age, with long grey dreadlocked hair the same hue as the wolf's pelt and eyes as black. She barely cleared five feet tall but stood with the posture of a queen and it made her seem taller. In the local witch circles, there was a suspicion that Mama Ruth and her wolf were one and the same, but Mya was damned if she'd ever heard of magic that could turn a person into a beast.

"Mya." The woman said with a bob of her head.

"Mama Ruth" she replied with a bob of her own and a small curtsey.

"I have been expecting you," Mama Ruth said, voice gone raspy with nicotine use.

"Yeah? Well, here I am" Mya said a bit nervously. She had been to Mama Ruth's before, playing messenger for her grandmother, either bringing something to her or collecting something from her. This was the first time she'd been here for herself though, and it was a little intimidating. What was she to say? She opened her mouth uncertainly, wondering what to say but Mama Ruth got there before her.

"Come," she said as she turned and disappeared behind a huge stone monolith that guarded the entrance to a clearing surrounded by trees so tall and old they almost looked like a circle of wise old crones, watching the progress of Men with dim-eyed curiosity. In the middle of the circle was a fire - a fire, unlike any Mya had ever seen. It burned with so many different colours it was disorienting and the flames leapt about, seeming to be alive and aware. Around the fire was a circle of stones, the upper surfaces of which were flat so that it looked like a circle of stools around the fire. Mama Ruth was already seated on one of the stones directly opposite Mya, so she walked slowly forward and lowered herself onto one of the stones. Although the fire was no more than two feet in front of her and the flames were

leaping so high they were over her head, they did not sear her. The whole atmosphere was so out of her experience she was a little scared. Maybe it had been a mistake to come here.

“Mya”, Mama Ruth said, “Don’t be afraid. You have something you have to say to me?”

“I-...” Mya began but her voice dried up. She took a deep breath and started again.

“About a month ago, a pool appeared at a friend’s house. It seemed to be of some water-based substance and there were coloured lights swirling about above it. The pool was about three feet in diameter and when my friend went closer to look at it; she was grabbed by the lights and thrown in the pool. She did not sink but just lay below the surface in an unconscious state. Nobody could touch her, and nobody else but me could get near the pool. I used a levitation spell to lift her and a spark spell to jump-start her heart again, but I could not revive her. Meanwhile, the pool disappeared.“

“The boy, tell me about the boy,” Mama Ruth said.

Mya stared at her in disbelief, “Boy?”

“He whom you used for the recasting spell.” Mama Ruth said, looking her in the eye.

“Leo?” Mya asked in stupefaction.

“Is that his name? Leo?” Mama Ruth asked

“Yes. His name is Leo. What...“Mya asked, increasingly bewildered.

“And he knew you?” Mama Ruth interrupted

“Knew me? Well, yes we go to the same school. What...“Mya tried again

“No” Mama Ruth interrupted again, “I meant, you were intimate with this boy?”

Mya stared at her, at a complete loss as to what to say. “Y-yes” she whispered, at last, looking down.

“Ah,” Mama Ruth said, sitting back in what looked like relief. It’s only when she relaxed that Mya realised how tense she had been.

“What has that got to do with anything”, she said, finally able to finish her sentence.

Mama Ruth smiled at her, dark eyes enigmatic.

“You want to know about the pool, yes? The magic pool and why it appeared.” She said to her, “the appearance of such pools cannot be predicted or explained by anyone. They are portals through which the Fates move.”

Mya opened her mouth to ask who or what the Fates were but Mama Ruth got there before her.

“The Fates are beings whose origin and or species is not known to humankind. They manifest as light or sound, sometimes as thought. It is thought that their true form cannot be encompassed by the human mind and that is why they only see light or sound or thought. Sometimes a child or someone thought to be mentally ill might see more. But naturally, they are not then able to describe them credibly”

“Why-“ Mya began

“Why would they want to manifest in your friend’s backyard?” Mama Ruth interrupted again, “that is a good question. It could be part of the fulfilment of a prophecy...”

Mya waited for her to continue, but Mama Ruth just looked back at her with that enigmatic look on her face.

“What prophesy?” she prompted at last.

“I couldn’t say just at present”, Mama Ruth said, “I expect all will become clear in time”

“All will become clear in time? Really!?” Mya asked in disbelief.

“Yes.” Mama Ruth said placidly.

Mya sighed; deeply disappointed. She’d come here for answers and now she had even more questions. *What was this prophecy? And why was Mama Ruth so interested in Leo?*

“Do you like the boy?” Mama Ruth asked with a smile.

Mya started, narrowing her eyes in suspicion. Did Mama Ruth read minds?

“Why do you ask?” she asked her.

Mama Ruth just smiled, enigmatic as ever.

“Where are my manners?” Mama Ruth said abruptly, “Would you like some tea?”

Mya was so taken by surprise at the abrupt change of subject that she was nodding her head before she could really think about it. Mama Ruth lifted her hand and waved it in a semi-circle from left to right. She continued the trajectory to pick up a steaming red and black polka dot kettle that appeared at her feet. She reached out her other hand and a mug appeared in it, into which she poured the tea and passed the cup over to her guest. Mya took it with a bit of trepidation and brought it up to her nose to smell it. It smelled like tea and it looked like tea. Tentatively, she took a sip – tasted like tea too...she looked over at Mama Ruth to see her smiling.

“Don’t worry, it’s not poisoned, I promise you,” her charming hostess said to her.

“I know”, Mya replied, a bit embarrassed at being caught out like that. She’d known Mama Ruth forever. This was ridiculous. She took a real sip of the tea; it was delicious and made her feel relaxed. She took another sip. – Very relaxed. Her limbs felt liquid yet heavy at the same time. She was suddenly full of sleepy well-being: like she was high on Ganja. She smiled at the thought because she’d only ever seen its effect on other people, so how would she know what it felt like?

“Good, you’re comfortable” Mama Ruth’s voice floated toward her as if from a distance.

“I’m comfortable” Mya whispered back, eyes drifting shut as her hand slowly dropped her mug.

“Now the boy, what did you say his name was?” Mama Ruth asked, disappearing the mug with a flick of her wrist.

“Leo.” Mya murmured with a dreamy smile

“Yes, Leo. How many times have you been intimate with him?” Mama Ruth asked leaning

forward.

Mya giggled...she was embarrassed to hear such a sound coming out of her mouth but she could not deny it was definitely a giggle.

“I don’t know”, she said; face flaming, “more than three times?”

Mama Ruth’s eyes widened with what looked like gratification to Mya’s fuzzy mind. “Ah”, she said, with a slight smile, “so you are...together?”

Mya frowned in confusion, her mind seemed to have slowed down considerably, and she pondered for a minute what ‘together’ might mean.

“You mean...” she said pausing mid-sentence to think.

“I mean are you in a relationship now?” Mama Ruth clarified

Mya had to think about this a little before settling on, “I don’t know”

It was Mama Ruth’s turn to frown in puzzlement, “You don’t...know?” she repeated

Mya gave her a brilliant smile and said suddenly “Yes!” before closing her eyes and nodding off.

“Mya!” Mama Ruth called seemingly from a great distance.

“Yes?” she whispered back

“Focus.” Mama Ruth said in a somewhat sharper tone than she’d been heretofore using, “This boy-“

“Leo. His name is Leo” Mya said dreamily.

“Yes. Leo. Are you or are you not in a relationship with him?” Mama Ruth asked

“He says not,” Mya said in a somewhat downcast tone.

“I...see”, Mama Ruth said speculatively, “but...you love him?”

Mya was silent for a while, and then she shrugged her shoulders.

“Let me guess”, Mama Ruth said wryly, “You don’t know?”

Mya shrugged again and Mama Ruth sighed.

“Okay, Mya. You will sleep now. When you wake up, you will remember only that you came for a visit, we had some tea, and you left. Nod if you understand” Mama Ruth said.

Mya nodded then her head fell onto her chest and she gave a little snore. Mama Ruth built up the fire again to its full strength. The flames were leaping so high they reached the tips of the lower branches of the tall trees. Then she took a piece of parchment from a roll of papyrus concealed within a gourd under her stone stool. She spread her hands over the parchment and words appeared upon it. She rolled up the parchment and held it out to the fire. A single flame seemed to leap out of the fire and snatch the parchment from her hand. The pieces were consumed by the fire and yet seemed to leap into the air disappearing with the smoke into the gathering evening mist. As blackness settled upon Mya she pondered upon the words on the parchment she’d seen just before her she blacked out...

‘It has begun...’

Chapter 16

In Which Leo Is Worried

Mya hadn't been on the river so late in the evening before. The whole atmosphere was a little spooky and if she was being honest with herself, she was a little afraid. She had heard that mountain lions sometimes came down at night to drink at the river and hunt...and she knew that there were definitely alligators in the river, and water moccasins. But that wasn't the worst – wild animals she could deal with. It was actually her dead relatives she wasn't so sure about. Her grandmother had said that sometimes the spirits of witches past sometimes walked at night. And considering that Samhain was approaching, well, circumstances seemed conducive for them to make their presence felt. The mist on the river and the place she'd come from was making her feel that the supernatural was very near to her and it scared her quite a bit.

She closed her eyes and clutched the amulet around her neck. Grandpa George had given it to her shortly before he died and it had more than once given her comfort and courage when she was afraid. It made her feel her grandfather's presence nearby and ghost or not, that spirit was always benign and protective. She took a deep breath, feeling better. Summoning a spell she'd learned early in life from her grandmother's friend, Sophia, she speeded up the boat.

She moored the boat in the little alcove where she usually kept it and made her way through the forest, skirting the family graveyard even though that added a mile to her journey. By the time the house came into sight, she was so tired she couldn't wait to get to bed. Her mind was so exhausted in fact, that she didn't notice that the lights were on.

"Where have you been!?" a deep baritone voice shouted at her as she came through the back door.

She was so startled she almost fell back out the door. She clutched her heart in shock, to behold Leo standing in front of her, legs akimbo and hands on hip – glaring at her with those slate-grey eyes, looking as cold as a freezing winter wind.

"What are you doing here?" she asked in breathless turn.

"What am I-" he began, his face getting whiter with what looked very much like anger, "What do you mean what am I doing here? You left me here this morning when you went off to run your mysterious errand. Do you have any idea how dangerous it is on the water at this time of the night? Do you have any *sense at all*?" he asked, his voice seeming to get louder with each word, till she was sure only dogs would be able to hear him soon.

She opened her mouth to tell him to calm down but thought better of it and sighed instead. She was a little at a loss for words and her mind was too tired to puzzle out why the dickens Leo was standing in her hallway hollering about how dangerous the river was.

"I'm tired," she said shoulders slumped, "I'm going to bed. Goodnight" and turned and walked up the stairs, leaving him staring at her in disbelief.

"Mya" he called after her, in a slightly calmer tone than he'd previously been using.

"Yes?" she replied, pausing at the top of the stairs to look down at him.

He stared at her for a long while before saying quietly, "I'll see you in the morning".

"Okay", she answered indifferently before heading to her room and to bed.

ξ

Mya started awake at about the same time as the birds did, feeling disoriented. Had she seen Mama Ruth yesterday? And had Mama Ruth hypnotised her or what? And had Leo shouted at her last night?

"Coffee," she said aloud. That's was what she needed. Some coffee to make sense of what her life was coming to. *She needed to stop feeling so out of control all the time*.

She wandered downstairs in her nightshirt, hair all over the place in lumpy clumps because she hadn't taken the time to plait it the night before and eyes sandy and swollen with sleep. Stepping into the sitting room, she stopped short seeing the lump on the sofa. It was a rather man-shaped lump, the suspicion that it was actually a man being reinforced by the pair of size fourteen feet protruding over the arms of the sofa. It was covered with the plaid that usually concealed all the burn marks on the old rocking chair that stood at the corner. It

looked quite uncomfortable the way he was lying, the sofa not made for anyone over five and a half feet stretched out. She reached out to pull back the plaid then had a thought as to how she looked and snatched her hand back, creeping fast out of the room to the nearest bathroom to wash her face and comb her hair. Then forgetting that she was dressed only in a short nightshirt, she went and woke him up.

"Good morning," she said cheerily," are you lost?"

Leo glared blearily up at her. His eyes were bloodshot and he looked tired and cranky – and yet he was still gorgeous. Life was just not fair.

"Me? Lost? If anyone's lost, it's you" he replied rudely

"Ha! I'm the one who spent the night in my own bed. You're the one who folded yourself into a couch not even long enough to fit your legs alone so..."

"You're the one who came home so late and acting so strange it would have been irresponsible for me to leave you alone." He countered still glaring

"Leo Devereux. Mr. Responsible..." she said sarcastically, "Nope. Don't see it. And what do you mean; acting strangely?"

His eyebrow went up and he turned around on the sofa, folding his legs under him and putting his plaid back up, closing his eyes and apparently going back to sleep. She stared at him for a full minute then shrugged her shoulders and went to brew that coffee. Having him here somehow made her feel more stable, less precarious. Omelette...she thought. Yes, that would do nicely for breakfast. With cheese and onion. She grimaced, thinking about the potential for smelly breath in that combo but then thought that if Leo was going to be hanging around, then any constraints she could institute against kissing might be a wise move. She glanced at the lump on her sofa but it was unmoving.

'*Why was he still here?!'*

"Why are you still here?" she asked him, "seriously".

The plaid heaved, and Leo sat up.

"Seriously. I was worried about you last night. You didn't seem quite...right" he said in a

comparatively even tone of voice.

She kept her eyes trained on the contents of the refrigerator, looking for ingredients. “Well...I was feeling a bit...off” she replied. ‘Cheese*!’* She spotted with relief, *‘and onion...’*

“What happened to you?” he asked curiously

“Nothing really,” she said after a pause to think about it, “ I went to Mama Ruth’s, we had some tea – she told me about the pool, I remember that – and then...well, I was on my boat, coming home. It was dark...and scary.”

He stared as if waiting for her to say more, but that was really all she could recall.

“ I thought you’d be back earlier when it started to get late, I-“ he stopped short, seeming to be at a loss, “ I couldn’t leave without knowing whether you were alright or not.”

“I’m touched,” she said, half-sarcastic, half-sincere.

He gave her a look, somewhere between exasperation and ire. “I didn’t appreciate the way you dismissed me last night,” he added

She stopped rummaging long enough to look at him, “I didn’t dismiss you. I was tired and I just couldn’t deal with all the drama you were bringing. I didn’t even get why you were still in my house!” she replied, her voice rising.

“*I* don’t get why I’m still in your house” he yelled back at her.

“Well, then – leave!” she answered irritably.

There was a charged silence in which they glared at each other balefully.

“So what about the pool?”, Leo asked at last.

“What?” she asked, completely wrong-footed

“The pool, what did Mama Ruth say about it?” he asked

“She...said that it was a portal,” Mya said slowly, wondering if she was authorised to share the information or not.

“A portal for...?” Leo prompted.

“Fates”, Mya whispered.

“Err, who? What?” Leo asked in simulated confusion, a slight smile showing on his face.

Mya sighed; feeling like Leo was back to making fun of her and not being in the mood to tolerate it.

“Weren’t you leaving?” she asked an edge to her voice.

“No. Were you?” Leo replied in the same tone.

“It’s my place, dude”, she said a little louder.

“So what?” Leo replied facetiously.

“So leave!” Mya shouted.

“No” Leo countered in an even tone, not raising his voice but looking her in the eye as if challenging her to throw him out if she dared.

She glared at him, and he stared back at her. Her chest was heaving with emotion and her eyes were misty with tears of anger and frustration. Suddenly the ridiculousness of the situation hit her, and she burst out into loud laughter. Leo continued to stare at her, seemingly unmoved by her change of mood. Gradually the laughter petered off into slight hiccoughs.

“Feel better?” he asked with a lift of an eyebrow.

“Yeah. Yeah, I do feel better, thank you. Now I need some eggs for my omelettes so you’ll excuse me while I visit the chicken coop” she said, walking out the door and hoping he’d have gone by the time she returned.

“I’ll butter some bread” he called after her, getting up from his makeshift bed.

She sighed in resignation and went to see how many eggs she could scrounge...

ξ

“I’m sorry about earlier. I was grouchy because I didn’t really sleep well” Leo said to her,

replete after a massive breakfast of omelette with toast and baked beans.

“Well, you have nobody to blame but yourself for that” Mya replied a bit smugly.

“Oh, I think I can legitimately blame you” Leo countered

“What! Why? *I* didn’t tell you to sleep on the couch, did I?” Mya replied indignantly.

“No you didn’t, but the couch wasn’t why I didn’t sleep well – you were” Leo answered.

“Me?” Mya asked in disbelief, “What did I do?”

“W-eell”, Leo replied with what definitely looked like a rakish smile, “It’s more what you *didn’t* do that was keeping me up...or rather the side effects”.

Mya gave him a puzzled and suspicious smile; what was he talking about? He looked eloquently down into his lap then back up at her again, eyebrows almost touching his hairline. She stared at him uncomprehendingly and then looked down into his lap as well – to see that he was either harbouring a banana in his pocket or else he was *very* glad to see her.

“Oh,” she said in a small voice looking away from him.

“Yes, oh.” He replied smiling at her and trying to maintain eye contact by leaning sideways and consequently almost falling off his chair.

“Your mother must be getting worried about you. Shouldn’t you be getting home?” Mya asked him a bit breathlessly.

In response, he stood up and came to stand in front of her, which brought his erection exactly at eye level with her.

“How” he demanded “, am I supposed to walk around with that?”

Her eyes tried to slide away from the sight in front of her but he was standing too close, his groin encompassed her entire field of vision.

“Well, I’m sure I don’t know” she murmured, “Maybe you could try a cold shower?”

He squatted down beside her, putting his hands on her thighs – they radiated heat like a

furnace – and said, “I could...or *we* could...”

“No, we couldn’t,” she said in a louder voice than she’d intended.

His eyebrows went up, “you don’t even know what I was going to say!” he protested

“Yes I do” she countered quickly, trying to remove his resistant hands from her thighs, “Leo?”

“Yes?”

“Get your hands off me”

“No”

“Why?”

“Because...I can’t”

His eyes were hot, more charcoal burning than slate grey, and his mouth was coming closer by the second. Mya tried to think of something to say to break the spell that seemed to bind them, but nothing whatsoever occurred to her. Then his lips were on hers, and it was game over.

Their tongues played catch in their mouths, playfully touching then sliding away only to come closer, yearning for more. Eyes closed, rendering them deliberately blind, enhancing other senses – touch, smell, taste, and sound. The touch of his hands all over her, hot with passion and desperate with longing evoked a mad response in her that she did not want to examine too closely. It reeked of desperate need and callous disregard for propriety or rules. It responded only to the call of now which was as primal and primitive and old as any living creature; the timeless urge to mate.

Clothes were strewn everywhere – her nightshirt was over by the aga, providing a makeshift cover for the coffee pot...how it got there, only God knew. She was stark naked, lying on the rug in the living room, with Leo lying atop her, still wedged firmly inside her – she thought he might have passed out because he hadn’t moved in the last five minutes. She knew he was still alive because she could feel him breathing. She thought wryly to herself that this room would soon have to be renamed the sex room if they were not careful. Her

grandmother would be back sooner or later – they really had to stop this!

“Leo?” she said into his shoulder

“Mmm?” he murmured sleepily in reply, not moving an inch.

“*Gerroff me!*”

He heaved himself to the side and lay on his back next to her, arms and legs stretched out, and eyes closed. She sat up and he stretched out a hand to stop her.

“Weaugoin?” he asked

“I beg your pardon?” she asked, cocking her ear in confusion

“Where. Are.you.going?” he asked again, slowly.

“I’m all sticky, I’m going to clean myself up” she replied sharply

“Don’t.” He said, not opening his eyes

“Don’t?” she asked with a frown, “Why not?”

“Because I’m just going to make you sticky again”, he replied a smile growing on his lips, though his eyes remained closed.

“Oh really?” she asked.

“Really” he asserted firmly reaching over and pulling her onto his outstretched body.

She gave a little squeal which he cut off very effectively by kissing her until she was dizzy. His hands moved down to her hips, positioning her over his very alert member, and with one fluid motion, he was inside her again; making her gasp with the depth of his reach.

“Oh God Mya”, he moaned, before coherence left them both...

Chapter 17

In Which an A New Term Begins

School began in five days – in five more days, their idyll would be over. They could no longer hide from the real world. There would be no more excuses to spend every day in each other's company – laughing, talking, making repairs to the house, cooking their favourite dishes...or making love. They hadn't talked about Charlotte again after that fateful morning when Leo had refused to leave. Indeed he'd barely left since – returning home only to change clothes and let his friends and family know that he was still alive and well – and doing repairs at Mya's. As far as everyone knew, Mya was working him like a slave, and he was doing his penance so that she would not report him to the authorities. Miles sympathised but felt that Leo really had brought it on himself. Charlotte had gone off to New York City to shop for the new school year, and in her view, better Leo be working hard at Mya's rather than hanging out with those slutty girls who tended to coalesce around him whenever he was out on the town. Only Leo's mother knew that something was up – Leo never worked this hard for *anybody* and she'd never seen him so relaxed and carefree while he did it. She wondered what the angle was with this Mya witch – was she feeding her son something? There was definitely something more going on there than met the eye...

Leo was in two minds about this whole business. On the one hand, the last two weeks had been the most fun he could remember having in his life; on the other, Charlotte would be back in town in two days, and he had to keep his eyes on the prize. *Had to.* This was one of those situations where the big picture was more important than immediate happiness. Sure, it was very difficult to think of the big picture when he had Mya in front of him- maybe he'd just have to start avoiding her...from tomorrow though; she'd said something about chocolate chip cookies when he was leaving last night – God, he would miss her cooking...

Charlotte called her father and asked whether she could get the plane two days earlier than planned. All of her shopping was done, and she wanted to get home to Leo. He'd sounded increasingly distant every time she spoke to him in the last week. That was if she

could even reach him. Leo was a little too good looking for his own good – she thought she'd left him to his own devices for far too long already. There were always vultures waiting for any chance to move in on him. You couldn't really trust anyone in these situations not even Tina or Ashley. She'd done some shopping that was sure to thrill Leo; both for him and for herself. She held out the creamy silk negligee she'd purchased at Victoria's Secret – the better to measure it against her voluptuous frame. The nude colour made her look like she was simultaneously naked and slinky; she was sure Leo would die. She smiled to herself as she packed it lovingly at the top of her bag.

Mya woke up suddenly wondering what was amiss...then she remembered. It was the happy feeling in her chest that she was still quite unused to. Every day of her life for as long as she could remember, she'd woken up vaguely anxious about some aspect of her life or other. Either the snails were eating her cabbages, or she was afraid of being laughed at, because of her clothes, or she was alone with no one to talk to...now she had a bubble of happiness lodged in her chest that she couldn't seem to get rid of. And it was all due to an over-pretty wannabe social climber named Leo, who she had been sure she disliked not two weeks ago! Life was truly strange. She jumped up quickly, remembering that she'd promised him chocolate chip cookies. Her supply of chocolate was running low...she needed to stop baking for Leo soon or her food budget would be ruined!

Grandma Matia woke with an anxious feeling in her chest. She'd been increasingly worried about her granddaughter in these last two weeks. The feeling was amorphous and she had no concrete reason to feel like this other than for the story that Mya herself had told her about the Devereux boy. The boy worried her because he reminded her of his father. A lady-killer Frank Devereux had been...he had gone through the ladies faster than a hot knife through butter. The only person important to him was himself. If Mya was mixed up with his son, it was definitely cause for worry. But there was more to this situation than met the eye if she was any judge and she did not know if it boded good or ill for her granddaughter...all she knew is that she could not shake the worry.

Mama Ruth filled the shallow bowl with water to the brim. She added a few powdered herbs into the water then placed it over the small fire she had made in an old marmalade tin. As steam began to rise as the water heated up, there seemed to be images appearing and disappearing in the resulting mist. First, the figure of a Negro girl, hair in plaits tied in an afro

ponytail, wearing a loose print frock dress. Behind her came a taller figure, dark hair, and male, of the Caucasian persuasion. The taller figure put his arms around the girl and pulled her close to him. His head bent towards hers and he kissed the top of her head. He turned her around and his lips descended to hers. The girl was enveloped by an aura of blue while her companion's aura pulsed with red light; the light of their auras seemed to coalesce around the area of her torso merging into the ring of royal purple that circled their middles. Mama Ruth sat back with a pensive smile...all was proceeding as written it seemed.

Coach Maxwell was a bit nervous about the start of the new basketball season. Many of his players had left the squad with the end of the preceding school year, and he would be relying on a few key players to hold the team together. Bolt especially was the focal point around which the team revolved. He had better bring his top form to the new season if he hoped to benefit from any scholarship opportunities. Coach Maxwell considered Leo 'Bolt' Devereux as the closest thing to a son he would ever have and he was immensely proud of his progress as a basketball player. He was good enough to go pro if he kept his focus. He'd been hearing stories about strange goings-on this summer within the group that Bolt hung out with, but he just hoped that once the term started, Bolt would be able to get his head back in the game and leave any sideshows behind. Coach Maxwell looked back at his game plan, going over the plays that would ensure them a place on the medals board for at least the regional championships – maybe even the nationals...

Chapter 18

In Which Reality Becomes Harsh

"Hello" a familiar sultry voice murmured in honeyed tones down the line.

"Charlotte", Leo said in a rather more flat tone, "I was just leaving, what's up?"

"Weell, I have a surprise for you" the honeyed tone continued, "Guess who's in town!" she said in a sing-song voice.

"Don't tell me", Leo said, trying to inject some enthusiasm into his voice.

"Yes! I came back early" Charlotte said with a delighted laugh.

"Great", Leo said, sounding flat in spite of his best efforts, thinking regretfully of the chocolate chip cookies he was missing right now. To think that if he'd just left five minutes earlier...

"So? Are you coming over?" she prompted.

"Of course", he replied with an internal sigh.

ξ

Mya placed the last tray of chocolate chip cookies on the kitchen sill to cool. It was a good thing Leo was running late because he tended to lick half the batter before it had a chance to be converted to cookies. There was time to maybe wash up and change into something more...well. there was the animal print dress – he liked the way it clung to her...or she could just wear one of Grandpa George's shirts; he liked that look too.

Mya stopped short, marvelling at her worrying about how she looked. Since when did she care what some guy thought of her clothes? '*Poor show, Andrewes'* she thought with a sneer to herself, '*very poor. Next thing you know, you'll be trying to wear matching clothes like Charlotte does...*'

The thought of Charlotte brought her back to earth with a nasty bump. She thought back to the last conversation they'd had about her when Leo had said he did not mean to jeopardise that relationship...she would be back day after tomorrow. Then what? She was pretty sure that whatever she was feeling was not one-sided. But she also knew that Leo was an intensely practical sort - he wouldn't let his feelings get in the way of his ambitions. *And what about me*? She needed to get a plan, know what she would do in the event...

She couldn't think about it.

She threw down the towel she'd been clutching, which she'd used to hold the hot tray and ran up the stairs to the attic where she sat on the floor, picking a book at random and opening it. It was a book on prophecies, written by her great-aunt Mairiebelle, who had lived during the Great War. She didn't remember taking it down from the shelf, but there it was on the

floor at her feet, seemingly waiting for her to open it.

The Fates

Not much is known about these beings but they are said to guide the course of human existence, sentinels at the gateways that separate humans from the chaos without, devising ways to keep it from overwhelming humankind. The Fates are known to be repositories of magic, and humans are able to access this magic through bloodlines with which Fates are known to have mixed. The Fates have at one time or other taken human form, and mated with humans of certain abilities, creating lineages of witches and warlocks. The magic in these bloodlines varies among the descendants, and some are able to manifest it more strongly than others. Once in millennia, a human child is born who is almost pure magic. Such beings are rare, and their coming feared by those of lesser ability. Many are killed at birth, but if they do survive to the age of thirteen when they come to their full power; they are almost indestructible.

Well, and what was this? Mya asked herself, completely distracted from her miserable thoughts. Where had she heard about Fates before? They sounded very familiar, but she could not remember where...

Then it came to her, Mama Ruth! That was where she'd heard the word Fates - when she had been explaining about the pool. She had said that the pool was a portal for the Fates to pass. But she had not explained why they needed to pass through Charlotte's garden. Wait, there had been something about a prophesy too! Mya could not clearly recall the strange afternoon she spent in Mama Ruth's company. The whole thing was shrouded in a haze, and she was not sure what was real and what was imagined about that day. She was quite sure though, that Mama Ruth had not explained it to her very well; why she'd been the only one who could approach the pool or anything. But if the Fates were beings of magic, perhaps it had required a person who possessed magic themselves to go near the pool! But wait, Charlotte had got near the pool – in fact, she'd been pulled *into* the pool by the lights. So, what did that mean? The more she thought about it, the more mysterious it all seemed – and just a little bit more sinister. God, where was her grandmother when she needed her?

Leo was definitely late. They had not agreed on a time that he would come by, but the sun was almost over the yardarm and he wasn't here. He usually arrived at her doorstep by nine in the morning, earlier sometimes, but rarely later. What could have happened? She went downstairs, book wedged under her arm, to check on the cookies – not a moment too soon as

a chipmunk was trying its level best to wedge open the kitchen window to get to them. She snatched the trays from the sill and slipped the cookies into the jar. She placed the jar on the top shelf, away from inquisitive pests, and sat down to read more as she waited for him to come, or call. It occurred to her that this was an extremely pathetic way to behave, but she couldn't seem to make herself stop. She tried to absorb herself in the text, but she was distracted by every noise she heard that could maybe be a car on the road or even a person on foot. Tossing the book aside, she threw caution to the winds and decided to call his house.

"Yes?" an extremely curt voice answered on the third ring.

"H-hello, erm, I'd like to speak to Leo please?", Mya said tentatively.

"He's not here" the curt voice replied, "try Charlotte's number," it said, and hung up.

Try Charlotte's number? Mya thought in startlement, so *she was back, was she*? Well, that explained Leo's no-show. He must have wanted to catch up with her, rekindle the flame or whatever. Mya went to the kitchen and made a huge pot of coffee. She took down the jar of cookies and placed them in her lap, with the pot on a table beside her. She carefully poured out a cup and emptying all the cookies onto a tray, she worked her way through the entire batch, thinking of nothing.

ξ

Leo was thinking very hard; about how soon he could leave the Le Carre mansion.

'*She must be going crazy, wondering where I am'* he thought to himself. '*Now what do I do*?' he thought about all his options, as he lay naked in bed beside his girlfriend. He could pretend that nothing had happened or it was all just a fling and proceed to ignore Mya from now on; or he could come clean to Charlotte about the nature of his relationship with Mya and say goodbye to a future paved with gold; or...he could continue to see Mya on the side and hope for the best. Of all the options available to him, the third one seemed the most attractive. He just had to get Mya on board. That shouldn't be too difficult considering it would simply entail continuing what they had started an odd fortnight ago – had it only been two weeks? He felt like he'd known Mya all his life...

ξ

Charlotte wanted to invite the rest of the gang over to gag over her purchases. Leo tried to dissuade her from this course of action because he knew that once gathered, the gang would not be satisfied with anything less than a full-fledged party, which meant that the earliest he could possibly leave would be 4 am. But Charlotte was determined and what Charlotte wanted – she got.

Tina arrived first with David, a joint trailing smoke in his wake as he walked a step or two behind his crush. Leo and Charlotte exchanged speculative glances, wondering where the third member of this trio was.

“Where’s Aaron?”, Charlotte asked Tina – she wasn’t one to be subtle unless there was something in it for her.

“Oh, he’s sulking, I think he’ll probably be by later”, Tina replied airily.

Charlotte’s face lit with the prospect of some juicy titbit, “Why’s he sulking” she asked with an eager smile.

Tina murmured something vaguely along the lines of ‘jealousy and envy’ and went to accept the drink that David was pouring for her. Charlotte lifted her brow at Leo who shrugged back at her. Undoubtedly they would pry the gory details out of one or the other of them sooner or later.

Miles blew in next, with Ashley in tow. It looked like they had been together, and Leo thought wryly that clearly, he’d missed a lot while he was a Mya’s ‘repairing the roof’.

“We should call Mya!” Charlotte announced to the room at large.

“What?” Leo asked startled, “Why?”

“Because, she’s my friend and its time she forgave you”, Charlotte said with what she probably imagined was a benevolent smile.

“Charlotte...leave her alone” Leo tried to protest.

“We have to be in school with her, Leo! We can’t let this bad blood continue.” Charlotte insisted.

"I promise you Charlotte, there is no bad blood. We sorted it all out" Leo answered a little desperately, '*God, what would Mya do if she was invited? Did she even know that Charlotte was back? Doubtful.'*

"Well good, if there is no bad blood, then all the more reason she should come. I'm calling her", Charlotte stated firmly, heading toward the phone.

"Charlotte, NO!" Leo said rather more sharply than he had intended. Charlotte turned around to stare disbelievingly at him.

Leo took a deep breath to calm himself and said, "Look, I've been working for Mya like a serf for the last two weeks. And while we're good, I'd really like to have one evening with my girlfriend without her hanging around. Okay?"

Charlotte smiled sunnily, coming to put her arms around him, "Of course Leo, whatever you'd like".

Miles was looking at him funnily. He knew something was up, just not what. Luckily everyone was distracted by the entrance of Teddy the Bear, who came in at a run, rushing up to Charlotte to lift her up in the air with joy.

"You're back!" he shouted, grinning broadly.

"Yes, I'm back Teddy," Charlotte said laughing, "Now put me down".

Teddy did so with the greatest reluctance, and only then noticed that Charlotte was not alone.

"Hey Teddy", Leo said with a wry smile.

"Hello, Leo" Teddy replied, the grin disappearing from his face like it had never been.

He turned round to see who else was there, nodding cordially at Miles and Ashley and waving to Tina and David at the bar.

"Where's Aaron?" he asked the room.

"That's what *we'd* like to know" Charlotte replied with a sly smile.

Tina sighed in resignation, walking over to the rest of them and saying, “Well, if you *really* must know, David got us some Bon Jovi tickets last week-“

“Bon Jovi!? Damn, you kept those quiet”, Miles exclaimed.

“Well, David had just the three tickets so...anyway; so we get to New Orleans where the concert was and it turns out Aaron had left his ticket in his other jacket which was over here. He wanted us to all come back and get it, but David said it didn’t make sense for all of us to miss the concert just because he’d misplaced his ticket so we went in and Aaron went home. Now he’s saying that poor David deliberately sabotaged him and he’s been sulking ever since”, Tina finished with flourish.

“*Poor David* is it?” Leo murmured softly to no one in particular.

There was a little silence which Ashley broke by asking for details of the concert, and whether they’d seen Jon himself up close. The discussion moved on to who was currently hot and which celebrity they’d most like to make out with. The hot favourite among the girls was definitely Marky Mark followed closely by Tom Cruise. Tina tried to propose Ray Romano as ‘kind of sexy’ but was shot down by everyone. The boys were torn between Cindy Crawford and Pamela Anderson, but there was general agreement that Cindy Crawford’s upper torso carried the day. Drinks were called for and bitings were availed and by the time Aaron walked in two hours later, they’d forgotten all about him.

“Hey,” he said to the room in general, “What’d I miss?”

Uproar resulted with everyone falsely commiserating with him on missing the concert and pressing conciliatory whiskey on him, patting him on the back and generally letting him know that the time to stop sulking had come. Point to David on this one, what would be his countermove?

ξ

It was 4 am before Leo could extricate himself from the party and leave. Although he’d talked and laughed as loudly as the rest, his mind was a little further away. He couldn’t stop worrying about what Mya could be thinking was happening. If she’d heard that Charlotte was back in town, she was probably thinking that Leo blew her off for her. Which was technically

correct he supposed but not intentional. As he drove slowly down the darkened streets to his house, he pondered what next. Before he knew what he was doing, he had turned the car around and headed to the turn that led out of town. In no time at all, he was barrelling down the dirt road that led to her place. He didn't want to think too much about what he was doing, but he knew he *had* to see her, now.

ξ

Mya was having one of those bizarre dreams that made no sense. She was in her kitchen, covered with cookie dough and dripping with chocolate, and the cookie dough was like quicksand, pulling her under. She tried to resist, fighting the sucking pull of the dough, but the more she struggled, the faster she was sucked in. Suddenly there was an owl outside the window and it was hooting at her – which was strange because she didn't think that owls were native to this region. And they were definitely nocturnal…The owl's hooting seemed to get louder and louder, sounding more and more like a car horn, and she woke with a start to realise that the hooting was real. She looked around her, half expecting to find herself covered in goo; she glanced outside to check whether there was, in fact, an owl there, but the closest tree to her window seemed free of birds of any kind as far as she could tell. The hooting, however, persisted. Finally, she realised that there was a car outside, and someone *was* hooting- which probably reduced the probability that it was a burglar but just in case, she collected her Grandpa's old shotgun on her way down the stairs.

She peeked out the window and saw the jeep parked at her gate. She stared at it for a while then took the few steps back that would take her to the living room doorway so she could have a look at the clock on the wall there. *4:30 am*. She switched on the light so that she could be sure she wasn't reading it wrong, then looked back out at his jeep.

'Ouvert' she thought, eyes closed and pushed with her mind. The gate opened on its own, as did the front door. Leo drove in and parked in the driveway, then went back to close the gate manually. He walked up the stoop steps and into the house with no hesitation. Mya continued to stand opposite the living room doorway, watching him.

"Hi," he said, stopping a few feet away from her after closing the door behind him.

"Hi" Mya replied, a question implied in the tone of her voice.

"First of all, I hoped you checked who it was before you went opening your doors like that to just anyone, " he said reproachfully before turning around to face her, "secondly, I...I'm a little late I know but I thought I'd come see if you made those cookies", Leo said a little sheepishly.

Mya lifted an eyebrow, trying to think what could be happening here and not coming up with anything coherent. She decided to say nothing and continued to stare at him, waiting for him to start making sense. Leo stepped toward her, mouthing her name, his hands stretched out, and Mya knew what he was going to do before he did it.

'No!' a voice shouted in her head, '*you will not let him use you like this'*

Mya stepped back from him, continuing to stare up at him unwaveringly – asking him with her eyes what he was doing, why he was here, and what the hell he wanted from her.

Leo stared back at her and then sighed with resignation. He hooked the chair that sat next to the hall table, turned it around, and sat on it.

"I don't know what I'm doing here," he said, answering her unspoken question, "I just had to come".

"Why?" she asked, trying to still the tremble in her voice.

Leo took another deep breath before saying, "Charlotte called me today, just when I was leaving the house. She's back in town, and she wanted to see me. Short of telling her my mother was dying or I had a life-threatening injury, I didn't see how I could get out of it. So I went"

"Okay. But why are you here? Now? At 4:30 in the morning?" Mya asked calmly enough.

"Because, I just left Charlotte's", Leo said, then seeing the look on her face continued quickly", we had an impromptu party – everyone was there"

"I see," Mya said, not really seeing at all. Somehow Leo seemed to divine this.

"I couldn't go home without seeing you first. I had said I would come, and... I keep my

promises", he finished quickly.

"Well, that's very kind of you I'm sure Leo, but I don't need you to feel sorry for me", Mya replied stung by his words, "Now you've kept your promise, you can leave" she said as she turned around to go upstairs, "Close the door behind you-" she continued before she was grabbed roughly from behind and twirled around.

Leo fit his lips to hers, holding the back of her head so she could not pull away and kissed her like his life depended on it. She stiffened in his arms, resisting stubbornly but eventually, his fever infected her and she was clinging to him just as desperately as he was holding her. They made it to her bedroom this time though, where Leo got rid of her cotton nightie and then his own clothes without once separating his lips from hers. They fell onto the bed, hands everywhere, biting, and scratching in an effort to get closer. Then he was inside her and the whirling kaleidoscope was taking her away and control seemed like an alien concept, something she'd never encountered. She felt his release as he surrendered to the moment as well, his teeth biting into her neck as he made a sound halfway between a grunt and a moan. He did not stop there but continued to lick his way up her neck until his lips touched hers. They kissed for a long time, savouring the taste and touch of lips and tongue. She held onto him with everything she had, surrendering herself to him, and felt him do the same. She could not continue to deny it to herself – she was in love with him.

This thought stopped her cold, and she pulled away from him.

"Mya?" he asked her with a puzzled frown, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing" she replied with tears misting her eyes", nothing is wrong. Everything is great."

"Really? So why are you crying?" he asked persistently.

"These are tears of joy and satisfaction", she said a bit dryly.

He smiled at her murmuring; "Well I aim to please" as he reached down to kiss her some more. She moved her head away, pushing his body off hers as she did so.

"It's been a long day Leo, I'm tired," she said turning away from him and folding herself up into a ball. He promptly folded himself around her, mimicking her posture and putting his

arms around her.

“Okay darlin” he intoned in a playful way, “go to sleep. I’ll be right here when you wake up. Then we can talk about whatever it is that’s bothering you”.

She let that one go, closing her eyes and feigning sleep. It *had* been a long and miserable day, and soon, her feigned sleep became real. It was easy to relax, wrapped in the warmth and safety of his arms...

Chapter 19

In Which Adjustments Must Be Made

“Are you ready to talk?” Leo murmured right into her ear, making her cringe away from him in her queen-sized bed.

“Do you really not know why you had to come?” she countered over her shoulder.

There was silence behind her, and she looked over her shoulder to see that his eyes were still closed but there was a slight frown on his face. His hand lay in the space between them, produced by her moving away from him. She stared at him for a while but he didn’t open his eyes or say anything.

“Leo?” she prompted

“I’m thinking” he replied, eyes still closed.

Mya sat up reaching for the shirt that lay nearest, which happened to be his. It smelled of him, and also of sex. She put it aside because she wasn’t ready to be enveloped by the smell of him yet. Grabbing the sheet, she wrapped it around herself, making Leo grunt in protest. She went off to the shower, leaving him to scramble for the blanket. It was very early and the mist still hung over the trees, the morning air was quite crisp and the insulation in the room was not quite airtight. Leo burrowed back under the blanket, covering his head and closing his eyes.

‘Why did I say that?’ Mya thought as water ran over her. She wasn’t sure she wanted to

pursue this conversation to its conclusion. This situation was complicated enough without her pushing him for answers he wasn't ready to give. And she wasn't ready to hear come to that. But they couldn't be ostriches for long. Monday morning was school and escapism would become much harder then.

She switched off the shower, which was piping hot for once because she hadn't remembered to switch off the heater the night before. She wrapped herself back in her sheet and walked back to her room, where Leo was still burrowed under the blanket. She glared at the bed, waiting to see if he would show himself – but no joy. Either he had fallen back asleep or he was avoiding talking to her. She dressed in her floral print dress and a woollen cardigan that actually *was* her grandmother's. It was cold in the mornings...

The smell of freshly brewed coffee should wake him she thought, as she walked down the stairs. Better sooner rather than later; this talk they had to have. If he was going to ditch her next week, it was better he did it now so she'd have time to adjust before the school term began, and she had to see him day in, day out cozening up to Charlotte. Though how she was going to adjust was a concept she couldn't quite imagine right now. She could make up a batch of doughnuts from scratch. That should take her mind off things nicely.

She was hard at work kneading dough when he finally came down – probably due to the aroma of coffee wafting up the stairs. He was dressed only in his black Levis and had wrapped himself in her grandmother's plaid. *I guess he thought the aroma of his shirt was a little too reminiscent of last night for his taste too*. He was barefoot and the floor was cold so she wasn't surprised that he hurried over to the coffee to pour himself a cup then went to curl up on the sofa with his legs up and his hands wrapped around the cup.

"Good morning," he said with a smile.

"Oh, we're doing civility this morning are we?" Mya replied dryly, "Good morning".

"What do you mean 'this morning'? I do civility every morning!" he answered a little indignantly.

"Oh you do?" she said with a smile of her own, "My mistake".

He sighed deeply and bit the bullet "I do know why I had to come. Well, at least I know I

had to see you."

Mya kept silent, not knowing where he was going with this.

"Charlotte is back in town. She's my girlfriend. She's going to stay my girlfriend; not just because of me, but because of you too. If she ever found out about this, "he said gesturing to her and then himself, "she would destroy you".

"Oh, she would destroy *me*?" Mya said, unable to keep the sarcasm out of her voice, "Well, how good of you to cover for me then".

"I know you think I'm bullshitting you but I'm not. Charlotte is sweet as honey when she gets what she wants but when she's crossed...she's scary. Think screaming spoilt brat with access to machine guns"

"She doesn't-" Mya began in alarm

"It's an analogy." Leo interrupted, "Do you recall Susan Stone? She was in our year last year, but she transferred out of town?"

"Yeah", Mya said slowly.

"Well, Susan had...a thing for me. She used to leave me notes in my locker, lie in wait for me at the cafeteria, in the boy's locker room, at my uncle's garage..."

"That's quite a thing", Mya murmured.

"Yeah...anyway, Charlotte found out about it or was told about it – I suspect David or Aaron personally – and she had Susan's father fired from his job at Count Arnaud restaurant, even though he was the only sous chef in town. No one else would hire him, so they moved to New Orleans and now he's barbecuing at a steakhouse in the French Quarter. Imagine what she could do to you"

Mya was shaking her head in disbelief.

"Did you...have a thing with this Susan?" she asked at last.

Leo stared at her in disbelief, "Really? Is that relevant?"

“Maybe yes, maybe no... Still, it’d round out the story nicely.” Mya said dryly.

“Okay, yes. I slept with her” he said and Mya sighed and rolled her eyes.

“Great”, she said

“I didn’t even know you then!” he protested

“But you knew *her,*” she said tiredly, “and apparently being unfaithful to her is a habit. Which means I’m probably just another whim-”

“Ha! If I was going for whims, I’d choose someone...else” he interrupted.

“So what am I to you then Leo?” Mya asked desperately.

“Damned if I know”, he replied dryly.

“Really? That’s the best you can do? Damned if you know?” she persisted

“What about me Mya? What am I to you?” he asked in turn.

“You’re the man I-“, she began then stopped short.

“The man you...” he prompted

“l-loove” she whispered hesitantly, “the man I love”.

He stared at her, mouth open at a loss for what to say. “Really?” he whispered

She took a deep breath and said simply, “Really”.

“Well...I’m flattered. No, not just flattered. Touched.” He said, not looking at her.

“I wasn’t trying to touch you”, she said derisively, “I was just telling it like it is”

“Unlike me, you mean” he finished for her.

“You said it, not me,” Mya replied.

“I don’t want to make you promises I can’t keep”, Leo said.

“I haven’t asked for any promises”, Mya countered.

“What are you asking for then?” Leo asked her

“Honesty” she replied simply.

Leo put his head in his hands, ruffling his hair in agitation.

“I’ve never been in love. I don’t know how it feels. But I will admit that what I feel for you, I have also never felt before. Is that good enough?” he asked

“Is it good enough for you?” Mya asked him.

“My father left me, my mother checked out. That is all I know of love Mya”, he said.

“I. Am. Here“. Mya said reaching out to touch him, “I am not going anywhere”.

Leo stared at her, and the silence deepened.

“Phew! This is getting too intense for me. What’s that you were kneading over there?”

Mya turned to look at the kitchen counter, “Doughnuts” she said wryly

“Interesting, “he said perking up, “let’s eat. This other” he said making a circle with his hand to indicate their situation“, can wait till after breakfast can’t it?”

“Sure, let’s eat,” Mya said in the same tone.

ξ

The ringing of the phone startled them in the middle of breakfast. Apart from her grandmother, who tended to call in the early evenings, no one usually called Mya, apart from Leo – who was sitting opposite her... She ran to the phone wondering if something had happened to her grandmother.

“H-hello?” she said breathlessly down the line.

“Hi, Mya! How are you?” Charlotte’s voice came back to her.

“Charlotte!” she exclaimed widening her eyes at Leo, “How nice of you to call.”

“Oh, well, I wanted to let you know that I’m in town early, and I’m thinking about having a welcome back barbeque this weekend. Wanna help me plan?”

“O-of course Charlotte. I’d love to,” Mya said, barely able to draw adequate breath.

“Good. So I’ll see you at my place soon?” Charlotte said

“Yes,” she replied with internal resignation.

Leo came to stand next to her, took the phone from her, and hung up.

“What does she want?” he asked her

“Planning committee for a weekend barbeque” she replied

“Great,” he said wryly

“It’s really not, I’m not sure how well I can pretend in front of other people,” she said with trepidation.

“Pretend what? Not to be in love with me?” he asked with a grin, “You don’t have to do that. Charlotte expects that *every* female I meet and spend time with is in love with me. You just can’t look like you did anything about it.”

“Great,” she said wryly. He laughed at her, taking her hand to lead her back to the kitchen counter.

“Come on, we can at least finish breakfast in peace...” he said.

“Hmmph!” she replied allowing him to tow her along.

Chapter 20

In Which a Party is had

Charlotte gave her a huge hug as she stepped into the living room of Le Carre mansion.

"Mya!" she squealed in delight, then holding Mya away from her, she looked her up and down, " I see you're still sticking to vintage." she said, her smile stretching artificially.

"Er, yes, I am," Mya said, "How are you?"

"I'm great, thank you. But I want to hear all about you", she said towing Mya toward a couch and sitting her down and adjusting her expression accordingly said, "Leo told me about The Situation"

"Situation?" Mya asked, heart skipping a beat at the mention of Leo's name.

"Yes. I'm really sorry about what he did to you." Charlotte said, not-quite-successfully hiding the smug smile on her face, " He was just trying to save me – you understand don't you?"

"W-weelll", Mya began, not entirely sure how forgiving she was supposed to be. Leo had not told her how much Charlotte knew about their meetings – or rather, she didn't know what Leo's version of their various rendezvous was. He'd only said she knew where he was, not how much trouble he was supposedly in. So Mya decided to go with 'deep trouble'.

"I'm not too sure I will ever forgive him Charlotte, in fact, if he's coming to this barbeque I'd prefer to stay away"

"Aww! Really? Leo said you were all good now" Charlotte whined.

"He's been helpful, I'll admit it, and he's improved a lot of things at the house, but we're a long way from best friends", Mya said, avoiding Charlotte's eye like her life depended on it.

"Well, you must admit your house was really in need of some improvement .", Charlotte

prompted.

Mya bit her tongue to stop the words that wanted to come out at this statement. She reminded herself that in the universe in which Charlotte lived, being patronising about other people's homes was par for the course. Living in the biggest house in town apparently gave you that privilege.

"By the way, did he come by your place today? I tried to call him at home this morning and his mother said he wasn't there" Charlotte asked her.

Mya's heart skipped a beat and she felt like she'd have heart failure if she didn't get out of here but quick. She stood up, wondering how she could get out the door.

"What'd I miss?" Leo's voice floated into the room, preceding the man himself.

"Leo!" Charlotte exclaimed jumping up and rushing toward him. He held out his hands to her and she jumped into them, gluing her mouth to his. Leo managed to disengage himself and held her in a close hug so he could look at Mya over her shoulder. He lifted his eyebrows at her in inquiry and she turned away from the pair of them, trying to get her face under control. Leo led Charlotte out of the room, whispering in her ear and making her giggle. Mya took the chance to slip out the side door into the garden, where she stood taking deep breaths. She wondered if she could leave without arousing suspicion but decided that whether she did or not, she had to get out of here.

'*Screw it*' she thought acidly, '*I'm out'.*

She hurried down the driveway toward the gate, wondering all the while how she was going to get through the next school term.

"Mya!" Leo shouted from behind her. She turned around to see him hurrying toward her, "Where do you think you're going?"

"Home." she answered shortly "Shouldn't you get back before Charlotte notices you're gone?"

"Who do you think sent me?" he asked dryly, "You have a party to plan, did you forget?"

"I can't do this Leo," Mya said tears not far from the surface.

"Mya, I-", Leo whispered reaching out his hand. She moved quickly away from him, casting her eyes over his shoulder in warning. He lowered his hand slowly, "Please my love? Come back, we can get through this together"

Mya stared at him in disbelief. Was he aware of what he'd just said or was it some unconscious term of endearment produced by the proximity of her tears? Either way, the mystery probably couldn't be solved right now.

'Buck up Andrewes! Stop with the snivelling already. It's just a party' she told herself. She took a deep breath and pinned a smile to her face that was dazzling in its fake brilliance. Then pushing past Leo, she marched back up the drive to the house, Leo following more slowly in her wake.

ξ

Leo was wondering how long Mya would be able to last under the pressure. Charlotte might be an overindulged, overprivileged debutante but that didn't mean she was stupid. If Mya continued to behave in this erratic manner, she was going to know something was up. Then it was curtains for all of them. He knew it sounded over-dramatic, but he'd spent a lot of time with Charlotte, and he had also spent last summer in New York getting to know her father. The two of them were two peas in a pod. And Mr. Le Carre was the most ruthless shark that Leo had ever met. He was a real estate mogul who owned half the town, and who made his money by buying up properties and breaking them down into their constituent parts and then selling off the parts for insane amounts of profit. He'd been known to use rather unorthodox means to get a prospect to sell to him, including bankrupting a few individuals and the odd rumour of murder, though that was all it was, whispers in corners. The *only* soft spot he was known to have was for his daughter, whose whims he unconditionally pandered to, between summarily ignoring her.

All of which begged the question; why didn't he just cut Mya loose? Why *didn't* he cut her loose? He had no idea, but he knew he wasn't ready to entertain the idea. He wasn't prepared to face the possibility that this idyll with Mya could be over. For one thing, the sex was out of this world. For a recent former virgin, Mya was *dyn-o-mite* in bed as J.J Evans from, 'Good Times' was wont to say. *He did rather enjoy that show…* Furthermore, it didn't

get awkward afterward and he wasn't visited with the urge to leave her in his rear-view as soon as he climaxed. These two details alone he thought were worth exploring further, but then add the fact that she was so easy to talk to...and the cooking, the laughter...and the love. He stopped short at that thought, thinking that he couldn't be thinking what he was thinking.

"What's wrong?" her voice floated back to him from the porch.

He started, not having realised he had stopped or that Mya was still nearby.

"N-nothing," he said, actually stammering in his agitation, "Everything's great" he gestured toward the interior of the house, urging her onward and she stepped in with a quizzical look back at him.

ξ

Everyone who was anyone came for the barbeque. It was the last big party before the new term and anyone who could get an invite was present. As Madonna's 'Material Girl' blared from the speakers strung about the garden, people gyrated on the makeshift dance floor located near where the magic pool had appeared. Waiters walked around serving hors-de-oeuvres and pink drinks in champagne glasses. In one corner was Jon the bartender, who doubled as the local pot dealer. Business was booming in his corner and a hazy cloud of smoke hung in the air around him. The party was jumping.

Mya was glad of the crowds. She could become almost invisible in them – without the benefit of magic. She'd barely seen Leo all evening and all her performance anxiety seemed far-fetched now that they were here. Leo was in the thick of things, surrounded by the other basketball players, their girlfriends and other 'A-list' students. Charlotte held court beside him, keeping a proudly proprietary hand on his arm at all times. Mya figured that perhaps Leo was right; Charlotte would come after *her*, not him if word of their little liaison ever got out. She still clearly wanted him – and she might put him on a tighter leash but he would be fine. Her? Maybe not so much. She looked around, trying to find something to distract her from the sight of him – she'd be walking around then find that she'd stopped moving and was just staring at him. That sort of behaviour had to stop – and right now. She headed for the food like she always did when agitated and served herself a large plate of ribs and potatoes. Some salad to add colour and an orange juice completed her ensemble. She took her food and wandered into the house to eat. The house was mostly empty and she went to the TV room

and sat down. There was a couple in the corner making out but she ignored them and they, her; the TV was on. Fatal Attraction was showing on the movie channel and Mya sat down to watch, finding herself feeling in strange sympathy with Alex Forrest – especially when she said, 'I'm not gonna be ignored, Dan!' That was the last damned straw; as far as Mya was concerned; this party was *over*.

ξ

Mya slept late on Sunday. The party had finished late and she had hitched a ride home from Leo. God knows how he'd managed to extricate himself from Charlotte's clutches but he had, long enough to take her home. He'd kissed her long and hard at her gate, and then told her he had to get back. The after party was apparently just beginning – close friends only. Mya was glad she hadn't stayed for that. It would have been much harder to disguise her feelings with just the fantastic seven on hand.

The ringing telephone woke her and she dragged herself out of bed to go answer it.

"Hello"

"Hey"

"Leo"

"Yes?"

"What's up?"

"A man can't call his-" Leo began then stopped short.

"His what, Leo?" Mya asked playfully.

"His…lady friend," Leo said, a smile in his voice.

"Lady friend huh? Well, why'd you dial my number then?" Mya asked, smiling back.

"So rude. I wanted to check on you...I hated leaving you alone last night" Leo said.

"Well, I'm a big girl you know, I can take care of myself," Mya said with a laugh.

“I know you can...doesn’t mean I don’t like taking care of you” Leo replied, his voice lowered seductively.

There was a small silence on the phone.

“This conversation is getting very flirty”, Mya declared

“No shit, Sherlock”, countered Leo.

“Want to come over?” Mya asked.

“Thought you’d never ask,” Leo said, hanging up.

Chapter 21

In Which School Starts

Francis Bacon high school, circa 1821 was the only school in Le Marais, population 500. The town had been named after the bayou that runs through it. The school, and the town had been started by the French émigrés who needed a place for their children to live and learn. Francis Bacon High became part of the public school system in 1980, serving the entire town of Le Marais and the surrounding areas. There had been two schools in the town, but the private Catholic School, St. Xavier had shut down three years before, with the students being offered an opportunity to join St Mary's school in New Orleans as boarders, or find another establishment to get their education. Many of the students had moved to Francis Bacon including Charlotte, Tina, Aaron, Ashley, and David, rather than go to boarding school and leave town. The school was best known for it's dedicated after-school programme that included basketball and swimming, drama and music. Coach Maxwell took training very seriously and was proud of the fact that in the course of his career, three players had been scouted by the national league, one currently playing college basketball in the NCAA league for the Privateers. He was hoping that Leo Devereux would be his fourth success story.

As students streamed in on Monday morning, he kept an eye out for Leo, wanting to have a word as soon as possible. He saw his trademark black and gold jeep pull up into the school parking lot and snagged a passing student in order to send him after Leo to ask him to come to the coach's office at once.

"Come in." Coach Maxwell said in response to Leo's knock on the already open door.

"Hey, coach. You wanted to see me?" Leo asked as he came in and sat down.

"Three months you haven't seen me and that's the greeting I get?" Coach asked with mock sadness.

"I'm sorry. Hey coach, how are ya? I hear you wanted to see me?" Leo said with an impudent grin.

"Yes", Coach Maxwell sighed, "I need to check in with you. I've been hearing some stuff"

"Stuff?" Leo prompted with a raised brow.

"Yes. Stuff. About you – something to do with your girlfriend collapsing? And some other girl?"

"Well, technically that's not really about me, is it? It's about Charlotte...mostly" Leo said evasively.

"What happened?" Coach Maxwell asked baldly.

Leo told him about how Charlotte had fallen in the pool and their failed attempts to remove her until Mya did 'something' which caused her to 'get out' of the pool, and the resulting consequences. He thought about telling him about sleeping with Mya for her spell, but on reflection, thought that that might not be a wise move. So instead he said that Mya used some of her grandmother's herbals to revive Charlotte and that was that.

"So what's this about you doing some sort of 'community service' for this girl to make up for something?"

"Wow, you don't miss much do you," Leo said trying for distraction.

"No, I don't. So what was up with that?"

"Nothing, I was just really rough with her when Charlotte was unconscious because I was worried she wasn't making a maximum effort to help her. And I decided to help her out with some home repairs to make up for it." Leo said not looking at the coach.

"*You* decided?" Coach Maxwell asked sceptically, "that doesn't sound like you."

"We-ell, maybe you don't know me as well as you think", Leo declared with a blank stare.

"Or maybe you're keeping something from me" Coach Maxwell countered.

Leo sighed in resignation, "Look. Coach. I promise you, nothing is going on which will

affect my game in any way. Isn't that the important thing here?"

"But something *is* going on?" Coach Maxwell persisted.

Leo was silent for a while, staring at Coach Maxwell in an assessing way. Finally, he said, "Yes".

"Okay then." Coach Maxwell said, "Training at 4 pm today – don't be late".

"I won't" Leo replied standing to go.

ξ

Mya climbed the stairs up to the school with trepidation. She was a little nervous about seeing Leo and Charlotte and decided to do everything she could to avoid them. Her inner abdominal muscles were still sore from yesterday's vigorous session with Leo and wetness still seeped down her leg. He'd climaxed quite a few times now that she thought about it, and now they would pretend that they meant less than nothing to each other on pain of...God knew what. It sounded so melodramatic when she thought of it like that – unlikely even. Still, she'd do better to just ignore Leo completely while in school, and if Charlotte found her behaviour strange... well, she'd enough of a reputation as a weirdo for everyone to chalk it up to that. If she could not bring herself to break up with Leo, she urgently needed to break up with Charlotte.

ξ

Charlotte walked into school flanked by Tina on her right, Teddy Bear on her left, David and Aaron bringing up the rear. Ashley trailed behind the main group, looking around to see if Miles was anywhere in sight. She spotted Leo's car in the parking lot and perked up. Where Leo was, Miles wasn't too far away. She almost tripped over Aaron at the school entrance, not looking where she was going. He gave her an irritated look but let it go. Ashley was so pale and vulnerable looking, being irritated with her was like being mean to a puppy – no fun. Aaron sped up to walk with Tina before David could claim her attention earning a dirty look from his brother in reward.

Charlotte watched these shenanigans with amusement. It was almost worth putting up with all of them just to watch the petty games they played. Speaking of games, she wondered

where Mya was. She'd been MIA a lot lately and Charlotte was not ready to put up with such insubordination. Mya could leave her group when Charlotte asked her to, and not a moment before. Never mind what Leo had done to her – it had clearly been for a good cause- and Mya would just have to get over it. Leo had been rather absent himself lately, yesterday he hadn't even come to spend the day with her! That would have to change; she had decided that being with Leo was what she wanted more than anything – and he said he felt the same. High school would be over next year and Charlotte was determined that the next phase of their lives would be spent together.

ξ

Leo spotted Charlotte coming down the hallway toward him as he arranged his new locker. He thought about ducking into the gents which was few feet away but figured it was best to get this over with. He hadn't seen Mya yet and wondered how she was feeling; knowing that after yesterday's intensity, today would be about pretending they meant nothing to each other. Not only because of Charlotte but now apparently Coach Maxwell was asking inconvenient questions. Being in school made him feel rather like he was under siege; so many different opposing forces all wanting a piece of him!

"Leo", she said in that sultry voice.

"Charlotte", he answered, still looking at his books as he arranged them in order.

There was silence behind him and eventually, he turned around to look at her; she was watching him, with her hand on her hip, looking less than pleased. He raised an eyebrow then turned back to his locker to transfer some books into his arms, for the first lesson. He slammed the door of his locker shut, turned, and walked down the corridor. He heard Charlotte's footsteps quickening to catch up to him and thought about lengthening his stride for a minute. Instead, he slowed down so she could catch up.

"What is wrong with you?" Charlotte demanded.

"Nothing," Leo said shortly.

"So why are you acting like this?" Charlotte said in a louder voice.

Leo stopped short, turned around, and faced Charlotte.

“I’m just tired of people trying to pull me one way or the other, and it’s not even eight in the morning!” Leo snapped irritably.

“People?” Charlotte demanded

“Coach Maxwell was on my case as soon as I stepped on school grounds. Something about me losing focus, you, Mya...I’d just like to get through my first day without any more aggravation” Leo said.

“Oh. Well, in that case, I’m pretty sure that can be arranged...” Charlotte said with a smile.

“Really?” Leo said wryly

Charlotte’s smile widened, “Have I ever lied to you?” she said.

Chapter 22

Who is Fooling Who?

The auditorium was packed with hopefuls for basketball tryouts. The new season would start in a month and so there was a sense of urgency about getting the new team to hit the ground running. Of the eleven original members that had reached the National finals in the previous year, only five remained; Leo, Miles, Aaron, David, and Teddy. Leo was shooting guard and de facto leader responsible for keeping those shots coming. Miles ran point guard with Teddy as a power forward. Aaron was the centre and David was a small forward. Of these five, only Leo had been in the regular starting line-up before due to his unusual speed and lightning fast reflexes; the rest had all been on the bench. Understandably, they were all eager to prove themselves as good as the previous first team.

Coach Maxwell blew the whistle to bring the room to order and asked all the potential players to line up at the baseline. Fifty people had shown up and they formed three rows. Coach Maxwell thought that the best way to trim the numbers was to ask them all to run laps

- including the five remaining team members he had. He might as well see how fit they still were...

For the first time since he could not remember when Leo's mind was not on basketball. While the rest of the day had been relatively peaceful, the fact was that he was sitting on a powder keg that could blow up in his face at any moment. Mya had kept her distance from them all day and Charlotte had stuck to him like a leech. He would have much preferred if it was the other way around and that was what was bothering him. He wasn't sure if he could pull this off. Pretending to be in love with Charlotte had suddenly gotten much harder than he had ever imagined it could. But breaking it off with her was not an option. The only way that this could work, was if she left *him;* and a less likely prospect than that he could hardly imagine right now.

Leo had always been literally a chick magnet. Even when he was still in his clouts, the women had flocked to his pram, cooing and giving him goodies. Girls had been fighting over him since he was old enough to talk. He had often found it amusing that he could get a female to go the extra mile for him with the merest smile. It was an attribute he used but also hated about himself. His father had been the same – a lady killer- and his mother was destroyed by it. It made him wary of having children himself and he was always careful to use protection. But it also filled him with contempt for all these females who were so gullible and malleable and he found it difficult to respect women. He felt sometimes like a puppet master whose puppets responded to the tiniest flick of a wrist. Except with Mya; who gave as good as she got. He had actually had to make some effort with her – he sometimes thought that was why he fell in love-

Leo stopped short at that thought. Was he in love with Mya? Since when? And could his life get *any* more complicated? Speaking of complicated, there was one person he was *not* at all careful to use protection with...

"Bolt!" Coach Maxwell's voice cut sharply into his thoughts, "why have you stopped?"

Leo hadn't realised that he had stopped moving. He came to himself to find that he was standing still while a legion of hopefuls tried to go around him.

"Sorry!" he called to the coach as he began jogging again. Charlotte was staring at him quizzically from the sidelines. She was sitting in a group with Tina and Ashley, come to offer

moral support to ‘their men’. Leo’s eyes rose higher on the bleachers, looking for darker skin and afro hair. But Mya was nowhere to be seen. And understandably so – she’d never shown any interest in basketball before, if she showed up now, eyebrows would be raised. One specific pair of perfectly arched tweezed eyebrows...

Mya was lurking outside the auditorium door, peeking in through the window that was embedded in the door. Leo was looking rather distracted as he did his laps and she saw his eyes scanning the bleachers, looking for...her? Probably not; he was more likely assessing the turn out to see how much support they’d have this season. Well, he needn’t worry – as long as he was playing almost every female in the school was going to turn out to the games. Including her own weak sorry little ass; well, maybe not little, but certainly weak and sorry. She had promised herself to stay away from them and had largely succeeded in that, but seeing them together had hurt more than she had been prepared for. Somehow, in these last two weeks, she had come to think of Leo as *hers* and now she had to deal with the harsh reality that he was in fact *not.* Someone was coming towards the door, she’d best move away if she didn’t want to be caught lurking. She glanced at Leo one more time before hurrying away to the library to acquaint herself with this year’s programme of study. If she meant to go to college, she would need a scholarship, which required that she keep perfect grades. So far, so good, but this was no time to slack off; problems of the heart or no. A wave of sickness overwhelmed her and she sincerely hoped the heartache she was feeling wasn’t going to make her physically ill…

§

The walk home was lonely and Mya felt unusually tired. It had been a long day, what with dodging Charlotte and Leo and trying to get organised for the new school year. She missed her grandmother and wished she would be at home so that they could talk. But Matia was busy in New Orleans for another month at least, so Mya would just have to lump it. On the bright side, the late summer sun was peeping through the trees and the sky was blue. She might as well enjoy the weather.

As she came up to her gate, she saw that the latch was off. She stopped and listened, alertly searching the vicinity for anything or anyone who might account for it. Nothing moved so she approached the gate cautiously, and tipped it open with the tips of her fingers. It swung open on its slightly rusty hinges but the front garden was silent and still. She

wondered for a minute if Leo could be waiting inside the house and her heart sped up, but then she'd left him at the school and his car was nowhere to be seen. No way would he have made it here before her, on foot – coming from basketball training. Besides, no-one was *that* eager to see her. She decided to stop with the shilly-shallying and just go and see who was here if there was actually anyone and she wasn't just being paranoid.

She walked into the house and the smell of Jambalaya slow cooking in the kitchen permeated everywhere. She stopped in disbelief – she must be imagining things; only her grandmother made that dish by substituting chicken with pork, giving it that unique aroma emanating from the huge pot on the fire. She wondered if wanting her grandmother to be around had triggered an intense hallucinatory experience. Only in this hallucination, the smell from the pot was making her slightly nauseous, which was different than how the dish normally affected her.

"Grandma?" she called tentatively, not sure if she wanted an answer or not.

Either way, she did not get one. She walked over to the stove and slowly stretched out her hand half expecting the pot to disappear. Instead, it burned her fingers as she touched it.

"Ouch!" she cried out, sucking all four of her fingers that were scorched by the heat of the pot, "Well, I guess *you're* real," she said aloud to it. Considering her grandmother's pot was purple and decorated with colourful flowers, it was very distinct, but also very illusory now that Mya thought about it, so one could not really be blamed…

Who was cooking in her kitchen? The thought cut across her ramblings like it was a separate person. She crept cautiously out of the living room, listening carefully for any sounds. There was a rhythmic sound coming from the back garden. It sounded like digging. Mya crept to the back door and peeped out. Her grandmother Matia was busy digging around some kale plants, a pile of leaves by her feet, probably for adding to the jambalaya. She liked to add the vegetable a few minutes before the meal was ready, so as to preserve as much nutrient value as possible.

Mya banged open the door, hurtling down the stoop to jump on her grandmother. She was so happy to see her that she forgot that Matia was old and almost knocked her sprawling into the garden.

“Grandma!” she shouted happily hugging her tight.

“Mya my darling, it’s good to see you too.” her grandmother’s gravely voice replied making Mya realise just how much she had missed it. They hugged close for several minutes before Mya could finally bring herself to let go.

“What are you doing here?!” she asked

“I live here”, her grandmother replied with a smile.

“I know that silly…I mean-“Mya began in a flustered way.

“I know what you mean my dear – I just felt like you needed me, and I needed to be here. So I came back” Matia said with a smile. “How are you?”

“Really glad to see you!” Mya replied with another tight hug.

The sound of the phone ringing finally drew them apart. Mya smiled at her grandmother before running back into the house to answer the phone. It didn’t even occur to her to wonder who could be calling.

“Hello?” she said happily into the phone.

“Wow. For a person who’s been looking miserable all day, you sound pretty happy…” another gravelly voice said down the line.

Leo.

“My grandmother’s home and I didn’t realise you were watching” Mya replied.

“ I was…So”Leo said with consternation, “does that mean I can’t come over?”

“What? Now?” Mya said with surprise.

“Yes. Now” Leo replied.

“What about-” Mya began

“Yes or no, can I come or not?” he rudely interrupted.

"Well, Grandma's made enough Jambalaya to feed about twenty starving people so come on down," Mya said, too happy that he still wanted to see her and that her grandma was home to care about the whys and wherefores.

"Grandma!" she shouted out the garden once she'd hung up, "can a friend of mine come for dinner?"

"Friend?" her grandmother asked with a look.

Mya's head bent to the side and her smile grew wider, "well, yes a friend. So, can he?"

"You know your…friends…are always welcome Mya," Matia said with a smile of her own.

"Great." Mya said with a skip, turning back to go into the house, "I have homework, see you in a bit!"

Matia watched Mya bound athletically into the house. There was a glow about her that hadn't been there before. Her aura pulsed with strong blue light, but her skin also seemed to glow with inner light. The strengthening of her aura indicated that she had grown in the short time Matia had been away – in abilities, strength, and character. Whatever had been going on while Matia had been away had obviously wrought some permanent changes in her granddaughter. It remained to be seen whether these changes would be for good or ill. Matia was worried that these changes were very much linked to the Devereux boy – and that could be extremely dangerous for Mya. Still, this whole situation had the scent of Fate about it, and Matia would not presume to interfere with that. But she planned to be around, should her granddaughter need her. She had not been able to save Mya's mother from her deadly fate, but she would be damned if she would let history repeat itself.

Chapter 23

Momentum of Truth

Leo wondered if he should hoot at the gate or just go in. Grandmother was home, which meant he had to stop treating this place like he owned it. He decided to let himself in, since hooting seemed a little rude, then knock on the front door. *Yes, that sounds about right*. While he was dilly-dallying at the gate though, Mya ran out the front door and came to open the gate. She was smiling happily and there was a glow that surrounded her. Was it because her grandmother was back, or was it him? He hardly knew which to hope for, he was so confused. But she was smiling at him and he couldn't help smiling back, and his heart couldn't help but lift – treacherous thing that it was…

"Hi!" she shouted as he drove past her. He waved back but didn't reply until he alighted from the car. Then he beckoned to her as he stood by his car and she went to him like a homing pigeon to its cage. Their lips met with an impact like two trains colliding and clung like super glue. The kiss went on for a long time, and the surroundings faded into some distant reality not really connected with them. The only thing that was real was her lips on his, her tongue in his mouth, her soft body pressed to his. He clung hungrily to her deepening

the kiss in passionate embrace. Only then did he realise how much it had hurt to be apart from her – which seemed such a corny thing to occur to him that for a moment he was afraid he was losing his mind. He pulled away from her instinctively, breathing hard.

“I’ve missed you”, she said with a smile.

He stared at her for a moment, fighting the urge to say it but eventually gave up, “I missed you too.” He said.

“Really?” she said smiling,” going by the way you really had to think about it; I have cause to doubt that.”

“And that makes you smile?” Leo asked her, smiling himself.

“Well, yeah I have a peculiar sense of humour” Mya said.

“Do you want to go for a drive, talk about it maybe?” Leo asked gesturing to his car.

“Aren’t you going to say hello to my grandmother?” Mya asked, “we’ve been waiting for you…she knows you’re coming”

“Great. Is it time for the ‘what are your intentions?’ conversation?” Leo asked in contrived trepidation.

“How can it be when we haven’t even had the ‘is this going anywhere?’ conversation?” Mya countered.

“*Is* this going anywhere?” Leo asked with a lift of his brow.

“God knows” Mya replied with an eye roll, taking his hand and towing him up the stoop stairs.

“Grandma!” she called, banging open the door.

“In the kitchen”, Matia called back in that voice like gravel crunching underfoot.

“Your grandma’s voice is deep” Leo whispered to Mya with a smile.

“Yeah, she kind of sounds like you now that I think about it” Mya whispered back.

“What’s with all the whispering?” Grandma Matia appeared suddenly at the door, smiling quizzically at them.

“Nothing Grandma”, Mya said, “this is Leo.”

“Hello Leo,” Matia said.

“Hello, Ms. Andrewes, Mya has told me a lot about you”, Leo said.

“Pshaw! Just call me Grandma Matia. Ms. Andrewes is way too formal for me”, Matia replied, “reminds me of *my* grandmother.”

Leo smiled, “Grandma it is,” he said, “that jambalaya smells great” he added.

“Thank you”, Matia said, head inclining to the side in acknowledgment of the gratuitous flattery, “it won’t be ready for at least an hour though I’m afraid”.

Leo’s smile widened “No problem. In fact, with your permission, I’d like to take Mya for a little drive before dinner”

Mya’s eyes widened at him behind her grandmother’s back.

“With my permission…well, at least you have some manners.” Grandma Matia said mildly. Mya transferred her widened eyes to her. “Oh go on. But don’t go too far into the forest, and don’t be late for dinner.”

“Yes, Grandma,” Leo said with a charming smile.

“Hmmph” she replied.

He held out his hand to Mya who ignored it and walked past him out to the car. He got in after her, starting the engine.

“I don’t know if your grandmother likes me,” Leo told her.

“Well, I don’t know either, so don’t look at me,” Mya replied.

“She did ask me to call her Grandma though” Leo commented

"She asks everyone to call her that. Its nothing personal" Mya replied.

"Such encouraging words…I see now why I like you so much" Leo murmured.

"Oh, cry me a river. Where are we going?" Mya replied

Leo shrugged, "Somewhere we can make out?" he said.

"Turn right here then," Mya said, indicating a rough track that led off the main road.

Leo glanced at her, a little surprised at her helpfulness. Not that she didn't seem to like making out with him, but she rarely took the initiative to make it happen or even facilitated it. She really must have missed him, he thought with a smile.

"What are you smiling at?" she demanded

"Not. A thing." He replied enigmatically.

"Hmmph," she said, sounding exactly like her grandmother.

They were coming up to a circle of trees, standing close together, creating a darkened area surrounded by a wall of wood. Leo parked the jeep and turned to her at once, finding her waiting eagerly for his touch. His hands were everywhere. It had been just a day since he'd been with her last but it felt like a lifetime. He couldn't get enough of her, no matter how deeply he kissed her. He could not seem to get close enough, no matter how closely he held her. Her hands clawing at his back made him think that she was having the same problem. But knowing that she felt as he did just made him feel all the more desperate and he bit her lip in his passion. Far from disconcerting her, she bit him back. That removed the last bit of self-control he was clinging on to and soon they were scratching and biting like a pair of rabid wolves. Their mouths clung as they struggled quite unsuccessfully to undress each other.

"Mya" he whispered, propelling her backwards as he let the seat out. Her nails were scratching his chest and stomach, leaving a trail of goosebumps in their wake. His shirt was half on, half off and he couldn't spare the hands necessary to take it off completely – or the attention. Her hands trailed lower and lower and just the thought of her hands on him had his jeans fitting suddenly a little too tight. Her fingers unbuttoned his jeans and he swelled into

her hands, all the while kissing her passionately and fondling her breasts. He fumbled ineffectually with her dress trying to move it out of the way but not possessing sufficient wit at present to make it happen. Mya performed that customary twist that only females seemed to be capable of, and she was out of her dress. Her hands were back on him and she pushed his jeans and boxers away. He wanted to take it slow but didn't possess sufficient control to make it happen. His hands grasped her arms, bearing her down into the car seat and he was inside her in a moment. His vision seemed to shrink to a pinpoint and his body took over without consulting him.

"I…can't…wait" he whispered breathlessly in her ear.

"Don't" she whispered back into his ear, taking in every thrust and giving it back with interest.

"Unghh," he said and his vision seemed to go dark as climax came up him. He felt like he was about to pass out as he cried out in his release. He thought he did actually pass out because he came to, to find himself lying on top of Mya, pressing her into the seat. He took his weight onto his hands, checking to see if he had crushed her to death. Her eyes were closed but there was a smile on her face and her chest rose and fell reassuringly.

"Are you alright?" he asked her

Her smile widened but she did not open her eyes or speak a word.

"I'll take that as a yes" he murmured pushing himself off of her and onto his seat, "Wow, are we late for dinner?" he asked looking around for his discarded shirt and pulling up his boxers and jeans. Mya just laughed continuing to lie in the horizontal car seat stark naked. Leo put on his shirt and buttoned it up then looked around for Mya's dress. He finally located it under the brake pad and fished it out from under there. He shook it out then reached out for Mya who seemed to be out cold. He gently lifted her from her seat so she was upright then lifted the dress one handed over her. She opened her eyes and smiled at him lazily, letting him dress her as he would. It made him feel like she had placed herself in his hands and he was touched by the implication of complete trust. Their relationship seemed to move in leaps and bounds with every little thing that they did, and he was hard put to keep up with himself. Just this afternoon, the notion that he might be in love with this girl had hit him. This evening, here he was feeling like his heart was literally melting because she let him dress her.

He seriously needed a timeout. Instead, he started the engine and reversed out of the grove so they wouldn't be late for her grandmother's dinner.

Chapter 24

Getting Acquainted

Leo parked the car in the driveway glancing across to see that Mya was asleep. He put his hand on her thigh to wake her then removed it quickly lest it got heated in the car again. Mya opened her eyes and looked at him, face lighting up in a delighted smile as if she had not seen him in a while.

"Hi" she whispered.

Leo turned away from that look, opening his door and busying himself by straightening his clothes. He felt like he should leave now before it was too late. Too late for what though, he couldn't say. Instead, he crossed over and opened the door for her. He reached out a hand to help her out noting as he did so that her hair was a mess and her dress was askew. Her

grandmother would definitely know something was up if they went in like this.

“Do you have a comb?” he asked her.

“Comb? What for?” she asked.

“To comb your hair silly, what do you think I’m asking for? You’re a mess.” He said a little more sharply than he intended.

That seemed to wake her up and her hand went up to her hair. Her eyes widened in horror and she looked down at her dress in consternation.

“I need you to distract my grandmother while I sneak upstairs and straighten myself out,” she said urgently to him.

“What? Are you or are you not a witch? Can’t you clean yourself up by magic? I don’t see myself successfully distracting your grandmother” he replied.

“Oh. Yeah.” She said, murmuring a spell under her breath, too low for him to hear, and moving her hand up and down like she was ironing. As her hand moved, her dress straightened itself. With her hair though, she just undid her ponytail and re-did it manually.

“Better?” she asked him

“Much” he answered, “Do me?”

“Sure,” she said making the same gesture down the front of his shirt which removed the wrinkles. She ran her fingers through his hair, combing it with her fingers and arranging it so it fell naturally about his face. She smiled into his eyes as she did it and he couldn’t help but lower his head to hers and plant a gentle kiss on her lips. Even that gentle touch ignited a fire within him and he quickly broke it off, smiling at her to cover his confusion.

“There you are” a voice called from the stoop, “I was beginning to think you’d been eaten by alligators”

“No, not alligators – though I do feel consumed by something…” Leo murmured, his voice pitched low so that only Mya could hear.

“Oh?” her grandmother answered, “what got you then?” but there was a bit of a twinkle

in her eye…she knew she wasn't meant to hear that-probably showing off the keenness of her hearing. Leo was reminded that this was no ordinary old lady, but a witch with God knew what powers. He'd do well to watch himself around her. Matia turned around, beckoning for them to follow. Leo made a 'shall we' gesture toward Mya bowing formally like an eighteenth-century gentleman and Mya gave a mock curtsey in return before following her grandmother into the house. Leo followed behind smiling slightly to himself. Witch or not, that jambalaya smelled good.

Mya was also thinking about the smell of the jambalaya, and wondering why it should make her nauseous. Granted, her grandmother had a rather heavy hand with the spices but Mya had been eating Matia's food for as long as she could remember and she couldn't recall another occasion where the mere smell of fried onions and cooking pork had made her want to throw up. Maybe she was sickening for something…But she couldn't think about that right now. What with Leo coming to dinner and the strange looks her grandmother had been giving her all evening, she had a lot more on her mind than just an upset stomach. What *was* Leo thinking, coming to dinner like this? Considering how tightly wound around each other he and Charlotte had been all day-

"What's up with the frown?" Leo asked her, making her realise that her face had actually screwed up at the thought of them together.

"Well, if you must know, I was just thinking about you and Charlotte." she blurted before covering her mouth with her hand, wishing she could gather the words and dump them back in there while she was at it. *What was that Andrewes? Don't you have* any *dignity?*

"Oh." Was all he said, giving her an enigmatic smile while he was at it, "Upsetting was it?"

She glared at him, wishing him acne and scar tissue and a wall-eye as well; anything to take some of the pretty off his face. He was just way too smug for his own good. She quickened her steps, trying to walk off in a huff but his legs were longer than hers and he kept up easily. She suspected he was doing it to further wind her up so she drew what tattered dregs of dignity she had left about her, and ignored him.

Matia was serving food onto the plates. She asked Mya if she could go down to the cellar and get a bottle of grape wine, explaining to Leo that it was her own private recipe and

extremely mild. Leo smiled non-committally, clearly not wanting to go near *that* powder keg. They sat down around the table as soon as Mya returned with the bottle and proceeded to eat and drink while exchanging polite pleasantries. The only snag was when halfway through the meal, Mya had to excuse herself to go and throw up. She ran upstairs so they wouldn't hear her, and afterward she felt all better – so she said nothing to her grandmother or Leo about the vomiting. She figured it must have been something she ate earlier that disagreed with her. In fact, after voiding her tummy she was quite ravenous and demolished three helpings of jambalaya- but limiting herself to one glass of wine because regardless of what her grandmother said, the stuff was potent. She'd seen two glasses fell a grown man. Leo, not having got the memo, had three glasses and as a result, fell asleep after a delicious dessert of King cakes. Grandma Matia didn't seem too bothered that a six foot four, 200-pound young male animal was curled up on her sofa fast asleep so Mya let it go. She wondered if she should call Leo's mom and let her know that Leo would be unable to drive home today – it was a school night after all and she might be worried…she asked Matia what they were to do for the best but Matia didn't seem too eager to call so Mya left it alone. She went up and got a warm patchwork quilt to cover him with then saying her own goodnights, went up to bed.

Grandma Matia also climbed the stairs, but her destination was the attic and a number of herbs that were stored there. She collected ingredients and set a fire in the grate; brewing a concoction in the cauldron. Once everything was ready she decanted her mixture into a porcelain vessel and carried it carefully down the stairs, so as not to spill a drop. She put it down carefully on the living room table and went to get the Bunsen burner that she kept in her room to heat her midnight cocoa. This she set down on the floor and set it alight, setting the porcelain vessel to warm upon it. Soon fumes were wafting upwards out of the vessel and she took a palm leaf and waved the fumes so that they floated over Leo's face. Eventually, his eyes opened, staring upwards yet unseeing and unaware. Grandma Matia called to him with her mind.

'Leo....'

'Yes? What are you doing to me?'

'I merely wish to talk, honestly'

'Ok. Talk then'

'Who has sent you to my granddaughter?'

'No-one sent me. I came'

'Why did you come?'

'I couldn't not…'

'You are compelled here?'

'I…do not know'

'What is she to you? Why do your auras meld?'

'She is…The Guardian'

'The Guardian?'

'Yes'.

'What do you mean by that?'

'It is…our destiny'

'Who has told you of this destiny, my child?'

'It is…a… prophecy'

'What prophecy?

Silence from Leo greeted this query and his brows drew together.

'What prophecy Leo?'

'I…do not…know'

Grandma Matia added one more ingredient to the warming mixture and the fumes wafting from it took on an acrid taste. She wafted this toward his face again.

'In the morning, you will not remember'

'Of course Mata'

Grandma Matia was startled. Mata was her secret name, known to but a select few. For the boy's spirit to call her that meant that there was more to him than met the eye. Perhaps he was not so Mundane after all. Indeed, the way that the girls followed him about was not usual. She must find out more – if she could. But she must be careful – his fate seemed to be tied to that of her granddaughter's. She would do well to tread carefully lest she trigger something best left undisturbed. Grandma Matia gathered up her things, reached over and closed Leo's eyes and then went to seek her bed.

Chapter 25

The Morning After

"Rise and Shine!" a voice shouted in his ear, making him startle awake. Mya was standing over him with a cooking implement in her hand poised as if to dot him over the head with it.

"Down girl, I'm awake," Leo said a bit grumpily. His head was aching something fierce and there was a strange bitter taste in the back of his throat. He had not slept well – his dreams had been disturbing though he could not recall what they were about just at present. Suddenly it hit him that Mya had woken him up. He looked around and saw that he was in her living room, and it looked like he had slept here.

“What. Happened? What am I doing here?” he asked her with trepidation.

“Well Leo- what happened is that you’re a lush; you got drunk last night and fell asleep on the sofa. Seeing as you’re way too heavy for me or my grandmother to lift, we left you there.”

“I am not a lush.” Leo replied automatically, “How bad was I?”

Mya was laughing at him he could see, but she also brought him a mug of coffee, strong and black just the way he liked it so he forgave her.

“You weren’t bad at all, you just sort of fell asleep after dessert and we couldn’t wake you. Besides, you were in no condition to drive.”

“Your grandmother said that stuff wasn’t strong”, Leo protested.

“My grandmother lied,” Mya said rather complacently for someone who had stood by and let him get high at her grandmother’s dinner table.

“You might have told me,” he told her reprovingly.

“I might have. I didn’t think it would affect you like that. No. that’s a lie – I’ve seen what that wine can do. I guess I just wasn’t paying attention. Sorry.” She prevaricated.

“hmmph” he replied grumpily drinking his coffee.

“If you hurry, you might just have time to dash home and change before school starts” Mya pointed out.

“Right,” he said putting down the cup, having drained it in two gulps, “see ya!” as he headed for the door. Just before he reached it, he stopped abruptly, crossed the room in two strides and fitted his mouth to hers in brief but passionate embrace. Then he turned around and hurried out the door waving goodbye as he swung out of the driveway.

Mya stared at the jeep as it disappeared down the road, still holding the spatula in her hand. Suddenly a wave of sickness took her again and she ran for the nearest bathroom, barely making it before upchucking at least half of last night’s dinner. She made up her mind to look in the grimoire for a cure for this bug. It was starting to become a nuisance.

§

"Where were you last night?" Charlotte accosted him as soon as he reached his locker. He sighed internally, wondering if he shouldn't just tell her and get it over with.

"I was at a friend's for dinner," he said shortly and truthfully.

"What friend? Miles had no idea where you were!" Charlotte countered, her voice rising.

Leo smiled at her, "Are you trying to say Miles is my only friend?"

"He *is* your only friend so far as I know, so where were you?"

"At a friend's, having dinner. We had wine, I got high, fell asleep." He said, again, truthfully.

Charlotte glared at him. She really was quite scary when she was mad, he thought. Still, he stared blankly back at her.

"Who is this friend?" she demanded.

Leo frowned at her, shaking his head, "I'm sorry but it sounds to me like you're under the impression that I should account to you for every moment of my time and everyone I speak to. Is that what this is?" he demanded. *The best defence is a good offence- he wasn't Francis Bacon's best shooting guard by accident….*

That flustered her for a minute but she rallied quickly, "of course not Leo" she said putting on a pouty face "I just thought *we'd* spend the evening together, and I was disappointed when you disappeared"

"I didn't disappear. I went for dinner. And how was I to know you wanted to spend time together? – we hadn't made any plans" he said reaching out to run a finger down her arm in the hopes of distracting her. He'd just caught sight of Mya coming up the school steps.

No joy. Her head turned sharply and she called out, "Mya!"

'Fuck' Leo thought with heartfelt sincerity.

Mya turned slowly and began to walk towards them, footsteps visibly dragging. Leo turned back to his locker avoiding her eyes.

"Mya!" Charlotte repeated a nasty edge to her voice, "Where have you been? We don't see you

around anymore. Are you hiding from us?"

Mya was studying her shoes with exaggerated interest when Leo glanced at her.

"Oh, I'm just somewhere in the crowd I guess", she murmured.

"You were so missing in action I was beginning to wonder if you were auditioning to replace Chuck Norris or something", Charlotte said sarcastically to the sycophantic amusement of her entourage – this morning consisting of Teddy Bear and Ashley. The menage á trois was not in sight.

Mya forced a smile and made an excuse to leave. Charlotte let her go but not before making her promise to sit with them during lunch break. Mya murmured something to the effect that she would try to be there and hurried away.

"There is something wrong with that girl. I think she's hiding something." Charlotte commented to the gallery in general.

Leo continued to arrange his books in silence and it was a minute before he realised that the group behind him was rather silent. He turned around to find Charlotte staring at him speculation in her eyes.

"That was a perfect opening for one of your sarcastic comments about 'my girlfriend Mya'. Why didn't you take it?" Charlotte asked, eyes boring holes into him.

Leo was stumped for all of thirty seconds then he lifted an eyebrow and said, "You've just been giving *me* a hard time about disappearing on you…I'm inclined to sympathise with her today"

"Oh Leo, don't be mad", Charlotte said, tone becoming cajoling in the split second it took for her to go from suspicious to clingy girlfriend, "a girl is allowed to be disappointed isn't she?"

"Disappointed, yes. Misery, no." Leo replied.

"Misery?" Charlotte asked in puzzlement.

"You know? Stephen King? Nurse with axe? Guy tied to bed?" Leo prompted.

"Oh!" Charlotte said, eyes widening in comprehension. She slapped him lightly on the arm, "I am nowhere near that bad you nasty boy" she said teasingly.

"No you aren't," he said leaning forward flirtatiously to plant a kiss on her nose, "but someone has to keep you in check" he murmured in her ear.

Now she was frankly smiling with delight and Leo knew the danger was past. For now.

Chapter 26

Conversations

“Mya! Good, you’re home. I need to talk to you”, Grandma Matia said, coming toward her as she stepped through the door.

“What about?”, Mya said closing the door behind her.

“Come, I made some hot chocolate and we still have some King cakes. Let us sit”, Matia replied, crossing to the living room. Mya followed her, wondering why her grandmother was looking so serious. Matia was laying out cups and plates when she stepped into the living room and she dropped her bag at the door and hurried to the table. She was suddenly starving to death!

Mya sat down and pulled three of the King cakes towards her, demolishing them in barely

three bites. She poured out some chocolate and drank it down as well before sitting back with a sigh of repletion and smiling at her grandmother. Matia was staring at her in bemusement.

"More?", she asked Mya wryly

"Sure", Mya said with a smile and a shrug, "I'm hungry, what can I say?"

Matia smiled as she placed two more cakes on Mya's plate and passed her some honey. She poured her another cup of chocolate as well and then sat back in her chair.

"Aren't you having any?" Mya asked her.

Matia leaned forward and poured some chocolate into her own cup and placed a King cake on her plate.

"I didn't want to finish them for you," she said smiling.

They ate companionably for a while before Mya ventured to ask, " What did you want to talk about?"

"Tell me more about Leo," Matia said without preamble.

"He's an only child, lives with his mother, was born on the 18th of July, 1973. He loooves anything with chocolate in it and eats absolutely anything without gaining the slightest bit of weight – the bastard. He likes to pretend he doesn't care about anything or anyone but I think it's all a front. He has some abandonment issues with his dad leaving and his mom basically drinking herself into oblivion after that and some trust issues as well-" Mya stopped suddenly.

"Why have you stopped Mya? It was just getting interesting" Matia asked.

"Well, I don't know if I should be telling you these things", Mya said reluctantly.

"Why, what do you think will happen?" Matia asked surprised. Mya generally wasn't wary of telling her anything.

"Well, these are private things and maybe not mine to tell", Mya replied.

“You love him”, Matia stated.

“Yes,” Mya replied simply.

“Does he love you?” Matia asked sympathy showing in her eyes.

“I… think that he has strong feelings for me. He wouldn’t keep coming back if he didn’t. But love?”, Mya said shaking her head, “ I think he hasn’t experienced love yet, so he might not know *what* it is. The fact that he keeps coming back though…I think he might…want to.”

“Are you sure it's not you who hopes that he wants to?” Matia asked

“No. I’m not sure. It could all be wishful thinking…but the fact remains, he does keep coming back” Mya argued.

“A man will not refuse sex when it is offered to him on a platter”, her grandmother said very gently.

“Weell, first of all, I did not offer him any sex, on a platter or otherwise. That just happened. Second of all, I think my cooking attracts him more than the sex and lastly…he doesn’t need me for sex, he has Charlotte and any other girl he wants. I’m not even his type!” Mya said, figuring it out as she spoke.

“How do you know that?” Matia asked her.

“How do I know what? That I’m not his type? He keeps telling me so.” Mya said wryly.

“But he has this girlfriend you said. Where do you think this is going?”, Matia asked in exasperation.

“I don’t know if this is going anywhere. I’m afraid to think past today to be quite honest, but I also don’t …no I can’t walk away. I have to see this through”, Mya said almost desperately.

“Have to…or want to?”, her grandmother asked. Mya opened her mouth to reply but her grandmother forestalled her, “ Don’t answer right away. Really think about it Mya.”

Mya sipped her chocolate and pinched a bit of king cake and nibbled it. She tried to look at everything that had happened objectively since the day Charlotte had called her over to

their table. Leo sitting there, deep in conversation with Miles, not even looking up to see who was approaching. It was the first time she had seen him up close, and she remembered thinking that no-one was that good looking up close. There had to be some flaws – but she couldn't see any. It turned out all *his* flaws were on the inside.

Was she blind to those flaws? As far as she knew, she was completely hyper-aware of them – every last screwed up twisted element of his personality had been on full display since the day they met. He had never hidden the black-hearted side of himself from her. It was the other parts – the sweet, protective, funny, clever, scared, vulnerable side that had surprised her. The greatest surprise is that he'd shown them to her…

"Have to." She said definitely.

"Mya, I am going to ask you to do something for me, and please don't take it the wrong way", Matia said.

"What is it?", Mya asked.

"Please be very careful with this boy", Matia said.

"I think its waaay too late for that grandmother", Mya said wryly.

The phone rang at this point, interrupting their tête a tête.

"Speak of the devil", Mya said, smiling. She got up and ran to the phone breathing "hello" happily into it.

"Hello, Mya." Charlotte's voice floated down the line.

"Charlotte", Mya said deflated.

"Who were you expecting?", Charlotte asked.

"No-one", Mya said, almost biting her tongue in nervousness. She was no good at these games that Leo and Charlotte played so well.

"Well, you sounded like you were expecting *someone* in particular. It wouldn't be Leo by any chance would it?" Charlotte asked in that fake pleasant tone she adopted just before all

hell broke loose.

"L-Leo?", Mya asked actually breaking out in a cold sweat, "W-why would I expect *Leo* to call me?"

"How should I know Mya? Perhaps you got chummy while he was over at your place working?" Charlotte said in *that* tone that said 'mess with me at your peril'.

"We didn't. Get chummy. And I wasn't expecting him to call. I was expecting my grandmother! She usually calls about this time" Mya said in relief of having thought of something.

"Your grandmother? Don't you live with her?" Charlotte asked sharply.

"I do. But she's in New Orleans right now." Mya said.

"Oh really? How long has she been there?", Charlotte asked

"Er..", Mya stopped herself from speaking trying to see where Charlotte could be going with this.

'Careful Andrewes. Don't let her trip you up – again.'

At last, she settled on, "Not long…she went over the weekend."

"Ah", Charlotte said with relief, "well alright."

Mya sighed with relief. *Danger past*?

"What were you calling about?" she asked, trying to move the conversation along.

"Oh, I seem to have misplaced my boyfriend again, so I was just wondering if you'd seen him," Charlotte said.

" Err…no", Mya said. '*Leo must be avoiding her.'* She couldn't help smiling at the thought.

" You don't sound certain", Charlotte persisted.

“I’m certain”, Mya said definitely.

“Okay well, if you see him…”, Charlotte said.

“I will be sure to tell him you want him”, Mya said and hung up. She turned around to see her grandmother staring at her bemused.

“You’re sure you have to?” Matia asked her.

“More than ever grandmother”, Mya replied.

The phone rang again. This time she knew it was him.

“Your girlfriend’s looking for you”, she said as soon as she picked up the phone.

“That’s nice. Fancy a drive to a lovely secluded spot in the forest?” Leo replied.

“Your girlfriend asked me some very difficult questions today, I think she’s getting suspicious,” Mya replied.

“Is that so? So was that a yes or a no on the forest ride?” asked Leo.

“You should go see her. Now”, Mya said.

“I’m guessing that’s a no?” Leo said evenly.

“Look, Leo, you’re the one who wants to keep that relationship going…so go keep it going.” Mya said.

“Shouldn’t you be all like…’Leo, when will you leave your girlfriend for me?’ sort of thing – this pushing me toward Charlotte is disconcerting.”

“Leo, darling? You’re a big boy. You will do whatever you want. I don’t have enough mental energy to push you into doing anything.” Mya said tiredly.

“Okay good. Because I’m coming to pick you up in an hour. Be ready.” He said and hung up before she could counter.

Did I mention stubborn? She thought ruefully to herself.

“Well grandmother, maybe I don’t’ *have* to”, she said smiling at her grandmother, “but that freight train named Leo Devereux just doesn’t let you off along the way you know? You kind of get off when *he* says.”

“And he wants you on board, does he?” her grandmother asked, still standing at the same spot with arms folded, looking at her.

“ Looks like he does”, she replied with a sigh and a smile that tried very hard not to be delighted…but failed.

“Mya darling…”, Matia began.

“I know…be careful”, Mya finished for her.

Chapter 27

Ride or Die

"What are we going to do?", Mya asked him as they sat in his jeep in the little secluded spot they'd found the other day.

"About…?" Leo asked lazily, his hand travelling up her dress.

"You know what!" She said, moving his hand back down her thigh to her knee.

"Why do we *have* to do anything?" he asked in exasperation, moving his hand back up her thigh.

"Look, you're the one who-", Mya began.

"I'm the one who made this mess. Why don't I worry about cleaning it up? You just sit back and don't worry your pretty little head about it."

"Did you actually say, 'don't worry my pretty little head'?"

"Yes. I did. I don't know why I said that. It could be that all the blood has left my head and is pooling around my nether regions." He said, indicating his groin.

"Oh haha. Is sex all you think about?" Mya asked frowning in exasperation.

"You're one to talk. It's all your fault I can't think about anything else…", Leo said.

"My fault. Right. That makes perfect sense." Mya said sarcastically.

"Before we started this, I had one thing and one thing only on my mind. Me, and my need to get out of this town. Now…" Leo trailed off.

"Now…?" Mya prompted interested in spite of herself.

"Now…sex is all I think about," Leo said with a smile.

"Pshaw!", Mya exclaimed, letting her breath out with a whoosh, "My grandmother asked

me to be careful of you."

"And so you should be…", Leo stated.

"So –", Mya began.

"Mya? I've had a long ass day. I've taken flack from Charlotte because I haven't been spending any time with her. I can't…spend time with her because if I did she would know that I can't really stand her anymore and she would wonder why. Seeing as mathematics is not one of her weakest subjects, she would put two and two together and come up with you. Coming up with you probably means you and your grandmother get ran out of town like a couple of stray dogs so…its been a long ass day. I just want you to put your lips on mine for one minute so I can forget what a long ass day I've had." Leo said.

"That is the most you've ever spoken in one sitting that I can remember," Mya said with a smile.

"Still not kissing me…" Leo replied.

Mya leaned over and put her lips on his for exactly one minute.

"Better?" she asked with a smile.

"Much." He said, putting his hand on the back of her head and pulled her in for a more passionate embrace…"You taste nice", he murmured.

"Hey, you know what, we can't really go on pretending to be enemies – that would come off as fake. We can just gradually act friendlier and friendlier and say we've come to an understanding and we like each other now. How about that?"

"I suppose it could work", Mya said with a shrug, "and if it doesn't well…I guess we'll always have the roof."

"Ah ha ha. That wit of yours…Keep your day job." Leo declared.

§

"Are we fighting?", Miles' voice in his ear startled Leo as he sat reading in the quad.

“What?!” Leo turned his head to find Miles leaning over him.

“You’ve been avoiding me or something. Seems like the only times I see you these days is during practise. And even then you’re mind’s definitely elsewhere. Did I do something to you or what is going on?” Miles continued sitting down opposite him.

“You know everything isn’t about you right?” Leo said amused.

“You remember when you used to talk to me?” Miles replied.

Leo looked up from his book and stared at Miles, “ I’m going through some things Miles, that it would be better you didn’t know about – for your sake.” He told him.

“Why don’t you let me be the judge of that?”, Miles replied exasperated at all this gratuitous secrecy.

Leo looked back at him for a while then said, “Okay, you want to know? I’ll tell you. I’m sleeping with Mya”.

“Mya who?”, Miles said in frowning puzzlement.

Leo gave him a look and his frown cleared to be replaced by a look of horror.

“No!” he said in disbelief, “No, no, no, no, you are not” he insisted shaking his head.

“Yes. I am”, Leo said wryly.

“You’ve lost your mind”, Miles said very definitely.

“Maybe”, Leo agreed.

“Why?!” Miles exclaimed.

Leo shrugged, smiling ruefully. This was why he hadn’t wanted to say anything. Even Miles who knew him well, or maybe because he knew him well, would wonder why he was risking everything for someone like Mya. Granted, if he looked at it from Miles’ point of view, he could see why he was a little disbelieving, even horrified. On paper, Mya was a bad idea – a very bad idea. Maybe even more than on paper. Still, the heart wants what the heart wants. Miles was sceptical about this being a matter of the heart, never having seen Leo use

that particular organ before – in fact, after the initial shock, he was inclined to be amused by the whole thing.

"Seriously Leo, the heart wants what the heart wants?", he repeated, " or is this just your way of living on the edge?"

Leo looked at him speculatively. *Could that be it? Was he just looking for some excitement in his otherwise humdrum existence?* If that was it, then that would be great! More than great…it meant that the plan didn't have to change, and he could still have everything he had ever wanted. Money, power…and security. And Mya could be what she was, a witch who happened to make him crazy with lust, made him laugh and listened to him whether he was making sense or not…time for a new train of thought.

"So what's your game plan here Leo? What's the big picture?" Miles demanded.

"Big picture. Wow, does there have to be one?" Leo replied reluctantly.

"Leo, you *always* have a big picture scenario. Plan B, C, D, and E? What is going on with you?" Miles asked in disbelief.

Leo shrugged, wondering himself what the hell was going on with him. *I'm just going to go ahead and be like Scarlett; think about it tomorrow…*

§

Miles was more than a little perturbed. Leo's revelation had hit him right in the solar plexus – it was one thing for him to be in a relationship with Charlotte, she had only ever been a means to an end. Or the endless parade of girls who vied for the privilege of being used and abused by Leo – they meant less than nothing. But this girl…this nobody who had come out of nowhere and seemed to be taking *all* of Leo's time and energy; this was a threat to the future they had planned. Yes, *they*, because the plan to get out of Le Marais and start a new life elsewhere had been both of theirs, not Leo's alone. And yet here he was jeopardising the whole plan for a meaningless fling with an obscure witch who was already on Charlotte's radar.

It hurt like a motherfucker to think about. Not only because of the threat to their futures but also because it was one thing for Leo to have girlfriends he couldn't give more than a

rat's ass about, it was another for him to be in love. And whether he was admitting it to himself or not – Leo was in love with this Mya. Miles knew that Leo could never love him the way that he loved Leo, knew that Leo *was, in fact, unaware that Miles was even in love with him* – or even that Miles…liked boys, but he had always known that *he* was the most important person in Leo's life. His closest confidant and friend, the one person whom he trusted. Now, this girl had come and taken all that away in one fell swoop – and Miles couldn't even voice his protests. Not in this hick town where being 'different' was almost a crime. Nobody knew about his…predilections, and he planned to keep it that way. And he certainly could not tell Leo; not without fear of losing his friendship. And that friendship meant everything to him – much more than the passion he held for Leo close to his chest.

Chapter 28

Goo Goo Gag

The nausea was persistent. So was the hunger. It was making her feel quite ill if she was being honest. Since hospital bills tended to be expensive, she decided to see if the grimoires could help. *Should I wait for Grandma?* Matia had gone downriver to visit Mama Ruth and she had said she might be late. No, best get it over with. Besides Mya had been able to do diagnosis spells since she was thirteen. She climbed up to the attic, setting the water to boil in the cauldron. She gathered some *acacia confusa*, *Nicotiana rustica*, and *Atropa belladonna* and set them to steep. Then she walked up and down the wall of books looking to see if one would catch her eye. A slim orange and yellow book emblazoned with runes jumped at her – *not surprisingly, it* was *orange and yellow* – and she picked it up from the shelf. It fell to the floor and fell open. She bent down to pick it up and it fell out of her hands again and fell again open, on the floor.

Mya crouched to pick it up again and read the heading for the spell on the page.

The Pregnancy Test Spell

She stared at it then reached out to pick up the book again. She stood up and put it on the table where it again fell open on the same page…

Ingredients

Patient's early morning urine

The ovaries of a live rabbit/ female rabbit

Instructions

Pour urine into a clay bowl and fill up a 5ml syringe.

Inject the syringe into the rabbit's ovaries.

Feed the rabbit well on cabbage and calendula leaves for five days.

Check the size of the ovaries.

Mya thought this method of testing for pregnancy a bit too involved for her taste but confronted with the notion of pregnancy, she was realising that there were several red flags she'd been naively disregarding;

Red flag no. 1; Her period was late. Although to be honest, she wasn't that regular so that wasn't really…

Red flag no.2: She was vomiting almost everything she ate but she had no other symptoms of illness. But she had a lot on her mind so maybe it was just stress…

Red flag no. 3: She was always hungry when she wasn't vomiting. Probably because of all the food she was losing…

Red flag no. 4: She and Leo had been having a lot of unprotected sex. Well…

Mya sat down heavily on the chair, covering her eyes with her hands.

'*Do not panic.*' a voice said clearly in her head, but she was pretty sure it wasn't hers. She took a deep breath, trying to calm down and think coherently.

Ok, first of all, just because a book fell open at a pregnancy spell didn't mean she was pregnant. *And why the dickens did it do that anyway? The first thing she needed to do was have a pregnancy test done.* This thought almost sent her into a tailspin of panic but she rallied and stood up. Then she sat down again. Pregnancy tests cost money, so did doctors' visits. She didn't have any. That feeling like she was about to suffocate was building up again so she stood up again quickly and paced around the room to give herself something to do. If she went to the pharmacy and bought a pregnancy test, everyone would know within the day. If she paid a visit to the free clinic that doctor Ross held once a week, everyone would know why soon enough. Jacinta, his volunteer assistant who also happened to be his sister, was not known for her discretion. But the clinic was free so the calibre of people who attended it were not in too much of a position to complain about invasion of privacy. The disadvantages of living in a small town…She picked up the orange and yellow book again and looked at the spell. Maybe it would be the better option. But how the hell she would know where on the rabbit's body to inject the urine so that it would reach the ovaries she couldn't imagine.

Mama Ruth. If anyone knew about animal anatomy, it would be her. The thought of Mama Ruth reminded her of her grandmother. She had gone off to see Mama Ruth today…should Mya tell her about this? *Well, tell her now, or tell her later – she's*

bound to find out; if she hasn't already figured it out. Mya decided that now would probably be a good time to tell her. Besides, she might know of an easier spell to see if she was pregnant or not. *Not. God please, not.*

§

Mama Ruth gestured to one of the stones, indicating that Matia should sit.

"Mata…it is good to see you again. You are home early from New Orleans" Mama Ruth said, the question not quite implied in her tone.

"Yes. I am worried for my granddaughter, Mya. I thought you might be able to help me." Matia replied.

"Indeed", Mama Ruth said enigmatically.

"This boy…" Matia began, not knowing how to continue – she looked up and saw that Mama Ruth's eyes had sharpened. '*She knows.*' Matia thought. Mama Ruth saw the look and nodded her head in wry acknowledgment.

"Leo Devereux", Mama Ruth said.

"Yes", Matia replied.

There was a small silence while they contemplated each other.

"Who is he?", Matia asked.

"Merely a conduit", Mama Ruth stated.

"Conduit for what?", Matia asked leaning forward as if to compel an answer from Mama Ruth.

"The coming of another", Mama Ruth said.

"Ruth, please speak plainly!" Matia said. It was a mark of her agitation that she should address Mama Ruth so informally and ask directly for a straight answer.

"There is a prophecy. It may be speaking of the two of them. The manner of their meeting, the unlikelihood of their joining and the cause of it…they seem to fulfil the terms of the prophecy. There is one more sign that we must wait for before I can be sure. Until then, I cannot say. You should consult Mairiebelle. She may have it written." Mama Ruth said.

"I do not traffic with the spirits Ruth, you know that," Matia answered with censure in her voice.

"Not even for this Mata?" Mama Ruth asked.

Matia leaned back on her stone stool so that her face was hidden in shadow, out of the light of the flames. She did not reply to Mama Ruth's question, for what answer was

there to give? Clearly, Mama Ruth would tell her no more. It was time to head back. Perhaps the grimoires would give her some clue…

She stood up and nodded her head in farewell before heading back to Mya's boat.

§

"Grammy! I'm glad you're home" Mya exclaimed as soon as she stepped off the stoop.

Matia frowned; Mya only ever called her Grammy when she was disturbed. It had been the name she'd called her when she was too young to pronounce Grandma and when she was agitated, she tended to regress to it.

"What is it dear? Is there a problem?" Matia asked her, standing still at the door.

"Well…not to say a problem exactly. I just need a bit of help", Mya said, face screwed up in distress.

Matia took her hand and led her to the living room sofa, helping her to sit down then sitting down beside her.

"Tell me," she said simply. This seemed to calm Mya down a little for she took a deep breath and told her about the nausea, the vomiting, the missed period, the orange and yellow book, everything. When at last she came to a stop, she seemed to be much calmer and sighed deeply, looking Matia in the eye.

'The coming of another…was this it?' Matia thought.

"Grandma? Do you know any spells or herbs that can tell me for sure if I'm pregnant?" Mya's voice cut into her thoughts.

"No," Matia whispered, *not her granddaughter – so bright, with such dreams…not her. Why couldn't the Fates choose someone else?*

"You don't?" Mya asked her, interrupting her thoughts.

"Eh, what? No. I mean yes of course I do…Forgive me, I was distracted.", Matia replied flustered, "Come, let's go up to the attic – I know just the frog's liver that will do the trick."

Mya sighed with relief saying, "Thank God for you, Grandma." As she permitted Matia to lead her up the stairs. Suddenly she stopped, turning toward Matia, dismay written on all her features.

"Grandma, what are we going to do!?" she wailed.

"Don't borrow trouble for one thing" Matia replied, urging her on.

Chapter 29

Avoidance Makes the Heart Grow Fonder

Mya was walking about in a daze, wondering what her life had come to. The pregnancy test that Grandma Matia had performed on her last night had turned out positive. She had said she would go to the pharmacy today to get a pregnancy test that was more conventional; try as Mya might to persuade her that that was a bad idea. For one thing, no-one would think that the pregnancy test was for Grandma so the only next possible candidate that it could be for was Mya! But Grandma had said this was more important than any town gossip so she *would* go. She looked up from her aimless walking to see Leo coming toward her. That snapped her out of the daze and she ducked quickly into the nearest classroom.

The thought of what Leo would say at this development had not even occurred to her. She had been so busy contemplating the destruction of her already precarious existence. Now a vision of how exactly he would react fell on her like a ton of hot bricks. If she knew one thing about Leo, it was that he put himself first. For sure the idea of becoming a father at seventeen would not fit into the philosophy of 'Leo first' that he espoused. So now what? Should she tell him? Considering she knew what he would do if she did, she really didn't see the point. Might as well spare herself a little rejection and just do this alone – like she would have to anyway. It was a good thing her clothes were so loose. She would be able to hide the bump for a good while…but when she couldn't anymore…then what?

§

Leo watched as Mya ducked into the classroom as soon as she saw him. Why would she be avoiding *him*? He looked around to see if Charlotte or any of her minions were about but the hall was diva-free. He thought about following her to the classroom but that might be too obvious. He would find out later.

He turned his mind to his earlier puzzle – why the hell Miles was so upset with him. Granted, he might be doing something extremely foolish carrying on like this with Mya but

Miles was acting like he had someone killed or something…and now here was Mya avoiding him.

He sighed.

This was why he preferred not to be too involved with people. They were too emotional for him.

¤

Mya hardly paid any attention in class that day. She thought about just ditching school and spending the day in the woods but then if anyone saw her grandmother buying a pregnancy test and the *same* day she ditches school…or maybe she was being obsessive and paranoid.

Either way, she wasn't exciting *any* attention today.

Leo passed her a note during Chemistry to have her meet him in the storage room off the boy's changing room at their free period 'to talk'. She knew exactly what kind of talking he was talking about – the kind that got her into this mess in the first place. She put his note aside and avoided his eye the entire period. Which was very difficult to do since he was sitting two rows in front of her and kept turning around to glance at her.

'Didn't he have work to do?!' she thought, exasperated at his attention.

The thought of ditching school for the rest of the day was looking more attractive by the minute. Instead, she hurried out directly after the lesson. She thought she heard Leo call out to her as she bolted past him but ignored it. She practically ran to the library where she went to ground in a secluded corner she'd discovered in the ninth grade. It was walled on three sides by shelves of very old books, and on the fourth side by the window. The books documented the history of the town and were composed of mercantile records, births and deaths of prominent citizens, and other historical occurrences.

On the average afternoon, Mya could lose herself in the pages of tedious detail in a moment, but today was no ordinary afternoon, and she sat on the floor next to her bag, curled up in misery – trying very hard not to think.

Leo watched Mya running off – this time he was definitely sure she was avoiding him. He tried to think back to the last few days, trying to guess what he could possibly have done to deserve this. But nothing came to mind. Yesterday, in fact, they'd spent a thrilling afternoon hiding in the janitor's office after Charlotte had come looking for Leo in the boys' gym – where he happened to be making out with Mya. Luckily for them, she hadn't come in but just called out to see if he was in there. They'd crept out the coach's office and hid in the janitor's closet until she'd gone away. It had been fun – he had thought, but maybe Mya had been upset by it…who knew with girls? They were all psychotic. *Or had Charlotte somehow found out and threatened Mya?* A frisson of anger went through him at the thought of *anybody* threatening Mya. However, it *would* account for her avoiding him in school…he would see if she turned up for their rendezvous and ask her. And if Charlotte had said something…well; he would deal with that as it came.

¤

Mya crept out of the library just before the final bell was rung and left the school through the side door. She took her own personal shortcut through the fields that bordered the school that came out at Mayor Jean's public swimming pond. Anyone was allowed to use it as long as they kept voting for him. The swimming pond bordered the Crenshaw sawmill which bordered the little road that led to her home. By using this shortcut, she completely avoided the town and cut a significant chunk off her journey. Also, anyone who took it into their heads to follow her could be lost in all the long grass.

¤

Leo waited for an hour before he was forced to admit to himself that she was not coming. He thought about what to do next, go out to her place? But he had practise – in fact, it had started ten minutes ago. He thought about getting a sick off and going to see her but knew that short of him displaying some sort of gaping wound, Coach Maxwell wouldn't buy it. He'd just have to get through training then go. He stood up to walk out of the storage room then stopped short. *Had he just thought about ditching basketball to go chasing after a girl? He really was losing his mind!*

He had been right, practise had already started. Coach Maxwell glared at him as he appeared in the auditorium at a jog. He began doing a warm-up lap without waiting to be told

but as he passed the coach, he reached out and detained him with a hand on his arm.

“Office. Now. We need to talk”, Coach Maxwell told him.

“Right,” Leo said under his breath as he followed the coach to his office. Shit was about to hit the fan – he could feel it.

“What is going on with you?”, Coach Maxwell began with no preamble.

“What do you mean?” Leo asked, stalling for time, he knew exactly what coach meant. His mind had not been on basketball for a while now.

“Your mind’s not here Leo. Now, where is it?”, Coach asked him, startling Leo with his mind reading.

Leo sighed wondering what to say. The truth was not an option; there was no way he was mentioning Mya’s name in this room. He knew full well what Coach would tell him to do and he wasn’t ready to hear it. If he wanted to risk his future in this way, wasn’t it *his* prerogative?

“I’ve been…” he began before stalling- his mind blank. “It's my mother…” he tried again.

Coach Maxwell held up his hand indicating he should stop talking. He knew full well what the situation was in the Devereux household and he sympathised. He also knew that one wrong word to the wrong person and Bolt was off to foster care for the next year. The best they could hope for was that his uncle would take him in. Either way, it would mean serious disruption to his life – and this was a scholarship year…

“Say no more. Is it the drinking?”, Coach asked sympathy showing in his eyes.

“Drinking, smoking, yelling, breaking things…”, Leo said wryly.

“Look, if you need somewhere to stay for a few days…”, Coach began but Leo shook his head. The coach always offered to take him in on an unofficial basis but Leo was not ready to take that kind of charity.

“I’m fine.” He said, “I’m sorry I’ve been a bit distracted. It won’t happen again” he stated

before standing up and walking to the door. He stopped to look back at coach, “May I?” he asked indicating the door. Coach Maxwell waved him out before sitting back down with a sigh.

Leo felt bad about lying to his coach like that – and using his mother to do it no less. She hadn’t been too bad lately either, though he’d hardly ever been home so that could be why. Still, …he’d at least try to keep his mind on basketball during training from now on so there was no more need for questions or explanations. He really wanted to get to the bottom of Mya’s avoidance though – it was causing a strange pain somewhere in the vicinity of his heart that he didn’t want to examine too closely.

Chapter 30

Positive, Now What?

Mya dropped her bag at the front door, so exhausted she could hardly speak. It had been a looong asss day! She went to see if there was anything to eat and saw that her Grandma had made some cookies. There was a plate on the table waiting for her, and a glass of buttermilk. Mya felt a wave of affection for her grandmother so deep she almost swayed with gratitude. She really did not know what she would have done without her.

She sat down, ate cookies and drank buttermilk. Then she stood up and went to throw it all up, before coming back to demolish the rest. It seemed her grandma was not around and there was no note indicating where she'd gone so she went upstairs to wash up and change. As she stepped onto the upper floor corridor, her grandmother's voice floated down to her from the attic.

"Mya? Is that you?" Grandma Matia asked.

"No, it's a serial killer come to do you in!" she shouted back up the stairs changing direction to climb up to the attic. "What are you doing up here?" she asked her grandmother while coming into the attic to see her seated at the table, surrounded by books.

“Oh, just reading”, her grandmother replied, not looking up from her book. Mya crossed over and gently kissed her cheek.

“Alright then, I’m off to wash off the dust of the day and change into something more comfortable…” Mya told her.

Her grandmother glanced up with a vague smile saying “Ok dear.” Like someone who was clearly not listening.

Mya stared at her quizzically for a bit then turned to leave the room.

The sound of the phone ringing aroused her from the fugue state she was in, in the shower. She contemplated leaving the shower to answer it, but the days were turning just that little bit nippy that made walking about when wet…well, uncomfortable. Besides, she suspected it was Leo, wanting to know why she hadn’t shown up at the storage room. So instead she increased the pressure of the water and closed her eyes.

Matia heard the sound of the phone ringing and waited to see if Mya would answer it but it cut off and then began to ring again. When this happened a third time, she descended the stair and picked up the extension that hung in the upstairs corridor.

“Hello,” she said.

“Ms. Andrewes”, Leo’s voice came down the line, “ is Mya home?”

“Grandma Matia, please”, Matia replied.

“Sorry Grandma Matia, it’s just that Mya has been avoiding me all day and it’s messing with my head. Is she there?”

“Er yes, she came in a while ago, I think she’s having a shower.’ Matia said, hoping it was true.

“Would you let her know I’ll be by soon?” Leo asked.

“Of course Leo, see you soon,” Matia said, glad of the chance to take another look at him. Clearly, Mya had not spoken to him yet…

¤

Leo hung up the payphone – it was the one outside the gym. He hurried to the changing room not even noticing Charlotte standing at the end of the corridor, watching him. He rushed through his shower, eager to get going and changed quickly into his civilian clothes. He ran out of the gym and almost ran over Charlotte who was standing right outside the gym door.

“Ahh!” she screamed tripping backward.

Leo’s hand shot out to steady her, standing her back on her feet, “Charlotte! What are you doing here?”

“Waiting for you”, she said.

“Oh. Well, that’s very nice but I’m just on my way out…” Leo said.

“I know you are, I thought we could escape, just you and me and go and…catch up.” Charlotte said with a knowing smirk.

Leo sighed, trying to think of a way to get out of this, and coming up blank. He smiled in resignation giving up the idea and held out his hand to her. She grasped his and they walked down the hall together, hips bumping into each other, minds worlds apart.

¤

“Leo called.” Grandma Matia called through her door, “He’s on his way.”

“On his way here!?” Mya exclaimed in horror.

“Yes.” Grandma Matia said.

“You told him I was here?”, Mya asked her.

“Well yes, I did not know you were not home to him. What is going on?”, Matia asked.

Mya opened the door so they could continue the conversation without shouting.

“You know what’s going on Grammy. Did you get the pregnancy test?” she asked.

“Yes I did, but its best done with the first urine of the day so we’ll wait until tomorrow morning. Are you not planning to tell him?” Matia asked curiously.

“No. actually I’m not,” Mya said.

“Why?” Matia asked in surprise.

“Because…he wouldn’t be a help anyway,” Mya said

“Are you sure about that?”, Matia asked her.

“Yes”, Mya declared.

“Well, he’s coming here today so we might just see. Are you doing homework?” Matia asked.

“Y-yes,” Mya lied, having been staring vacantly into space since she’d left the shower.

Matia ignored the blatant lie and told Mya to come and do it downstairs. They could keep each other company as Matia put something together for dinner. They descended the stairs together and Mya settled at the table with her books, senses hyperaware for any sound that would herald Leo’s arrival. Matia began making gumbo, humming to herself as she worked.

The evening wore on, and still, no Leo showed up. Mya got tired of starting at every sound and fell asleep at the table. When the gumbo was ready, Matia served it on two plates placing one in front of Mya. She was reluctant to wake her…the poor girl seemed so tired, but she also needed to eat. Matia woke her gently letting her know that the food was ready and she started awake looking around the room.

“He didn’t come”, she stated.

“No, he didn’t”, Matia said.

“Well…I guess I should get used to it”, Mya said. She thought about just going off to bed but she was hungry so she pulled the gumbo toward her and choked it down, stopping only briefly to vomit halfway through.

¤

Leo called Miles from Charlotte's phone, asking him to call him back with some major emergency in ten minutes when Charlotte got out of the shower. He'd been as passionate as he could be, and as messy – whipped cream, chocolate dip and discarded condoms everywhere – as could be managed. Just so that Charlotte would have to go shower and give him five minutes alone with her phone.

"No," Miles said very definitely.

"What! Why?" Leo demanded, not believing that Miles was refusing to help him.

"You want to go see *her* don't you?" Miles accused.

"What if I do?" Leo asked feeling defensive.

"I'm not going to aid and abet you in your foolishness. If you want to commit suicide, you're going to have to do it alone." Miles said and hung up.

Leo stared disbelievingly at the phone. Miles could not be serious. Surely he would call back in a minute! He fell back onto the bed staring at the ceiling waiting hopefully. Charlotte came out of the shower in a tiny towel and came to curl up beside him.

"Mmmm", she said snuggling close.

Leo wanted to scramble away from her but stilled himself. He could not remember ever being this miserable, not even in the week after his father left and his mother was in an alcoholic stupor the entire time. At least he had had Miles at the time – he'd hung out with him and brought him food so he didn't starve. And now Miles had turned his back on him. Mya was avoiding him – and probably thought he'd stood her up on top of it…and Charlotte's hand was edging toward his penis and he didn't know if he could stand to put it inside her again. Every single cell in his body was yearning toward Mya even as he deliberately relaxed it so that Charlotte could think…*God, he needed to get* out *of here!*

"Charlotte…", he whispered.

"Yyyyess?", she whispered seductively back.

"I need you to stop", Leo said.

“Stop? Why?”, Charlotte asked.

“Because…I…need to talk”, Leo said.

“Talk?” Charlotte said in surprise. In the two years they’d been together, he’d never wanted to talk.

“Yes. Talk”. Leo said.

Charlotte sat up and looked at him. “Okay then, let’s talk”.

“I’m in love”, Leo said with no preamble.

“Oh?” Charlotte said with a smile.

“Yes. I’ve only just realised it, and it’s freaking me out a little bit.” Leo said.

“So you’re saying you weren’t in love before?” Charlotte asked.

“I’m saying…I hadn’t realised before.” Leo said, staring up at the ceiling.

“But now you do?” Charlotte asked.

“Yes,” Leo said.

“Aaand…?” Charlotte prompted.

“And, I need time to process.” Leo said, “Time alone.”

“How much time?” Charlotte asked smiling.

“I don’t know… I’ve never done this before.” Leo said.

“Is that why you’ve been so out of it? Because you were just realising?” Charlotte asked.

“Yes”, Leo replied – it was as good a reason as any after all.

“Okay then, take the time you need,” Charlotte said, taking her hand off him.

“Thank you,” Leo said.

“Just one thing before you go, Leo,” Charlotte said.

“Yes?” Leo said, sitting up and picking up his shirt.

“I love you too,” Charlotte said.

Chapter 31

Tables Turned

Leo paced up and down in his room, running his hands continuously through his hair like the disorder without could calm the turmoil within. He had just come in from his wild goose chase to find his mother passed out in the den and what he assumed was supposed to be supper burning on the aga. If he hadn't come in when he did…

He'd left Charlotte's soon after their conversation and driven like the devil was chasing him to Mya's. The gate was locked and the house was dark and hoot as he might, no one came to answer. He didn't know if anyone was home, or they were just avoiding him; either way, it was rather upsetting. He'd rushed home and tried to call the Andrewes house but no one picked up. He didn't know whether to be angry or worried at this point.

He rushed back to the phone for lack of a better plan and dialled her number again. The phone rang and rang and rang, and he was about to give up and hang up when it was picked up.

"Mya!" he cried in relief.

"No Leo. Not Mya." Grandma Matia's voice came down the line.

"Well, may I speak to her?" he asked impatiently.

"Not now, Leo. You need to give her some time." Matia replied.

"Time? For what?" Leo asked

"Leo, trust me when I say that all will become clear. But for right now, Mya needs some time." Matia said, her voice distant but sympathetic.

Leo didn't know what to make of the conversation. Mya *had* definitely been avoiding him in school and something *was* going on. The question was; what? Another guy? Unlikely. Had she contracted some possibly contagious highly dangerous illness? But why would she avoid just him if that was the case?

Crisis of conscience?

But she'd asked for time, not closure.

What then?!

He needed to know. He thought about calling her again, *making* her tell him but even in his limited experience as the *chaser* rather than the *chasee*, he knew that that way lay madness.

He decided a shower was in order, a cold one at that, to clear his head. Then he supposed, he would have to deal with his mother – make sure she wasn't going to choke on her own vomit or anything. Though he doubted she'd eaten anything; she rarely did when she was on her own. Which meant he should probably feed her. Leo sighed as he stripped off his clothes and went to shower.

§

Mya could not sleep. The prospect of the pregnancy test in the morning and Leo showing up like that was disconcerting her. She couldn't deal with him *and* this at the same time. One thing at a time – or she would lose her mind. Alternatively, she could just tell Leo what was happening…that was one way to ensure she had only one thing to deal with; Leo would surely disappear faster than the Roadrunner after she broke the news to him. Still, he happened to be the man she loved and she wasn't quite ready to say it was definitely over. Even though she knew she was kidding herself.

§

Leo emerged from his cold shower feeling slightly clearer-headed if not better. His mom

was still passed out cold in the den so he went to the kitchen and cleared out the congealed goo that may have started life as spaghetti. He got some bread buns from the basket and opened a tin of soup, heating it up on the aga before pouring it in a bowl. He took the simple meal over to the den on a tray and kicked his mother in the foot to wake her up. There was no response so he set the tray down, went and retrieved the hot tin from the kitchen and pressed it against her foot. That started her awake with an incoherent noise of distress and before she could lie back down he grabbed her by the hair and sat her up straight.

“Oww!”, she yelled, “ Stop that Frank! It hurts” she tended to confuse him with his father when she was out of it like this.

“Sorry. But you need to eat”, he said, not bothering to correct her. “Go on, soup’s getting cold.” he harried her.

“Okay, okay, keep your hair on, I’m eating.” She said, taking up the spoon. Once she’d put the first spoon in her mouth, she realised she was hungry and wolfed the rest down. Leo observed her dispassionately, noting the way her bones jutted out of her neckline. She definitely hadn’t eaten in a while, probably since the last time, he fed her. She could do with a shower as well, the smell coming off her clothes was rank.

“Where have you been Leo?” she asked, breaking into his thoughts. She’d called him by his name which meant she was back in her head and that the complaining portion of the evening was about to commence.

“Around”, he replied shortly, wondering if he was hungry enough to make a plate for himself. He decided he wasn’t and got up to go to bed.

“Where are you going?” his mother asked him sharply.

“To bed.” He replied briefly.

“ You disappear for days on end, leaving me here all alone- not even knowing if I’m dead or alive – and now you just…go to bed!” his mother shouted as he walked out of the room.

“Yes mom”, he said as he shut his door. He was too tired for this today. He could hear her ranting on the other side of the door but shut her out and went to sleep.

§

Mya woke up in the morning feeling sick, miserable and unrested. Her dreams had been restless and she'd started awake so many times during the night she was sure she had some sort of Vitamin B_{12} deficiency. Grandma Matia was standing at the door looking at her and when Mya finally noticed her she asked, "Ready?"

"I just need to throw up first," Mya replied brushing past her to get to the bathroom across the hall. Once the vomiting portion of her day was completed, she felt much better until the peeing-on-a-stick portion began soon afterward. The three minutes that followed that were the longest she'd ever spent in her life, although she was pretty sure what the results would be – she couldn't help praying for a miracle.

"The line is blue." Her grandmother declared, staring at the stick in her hand.

"And that means…?" Mya asked, eyes closed.

"Positive." Matia said simply, "You're definitely pregnant."

§

Leo decided that he had no choice but to stalk Mya. He knew she took some sort of shortcut from the Crenshaw field and decided to lie in wait for her there. If he let her reach the school it would be another day of cat and mouse games. He couldn't take another day of this, that he knew for sure. He parked the jeep behind some trees that bordered Mr. Crenshaw's property at 6:20 am in the morning so as to be sure not to miss her then concealed himself in some trees. He passed the time with coffee and doughnuts that he'd picked up from Mrs. Jean's bakery which was located at the junction between town and this road. He kept his ears pricked for the slightest movement or sound but it wasn't until an hour later that he heard her footsteps. Though this was not her usual brisk step –she was dragging her feet something terrible. *Something was definitely wrong.* He waited until her footsteps were almost level with him before jumping out of the bush and picking her up off the ground like she was an opposing player in a rugby scrum. He carried her off to his car while she was still deciding whether to scream or not. They reached the car just as she decided that screaming was definitely called for and opened her mouth to do so.

"Shut up." He said very definitely, depositing her in the passenger side. "If you try to get

out, I will not be answerable." He declared glaring menacingly at her as he closed her door. She shrank back into her seat and shut her mouth with a click.

"This is kidnapping", she said as he got in the driver's seat.

"Yeah? So sue me", he replied reversing down the road. They did not talk again as he drove them to the abandoned cabin he and Miles used as their hideaway. No-one else had ever been brought to the spot, it was exclusive to them – Miles and he – the only place that was truly theirs. But he needed somewhere where he and Mya could talk and the cabin was the only safe place that came to mind.

"Where is this?" Mya asked him as he dragged her out of the car, picking up the package of food he'd bought on the way as well.

"Never mind", he replied shortly, propelling her to the cabin, "Just walk."

He opened the door and motioned her to enter, which she did after a cautious peek in, and an encouraging shove from his hand behind her. She stopped just inside the door to glare at him but he ignored her, closed the door, went to open the windows and put the package of food on a makeshift table that stood against one wall of the cabin. There were bales of hay scattered on the floor and he gestured for her to sit on one, which she did with utmost reluctance.

"We're missing school you know!" she said.

"Why are you avoiding me?" he asked her baldly, looming over her like the sword of Damocles. Mya was silent, staring off into the wood through the window that faced her.

"Mya!" Leo shouted, almost at his wits' end. She jumped, startled but her attention shifted from the window to him. Leo leaned down and grasped her by the arms, pulling her effortlessly to her feet.

"You will tell me what is going on Mya or so help me…" he told her through gritted teeth. Her legs were hanging off the ground as he lifted her so they were at eye level and she looked into his eyes as she said, "I'm pregnant."

They stared wordlessly at each other for an eternity before Leo slowly lowered Mya to

the ground, turned and walked to the furthest corner of the room.

"*What?"* he said in disbelief, the word barely audible.

"I said I'm pregnant," Mya repeated baldly.

"And that's why you're avoiding me?", Leo asked, torn between relief and disbelief. Mya was staring at *him* in disbelief.

"*That's* your main concern?" she asked him eyebrows so high they almost disappeared into her hair.

"Yes. I mean no. Of course not…", Leo was actually babbling. He stopped himself before it could get any more embarrassing. Taking a deep breath he sought for something to say.

"Are you okay?" he asked her. The disbelieving look had not left her face.

"Am I okay?!" she repeated.

"Are you deaf? That's what I asked." He snapped, recovering his equilibrium in the face of her disbelief.

"I'm fine Leo, how are you?" she asked, clearly she was also recovering her equilibrium. Sarcasm was always a good sign.

"Not great actually. I've just received some rather disturbing news." He replied.

"Oh really? So sorry to hear that. Anything I can do?" she asked briskly. Leo smiled; you could not keep a good girl down.

"Well, you can cut the sarcasm for one. I was serious when I asked if you were okay." He replied, surprising himself as much as her. She was silent for a minute before stating that she was indeed okay, if shell-shocked and horrified, possibly miserable and definitely feeling a little sick. Leo gazed at her in sympathy as she talked. When she finally fell silent, they stared at each other for a minute before Leo stepped forward, and so did Mya. They met in the middle of the room and Leo gently enveloped her in his arms, hugging her to him and burying his head in her fragrant afro hair.

"Sooo…we're pregnant? Is that what you're saying?" he asked her curls.

"We are most definitely pregnant." She said into his shirt. They were silent for a long while.

"Now what?" he asked her.

"Fuck knows." She replied, surprising him with her profanity.

"Not in front of the child Mya!" Leo exclaimed, making her smile.

Chapter 32

Two Is Better Than One

Mya could not believe she was here in this abandoned looking cabin eating…what were these? Cherry doughnuts?...with Leo, while they made clever remarks about the fact that they were fucked. No pun intended. She had been so sure he would run away screaming; instead, he seemed almost relieved. Who'd a thunk it?

"Leo. Not to be rude or anything but you do know that when I say I'm pregnant…it means you're going to be a father right?"

Leo leaned back against the wall, the better to stare balefully at her. "I'm not really sure, but I think that was some sort of insult. Am I right? You think I'm retarded?"

Mya snorted so hard she almost had donut coming out of her nose. Gross. Which reminded her, why wasn't she nauseous?

"I'm just saying, you seem a little too relaxed for someone who's basically been told their life is over." She said.

"Who said my life is over?" Leo asked through a mouthful of donut, which *was* really gross making Mya wonder *why* she wasn't nauseous.

"What are you saying?" she asked pinching some of his donut.

"I'm saying…I don't know. Maybe this will turn out to be a good thing." Leo said.

"You're drunk." Mya declared.

"Sober as a judge." Leo denied.

" Then you're not thinking…I'm seventeen, relying on a scholarship to go to college – which I am unlikely to get now. You're planning to elope with someone else – who will kill me when she discovers I'm having your baby. Oh, and we have no money. Which part of this is a good thing?"

"The part where I love you and you love me," Leo said quietly.

"Oh." Mya said very quietly, "Well…still."

"Still, Charlotte will kill you, you'll probably have to stay home for a year or two with the baby before you can think about going to college…okay, these are bad things." Leo began.

"Which I mostly won't have to experience since I'll be dead." Mya interrupted.

"But *I* can get a scholarship." He said, at her raised eyebrow he qualified, "In basketball. I can go to college, work as I study and send you home some money. You can live with your grandmother until I complete my college, then we can move in together and *you* can go to college. Hell, I might even be drafted into the NBA which means paying for college will be no problem."

Mya leaned forward, squinting at him like she didn't know who he was, "W*ho are you* and what have you done with Leo?" she asked.

"Oh, haha. Very funny." Leo said stuffing another donut into his mouth, "God I'm hungry, this pregnancy thing isn't contagious is it?"

Mya was silent, staring out of the window again. "I'm scared, Leo." She whispered, still

looking outside.

“I know. But there are two of us now, together we’ll get through this.” He replied reaching out for her.

She placed her head on his shoulder and he put his arm around her.

“ I thought you would run.” She told him.

“Yeah well, that would have been my prediction too.” He replied, a smile in his voice.

“Why didn’t you?” Mya asked Leo.

“Because…its scarier out there than it is in here,” Leo replied, uncharacteristically cryptic, which made Mya wonder if there *was* someone else possessing his body.

“Well, whatever the reason; I’m glad you’re here,” Mya said.

“Whatever the reason, I’m glad I’m here too,” Leo replied squeezing her arm.

Mya sat up, still watching the window. “ Leo what are we going to do?” she wailed.

Leo sat up as well, gathering donut crumbs into the bag.

“Nothing. We have time yet before you start showing right?” he asked her.

“Yes.” She answered, “But-“

“You need to see a doctor, check that everything’s alright.” Leo interrupted.

“ I do?” Mya asked in trepidation; *there was no money for doctors!*

“You do. I’ll take care of it.” Leo said briskly, “I know some people.”

“Of course you do,” Mya said under her breath.

While all this making of plans was making her feel slightly breathless, Mya was glad that Leo was adopting this take charge attitude. Never in life would she have thought of herself as the helpless female type but this situation had her feeling very overwhelmed. Having Leo take everything in his stride somehow steadied her and the sick miserable feeling that she’d

been living with for days seemed to have disappeared without a trace. With that feeling gone, she could also think clearly and began to plan how she could possibly start saving money. Perhaps it was time to start raising cabbage prices. They'd been selling to the grocer's at the same price for years. Time for change…

"Mya?" Leo interrupted her racing thoughts.

"Yes?" she said absentmindedly.

"We're having a baby," Leo said solemnly.

That snapped her out of her reverie. They stared at each other, contemplating the prospect of the new life growing in her womb, *this very minute!*

Leo's eyes rolled to the back of his head and he fell to the floor in a dead faint.

"*That's* more like how I thought this would go," Mya said to no one in particular.

Chapter 33

Is three the Magic Number?

They sat in the waiting room, jumping nervously when anyone new came in. Le Marais did not have a public hospital. The nearest public hospital, in fact, was in New Orleans. What Le Marais did have, was a private facility founded by French Missionaries in 1895 and kept running through the generous donations of well-wishers and the medical fees they charged. There were two permanent doctors employed there. Doctor Jonathan Ross, a dissolute disgraced medico who was willing to take the mediocre pay that the clinic offered in return for the lack of supervision that allowed him to conduct his slightly shady side hustles with no demur from anyone. The second doctor was a Le Marais native, Carey Pinot, who had come back after medical school to work in the community where he grew up. The occasional volunteer doctor did a rotation in the clinic either to complete an internship or for some personal reason. There was currently a young visiting physician, on sabbatical to study the unique cases of malaria that had appeared along the swampy coast. His name was Dr. Andre Parvenu. He was currently on duty and Mya and Leo were waiting to see him. They were also nervously hoping that no one they knew would walk through the clinic doors.

"Mya Andrewes." The nurse called out from her clipboard. Mya raised her hand and the nurse beckoned to her to follow. Leo stood up too, making the nurse stop short.

"I'm sorry, sir, you need to wait your turn." She said to him sharply.

"I'm with her," Leo said, pointing to Mya with his thumb.

The nurse looked confused for a minute, like she wanted to ask a question, thought better of it, and turned toward the triage room. Leo and Mya followed, hooking their pinkies together.

"Well, what seems to be the problem?" the nurse asked, seemingly flustered at their presence. She very deliberately did not look at their linked hands and Leo and Mya exchanged a raised eyebrow and puzzled looks, wondering what the matter was.

“I..I’ve come for a check-up,” Mya said shakily.

“She’s pregnant.” Leo said baldly, “We’ve come to check on the baby.”

“I see…” the nurse said slowly, giving Leo a look he did not quite understand. “How long since…?” she asked.

“Oh, we don’t know, probably about a month or more. I’m one month late with my period.” Mya said.

The nurse wrote something down in her file then asked Mya to stand on the scale. She then took her temperature and blood pressure before asking about her medical history.

Mya couldn’t recall whether she’d ever had appendicitis or had her tonsils removed. She knew she didn’t have any asthma, diabetes or a family history of high blood pressure. The Andrewes were a very healthy family. The nurse asked them to go back to the waiting room – the doctor would be with them shortly. She seemed to be avoiding looking at them directly, especially their linked hands. It made Leo wonder if maybe she knew about him and Charlotte.

The wait for the doctor was shorter than that for triage and soon they were sitting inside Dr. Parvenu’s office explaining about the baby. Dr. Parvenu was pleasant and friendly, seemed extremely excited a the prospect of new life. He looked over Mya’s vitals, all the time exclaiming about how wonderful it all was.

“Dr. Parvenu?” Mya began tentatively.

“Andre, call me Andre”, he replied.

“Andre…”, Mya began, “Um, I throw up *a lot*. Like during every meal.”

“Really? Well, that is excessive but not unusual”, Andre said.

“It's not?” Mya asked in relief.

“No, it isn’t. However just to be safe, we should do an ultrasound.” Andre said, listening to her stomach with a baby heart monitor. Mya stared anxiously at his face, trying to read it for good or bad news but Andre’s expression was non-committal.

“How much will this ultrasound cost?” Mya asked anxiously. She glanced irritably at Leo who hadn’t said a word since they entered the doctor’s office.

“Let’s not worry about that right now”, Andre said, “Let’s just make sure the baby is alright.”

“So you’re saying something could be wrong?” Mya pressed him.

“I’m saying…let us check that everything’s fine.” Andre placated, he exchanged an extremely male look with Leo which said more clearly than words…”*Women*”

“So when are we going to do this?” Mya asked torn between worry and irritation.

“Let me see when we can schedule an appointment,” Andre said, standing up and going out to the reception to speak to the nurse.

Mya got off the examination couch and walked over to Leo, sitting down beside him.

“You’re very quiet.” She told him.

“What do you want me to say?” he asked, not looking at her.

“I don’t know. You could show some interest.” Mya replied irritated.

“I’m here aren’t I?” Leo replied in the same tone.

Mya sighed tiredly, “Let’s not fight,” she said.

“Hey, you started it. I was just sitting here.” Leo said.

“Yes, you were,” Mya said under her breath.

Leo glared at her and Mya glared back. The tension was broken by Andre blowing in with the news that the ultrasound would be available within the next half hour. Mya’s stomach contracted in fear and Leo reached for her hand and squeezed. This made her relax slightly and she squeezed back. Andre directed them to radiology and asked them to wait there for him. Leo sat on the radiology waiting room bench while Mya paced up and down, too anxious to be still. Not ten minutes later, Dr. Parvenu came to usher them into the radiology room, where Mya was given a gown to change into. Leo gave her hand one last squeeze

before letting her disappear behind the curtain.

“There it is!”, Andre exclaimed, pointing at a slight blob on the screen. Leo exclaimed in wonder and Mya sat up for a closer look. Andre asked her to lie back down so they could continue and she did so reluctantly. Andre moved the transducer about on her still flat stomach and then stopped abruptly, moving it back a few inches. He stopped there and stared at the screen for some time.

“What’s wrong?”, Leo asked, beating Mya to it.

“Well…nothing’s *wrong* per se, there just seems to be an unexplained mass just about here,” Andre said absentmindedly, staring intently at the screen. He moved the ultrasound back to the blob that was the baby, and then back to the mass.

“What could it be?” Leo asked, leaning closer.

“I…don’t…know,” Andre said.

“Could it hurt the baby?” Mya asked anxiously.

“I…don’t know,” Andre said. He straightened up and looked at them both, holding hands extremely tightly as they stared anxiously at him. “I’m sorry I don’t have better answers for you. This mass is like nothing I’ve ever seen, but it seems to be moving in tandem with the baby. The only way to know for sure what it is would be to open you up. And that could be extremely dangerous for the baby. It's up to you. What do you wish me to do?”

Mya and Leo stared helplessly at each other and then looked at Dr. Parvenu. This was way beyond their ken.

“What do you advise us to do?”, Leo asked him.

Dr. Parvenu looked at them both, thinking hard.

“I think we should wait.” He told them.

“For?” Leo asked, again before Mya could.

“Well so far as I can tell, the mass is not harming anyone, especially not the baby. Of course, we’ll need to do some blood work and probably another scan or two to be sure about

what is going on and most definitely a biopsy." He raised his hand to forestall the protest that Mya was opening her mouth to make, "don't worry about the expense for now. The fact that this mass is an unknown could make it an interesting case for a journal or two. I could speak to the hospital's administrators about covering your expenses. But I take it you both have no medical insurance?" he asked as if hoping they would contradict him.

"I do." Leo said, "But I don't think it covers maternity."

"Mya?" Andre said, turning hopefully to her. She shook her head sadly, looking down.

"Well not to worry", he continued in a cheery voice, "I'm sure *something* can be done."

§

"I'm pretty sure our doctor still believes in Santa Claus," Mya said miserably as they walked out to Leo's car.

Leo laughed reluctantly saying, " Well, not too long ago I thought the idea of magic was bullshit so I'm not ruling anything out."

"Leo!" Mya said in a tone that was tettered between irritation, fear, and laughter.

"Mya!" Leo replied in the same tone.

"We are in deep shit," Mya stated stopping just short of the car.

"Says who?" Leo countered.

"Says the doctor who doesn't know *what else* is growing in my stomach and wants to do 50,000 tests to find out." Mya insisted.

"He said we should wait and see." Leo pointed out.

"Yeah. Wait and see. Because that always works out so well…" Mya murmured miserably.

"Hey! No pessimism around here. It's bad for the baby." Leo admonished.

"You know things are bad when *you're* the optimist in the room," Mya said smiling

reluctantly.

“Well, this optimist is of the opinion that you need some ice-cream so get in the car,” Leo said.

“We can’t be seen getting ice-cream together!” Mya cried.

“Why not?” Leo asked looking genuinely puzzled.

“Oh, I don’t know – because your psycho girlfriend who is a possessive sociopathic diva might hear of it and decide to kill me and my unborn child?” Mya said sarcastically.

“*Our* unborn child Mya,” Leo replied.

“Ooh, my mistake. *Our* unborn child, plus possibly some alien species who’s decided to come along for the ride.” Mya said desperately.

Leo turned to her in the driver’s seat reaching for her hands and making her look him in the eye.

“Mya, it is going to be alright.” He said, emphasising each word, “ I will not let anything happen to you; or to our baby. Okay?”

Mya stared at him for a long time and he looked back at her just as intently.

“Okay. Just don’t start believing in Santa too.” She said, at last, fingers relaxing on his. It was strange, how he made her feel safe.

Chapter 34

Magic or Medicine?

"So the doctor doesn't know what the mass is and he said we have to wait and see. What do you think?" Mya asked her grandmother.

"But…he doesn't seem worried that it could be harmful to you?" Matia asked staring at Mya with her golden brown eyes that seemed almost translucent in their intensity.

"Well, all he kept saying is 'I don't know' and proposing more tests so…well no, he didn't specifically say that it *wasn't* harmful," Mya said thoughtfully.

'*Could this be the last sign?'* Matia wondered, remembering what Mama Ruth had said. "Perhaps you ought to get a second opinion, Mya." She told her granddaughter.

Mya laughed ruefully, " We couldn't even afford the first opinion. If it wasn't for Leo's uncle Jamie getting us that appointment because Dr. Pinot is an old friend…and where and from who would I get a second opinion anyway? There are no other clinics in town."

"I…meant, perhaps you should talk to Mama Ruth," Matia said hesitantly. Mya shrank into her seat at the name.

"Grammy I don't know about her. There's something…" Mya trailed off uncertainly.

Matia stared sympathetically at her, "I know dear, she is a bit…scary. But her Hoodoo is good – she has always followed the white." She said. There were two kinds of magic, black magic practised by many a voodoo priestess along the Bayou Sauvage; and white magic who's practitioners were slightly less widespread. Mama Ruth and the Andrewes clan were the only known white witches for a hundred miles.

"I'm scared Grammy," Mya stated frankly.

"I know ma chère. So am I. Take your young man and go to her…nevertheless." Matia

said with a sympathetic smile.

§

“Are you suicidal?!” Miles asked Leo as he blew into his house like a blonde, green-eyed hurricane.

“I don’t think so…come right in why don’t you?” Leo replied closing the door.

“Someone saw you at the clinic yesterday, holding hands with Mya. What are you trying to do?”

“I wasn’t-“ Leo began before Miles interrupted him, clearly not listening to anything he had to say.

“Leo, it’s one thing to sleep with the witch. It's another to go parading hand in hand in full public view! What were you? Getting birth control? She couldn’t do that on her own? Honestly, Leo, since when did you start taking girls to clinics!?”

“She’s pregnant Miles.” Leo cut into Miles’ tirade.

Miles stopped talking very abruptly. He stared in horror at Leo like he hoped he would burst out laughing and say that this was all a bad joke.

“Pregnant?” he whispered finally.

“Yes,” Leo replied, looking at Miles calmly.

“And you’re sure it's yours?” Miles asked. Leo stared at him with a look in his eye Miles had never seen.

“Soo, are you getting an abortion or what?” Miles asked still in that breathless disbelieving tone.

Leo turned away from Miles, feeling like he would possibly knock his best friend out if he didn’t. He didn’t say anything for a long time, just stared out the window and breathed in and out. His mother was downstairs minding the shop so they were on their own.

“Leo?” Miles called tentatively from behind him.

“We’re not getting an abortion. We’re keeping it.” Leo stated curtly, not turning around.

“I…see,” Miles said. There was silence in the room for a long time. “Congratulations.” Miles finally said, still in that breathless tone.

Leo turned around and smiled at Miles. “Thank you.” He said very pleasantly.

“But what about –“, Miles began.

Leo put up a hand to forestall him. “I don’t want to talk about it. Let’s just… play poker okay?” he said giving Miles a pleading look.

“Okay”, Miles said quietly and went to get the cards out. ”Want to make it strip poker?” he called back half-jokingly.

“Pass,” Leo called back going to the fridge to get some beers. “Hungry?” he asked Miles, having seen some strips of jerky at the back of the fridge.

“Naah. Let’s play.” Miles replied, sitting down at the dining table. Leo got some jerky for himself and came to sit down with the beers.

“Loser does the winner’s laundry for a week?” Leo asked.

“ While that is a tempting proposition,” Miles replied, “ how about loser has to take winner’s advice on life-changing events in their lives for the next week?”

Leo’s eyebrow went up. “Only for the next week? You promise?”

Miles sighed deeply, “Let’s play shall we? Winner chooses the stakes.”

“Fine,” Leo replied.

They dealt in silence for a while then Miles said dryly, “Two girlfriends and you still do your own laundry?”

Leo glared at him, “Don’t be a male chauvinist pig Miles.”

"Ooh, sorry. I didn't know I was dealing with a feminist." Miles said grinning.

Just then, the phone rang.

"Which girlfriend is it I wonder?" Miles stated smiling maliciously. Leo gave him back the smile with interest and went to answer the phone.

"Hello", he said cautiously into the receiver.

"Leo, thank God. I don't know *what* I'd have said if it was your mother…or Charlotte." Mya's relieved-sounding voice came down the line.

"Charlotte doesn't answer my phone. Is something wrong?" Leo asked, his tone sharp.

"Noo. Nothing's *wrong* per se. I just need to talk to you, if you have time." Mya said diffidently.

"If I have time? Really? Miles and I were just playing poker, I could be there in about an hour?" Leo said.

"Actually, I'm calling from my grandmother's friend's house. You know Sophia? Anyway, its close to you so I could just come over if you like." Mya said tentatively, " We won't be home till late otherwise."

"Come," Leo said briefly hanging up.

"Mya?" Miles asked him though the question clearly didn't require an answer.

"She's coming over," Leo said, feeling a little queer. This would be the first time Mya would be in his house…he looked around noting the pile of dishes waiting in the sink and the fact that the living room hadn't been swept for days. He was usually blind to these things, having become so used to them but when he thought of Mya's threadbare but clean and lovingly tended home, he felt ashamed for her to see his place like this.

"Help me, Miles." He said urgently, passing him the broom, "Sweep up this room."

Miles' mouth opened in stupefaction but he took the broom and went to work. Leo rushed around straightening cushions and dusting surfaces before running to the kitchen and running hot water over the dishes in a makeshift attempt to move most of the stains off them. He put

them on the rack to dry and then wiped off the surfaces of the sink.

"There. That should do it." He said, inspecting the room critically. Miles was staring at him like he'd never seen him before.

"You. Have got it…Bad." He said wonderingly.

"Yeah well, keep it to yourself will you?" Leo asked him as he went to answer the doorbell downstairs.

"Hi," Mya said when he opened the door. She was standing on the stoop wringing her hands. "Sorry to just show up like this." She continued anxiously.

"You didn't just show up. You called first. Come in." Leo said moving aside so she could enter. He gestured for her to go up the stairs before him and she climbed slowly. She was wearing the animal print dress with strappy sandals and a long black sweater. Her jewellery was big and chunky today and she was wearing some sort of headdress that covered most of her hair. She looked exotic, mystical and beautiful and Leo wondered how the hell he could ever have thought her nondescript.

"Where have you been?" he asked her.

"What do you mean?" she replied stopping with one foot on the next stair to turn and look at him.

"Well, I assume you didn't dress up just to come and see me," Leo told her. He was feeling slightly breathless for some reason.

"Oh. This?" Mya said with a smile looking down at herself, " well I went to church actually. It *is* Sunday."

"So it is." Leo agreed with a smile, "where do you go?" he asked.

"To church? Um…well, it's a small community so we usually meet at someone's house. Today was aunt Sophia's turn. Everyone's still back there enjoying Sunday roast but I thought…"

"How come you've never invited me to one of your…services?" Leo asked.

Mya raised her brow in amusement. “Well, it could be that they’re super secret witch meetings…or I didn’t know we were inviting each other to public events these days. What happened to keeping things secret?”

Leo shrugged, “ I don’t know, the prospect of having a child kind of changes priorities doesn’t it?”

“Yes, it does. It makes me even less willing to get killed” Mya replied.

“She wouldn’t kill you. Maybe run you out of town or ostracise you in school…”

“Great,” Mya said wryly.

“Are you guys planning to lurk on the stairs all day?” Miles’ voice came floating down from the apartment.

Mya started and Leo jumped. He had forgotten that they weren’t alone. Mya turned to Leo widening her eyes at him.

“He knows,” Leo said simply, gesturing to her to keep climbing.

Mya ascended the stairs, stepping hesitantly into the room at the top.

“Hi Miles.” She said tentatively. This was possibly the first time she’d ever addressed him directly.

“Hi, Mya.” Miles replied in a non-committal tone, “How are you doing?”

“I’m good. You?” she asked.

“Okay, okay, break it up you two. If you continue like this I might just get jealous.” Leo walking past them said sarcastically.

“Of whom?” Miles asked quietly. Mya gave him a sharp look but let it go. She followed Leo into the room and sat uncertainly down on the sofa.

“So. Mya, what’s up?” Leo asked sitting down opposite her. Mya glanced at Miles with a questioning look but Leo waved his hand in dismissal, “its fine. He’s fine.” He told her.

“I need you…to come with me.” Mya said hesitantly.

“Come with you where?” Leo asked smiling at her tone, “I’ll go with you anywhere, you know that.” He continued gently when she didn’t say anything.

Mya glanced at Miles who was standing in the corner, staring at Leo. She took a deep breath, “Do you remember Mama Ruth?”

“The witch you went to see, who told you about the pool?” Leo asked.

“Yes, her…well, my grandmother reckons we should go see her about…the thing.” Mya said.

“The thing?” Leo asked, furrowing his brow in puzzlement.

“Yes. The mass thing in my womb.” Mya said softly.

“Oh, that thing.” Leo said, “Why?”

“I don’t know why. But she was rather insistent.” Mya said.

“And your grandmother said both of us?” Leo asked sceptically.

“Yes,” Mya said.

“I thought I wasn’t eligible to go see your – “, Leo began.

“Yes well, I’m guessing that things have changed.” Mya said dryly, “What with you being the father of my child and everything…”

Leo's lips twitched, “When do you want us to go?” he asked.

“I don’t know, I think my grandmother will make an appointment,” Mya said.

“I’m going to go…”, Miles interrupted, “leave you guys to talk.”

“Cool man. See you later?” Leo replied not taking his eyes off Mya.

“Sure…” Miles said softly as he headed for the door.

Chapter 35

Heartbreak and Lies

Miles felt like his heart was breaking into a million pieces. He parked his Ford Escort outside the abandoned cabin and got out, falling to the ground, hands clutched to his heart. He folded himself into a ball of misery tears streaming down his screwed up face. He couldn't help it; he felt like his dreams were disappearing in a cloud of smoke. The look on Leo's face as he gazed at Mya had been all the proof he needed that he had lost Leo. Not that he had ever had him, not like that. But he had felt that as long as Leo didn't get emotional about anyone else, then his heart belonged only to Miles. His best friend, his confidante, the only one he showed his true self. He'd thought they'd go off to New York, Leo would marry Charlotte and manage to escape at last from his life. Miles would get a job in the Arts and continue to be the only person who Leo would genuinely love in his life.

Now all that had changed – the glow on Leo's face as he looked at Mya; the way his whole spirit seemed to light up…it was like a thousand knives stabbing him in the heart. He tried to think of a silver lining to this dark cloud and figured that at least Leo was happy; probably for the first time in his life. He could fight Mya, and risk losing Leo in the process – or he could help them, and maybe get to keep his best friend. Miles sighed deeply…it was not like he had a choice; there was really only one option.

§

"Leo said he loves me!" Charlotte said to Ashley clapping her hands excitedly.

"Did he?" Ashley said in surprise.

"Yes! He told me he realised that he was in love with me and it freaked him out." Charlotte said smiling widely, "He wanted a few days to come to terms, it scared him so

much."

"Oh. Well, that's really great isn't it?" Ashley said, trying to inject some real happiness in her voice. She didn't speak much, so she saw a lot; and she had been seeing how Leo's eyes lit up when Mya entered the room lately, and how distant he was when she wasn't around. She'd also noticed how much Leo had been AWOL since school opened, disappearing without a word to anyone including Miles…and Mya was MIA too. If Leo was in love with anyone, she was prepared to bet…Miles, that it wasn't Charlotte. God, if it could happen to Mya, maybe it could happen to her too! A more unlikely pairing than Mya and Leo was hard to imagine, so maybe Miles would notice *her* one day. She just had to keep hope alive. Meanwhile, what game was this Leo was playing with Charlotte?

"What are you going to do about it?" she asked Charlotte.

"Why would I do anything about it? I'm guessing he'll propose soon…or maybe he won't. I know he can't afford a diamond." Charlotte said thoughtfully.

"Isn't it too soon to be thinking about marriage?" Ashley asked in a repressive tone.

"Its never too soon, Ashley. If you want something you have to go for it or else, you risk losing it. You know how the women flock to him."

"Yes, but Leo doesn't seem interested," Ashley replied, not knowing why she was covering for him.

"No." Charlotte said smugly, "He has eyes for no-one but me."

"Yes," Ashley said neutrally. Wherever Leo was right now, he should thank his lucky stars that Charlotte was so self-absorbed.

§

Leo crossed over to the sofa where Mya was sitting. He put his arm along the back of the sofa and leaned closer to her, kissing her behind the ear.

"So," he murmured in her ear, "what with you avoiding me, and Charlotte stalking me, I've kind of missed you."

"*Kind of* missed me?" Mya asked moving away to give him a look.

"You women are never satisfied are you?" Leo asked pulling her in for a long kiss. Their tongues got into the action and soon passion was taking over and the room temperature was rising fast. Leo cut the kiss off to whisper, "bedroom…" and pull her to her feet. They kissed steadily as they propelled themselves to his room, Leo's having Mya's butt cheeks firmly in hand as he pressed her to him so that not even the meanest blade could slide between them. Mya's hands clutched his hair pushing his face into hers in a mad effort to merge them. Leo picked her up and walked quickly to his room, dropping her on the bed and falling on top of her, kissing passionately. He moved to the side, with a muffled apology.

"Why are you apologising?" Mya murmured before her mouth closed on his neck making him groan.

"Didn't want to hurt the baby." Leo murmured incoherently making Mya giggle into his neck which caused him to shiver with pleasure.

"I don't think you can hurt the baby." She said into his neck, making the shivering worse. He got back on top of her, pulling her dress up and over her shoulders, headdress and all.

"The jewellery can stay." He said as he sat up astride her so he could look at her. He ran his hands down her neck to her shoulders, ending by cupping her breasts.

"I've heard that your boobs get really sensitive when you're pregnant. Is that true?" he asked kneading them gently.

"Weell, maybe you stop touching them so I can see whether it's you or them that's making them tingle?" Mya said, making Leo laugh. He leaned down and kissed her lips, trying to infuse the kiss with everything she made him feel. She held him close and gave him back the kiss and he hugged her close. She pushed him away, so she could remove his jeans then she pulled him back to her, clutching him and putting him inside her. He groaned again, saying her name like a prayer. She wrapped her legs around him and whispered in his ear.

"Take me."

Leo thrust into her without restraint, holding tightly onto her as he went in as deep as he could. It wasn't deep enough. He wanted, *needed* more. He placed his hands on either side of

her arching backward and taking her legs onto his shoulders. This opened her up even more and he thrust deeper and faster into her, making her produce a sound that was halfway between a scream and a groan. The sound made him wild and he thrust harder and faster, growling deep in his throat like a formula one engine revving up to full throttle.

“Leo!” she screamed and he didn’t know if it was pain she felt or pleasure. He tried to slow down but his body was out of control.

“Am I…hurting you?” he gasped out between thrusts.

“Yes…” she breathed, “No! don’t stop.” she cried as he slowed down. He leaned down taking her tightly into his arms and fitting his mouth to hers although kissing might not exactly be the right word for what they were doing. Breathing each other’s air, trying to exchange tongues, reaching as if their very souls could be transferred in this way.

Her back arched in her extremity, literally lifting him off her – mouth opened in a soundless scream, he felt her liquid release as she spasmed into boneless immobility beneath him. He lay down on top of her, still inside her, still hard; kissing her neck gently.

“Leo.” She whispered, “I love you.”

Leo smiled into her neck, “That good was it?” he murmured.

Mya slapped him lightly on the back. “Don’t you want to come?” she asked him.

“I do. But I don’t much fancy fucking a corpse.” He replied. She slapped his arse, wrapping her legs around his middle.

“I’m not dead yet.” She replied as he began to move inside her again.

§

Jade Evans listened as her son fucked some girl. The acoustics in the house were quite good and she could hear everything that was going on in her son’s room. She’d come up for a fortifying nip of whiskey when she’d heard the sounds. It hurt her when she saw her son acting just like his father. It had always been one woman after another with him too. She had been shocked when he agreed to marry her after she fell pregnant with Leo. She’d only done it so that she could have something of him to keep forever, but he had stepped up and offered

to make an honest woman of her. Surely he could have had any woman he wanted, she was so grateful that he chose her. They had a good eight years and then he just disappeared without a word. She took the full bottle of whiskey and went back down to the shop with it. A nip would not be enough.

§

They lay in a tangle of limbs, replete with satisfied passion.

“I love you too,” Leo whispered, eyes on the ceiling. Mya turned smiling to look at him, but he didn’t meet her eyes. She ran her finger gently down the length of his face from his eyebrows to his chin then up to his lips, tracing them lovingly.

“I think this is an ice-cream moment, don’t you?” she asked him smiling.

“Ice-cream moment?” he asked with a snort.

“Yes. You must be freaking out right now, saying those words so baldly like that.” She said continuing to smile.

“Actually I’m fine.” He said with a raised eyebrow at her.

“Really?” she said in surprise.

“Really,” Leo stated firmly.

Mya’s eyes lit up with laughter, though she didn’t actually laugh, “Well look at that” she said with a wide smile, “my baby’s all grown up!”

“You better believe it,” Leo answered rolling onto her again and fitting his mouth to hers as he entered her again.

Chapter 36

Hoodoo Priestess

"Are you sure about this?" Leo asked, looking slightly apprehensive at the look of the river at dawn.

"Yes," Mya said as she paddled with her stick. Leo had offered to steer but seeing as he had never so much as paddled in a baby pool Mya thought it best to do the steering. They had started out early because, according to Grandma Matia, Mama Ruth was expecting them for breakfast.

"Do you really think she can help us better than Dr. Parvenu?" Leo asked her sceptically.

"I don't know. Maybe, maybe not. Grandma seems to think she could be of some help, and I trust Grandma. So if she says we should go, then we go." Mya stated.

"Right," Leo said but the lines on his brow did not ease.

The mist was thick on the river, and Leo was impressed that Mya had any idea where she was going. She steered without hesitation and eventually, they changed direction and came into dock. Mya stood without moving, holding on to an overhanging branch, and Leo was just opening his mouth to ask what they were waiting for when he saw the grey wolf standing and staring at them. He stood up quickly, rocking the boat and moved in front of Mya, shielding her from the wolf.

"It's alright," Mya said, "its Mama Ruth's sentinel or familiar – possibly Mama Ruth herself – whatever, it's here to guide us."

"Is it?" Leo said, sounding just a little scared.

"Yes," Mya said calmly.

"You have some strange friends Mya." He said shakily.

"Yeah well, so do you," Mya told him, stepping past him to alight from the boat. She

reached back for his hand and he took it, holding tightly on to her, in case the wolf should turn out to have a taste for human flesh after all. The river behind them was filled with alligators, and only God knew what was in the forest ahead- but at least he could swing her back into the boat and make sure she had some sort of head start. Mya, however, blithely followed the wolf which had whirled around, loping into the forest. After a bit of a trek, they suddenly turned a corner and Leo stopped short because a woman was standing in the path about where the wolf would have been if it didn't seem to have disappeared.

"Welcome," she said, whirling around just like her wolf and walking off into the darkness.

Mya did not seem very surprised at this turn of events so Leo followed her lead and walked into the darkness after the woman whom he assumed was Mama Ruth. They came into a ring of trees surrounding a clearing where a fire was burning merrily in the midst of a circle of stones. Mama Ruth indicated they should sit and Leo settled Mya on a stone before sitting down next to her. Mama Ruth busied herself on the other side of the fire before placing before them a tray filled with rice cakes, a jug of hot milk, another of hot coffee and some waffles. The tray hung suspended in front of them, needing no support and Leo reached out tentatively to pour out the coffee.

"Leo. I am happy to meet you at last." Mama Ruth began.

"Oh? I wasn't aware that you knew me." Leo replied dryly.

"I do know you. Or rather, I know of you. I have heard a lot about you." Mama Ruth said.

"Oh yeah?" Leo said with a suspicious glance at Mya, "who from?"

Mama Ruth smiled enigmatically, "The spirits have noticed you."

"The spirits is it?" Leo said with a lift of his eyebrow, "I don't believe I've met *them* either."

Mama Ruth smiled, "I like *your* spirit." she said, "Ah, but we digress. Matia says you wish me to help you with something?" she asked glancing enquiringly between them.

Leo exchanged glances with Mya, nodding at her to go ahead.

"Mama Ruth, I am going to have a baby." Mya began slowly. Mama Ruth's eyes widened with pleasure and she smiled holding out her hands to Mya.

"That is indeed good news!" she said grasping Mya by the hands and squeezing, "Congratulations."

"Thank you." Mya said, "The problem is that there is another…*thing* in my womb. The doctors don't know what it is, but Grandma thought that you might."

Mama Ruth brightened visibly. This news looked to please her more than Leo thought seemly.

"So, you *do* know what it is?" he asked her in a rather unintentionally aggressive tone.

Mama Ruth closed her eyes, taking deep breaths. She spread out her hands toward Mya and Leo and the fire grew larger until it was like a wall between Mama Ruth and them. Strange colours began shooting through the flames in a whirling kaleidoscope. The whole mass of fire suddenly became translucent like a TV screen and the contents of Mya's womb were on display in the fire, just as they were on the ultrasound screen. Except that they were magnified to such a degree that she could clearly see the cells of her baby multiplying even as she watched. The other mass was also magnified, and it seemed to mimic the shape of the baby, only it was bigger. The bigger shape seemed to circle the smaller one keeping track of it. Then, just as suddenly as it appeared, the image was gone and the fire was nothing but flames again.

"Am I having twins?" Mya asked disbelievingly.

"I think the doctors would have caught that." Mama Ruth said dryly.

"There *was* only one heartbeat." Leo said, making Mya glance sharply at him in surprise, "so what is it?"

"I believe it is what is known as a Guard." Mama Ruth said.

"A. Guard?" Leo asked.

"There is a prophecy. I believe it may refer to you – because you seem to fulfil the terms

of that prophecy." Mama Ruth said cautiously.

Leo leaned forward, taking Mya's hand in his. "What prophecy?" he asked staring intently at Mama Ruth. She stood up and stared straight ahead, folding her hands in her lap like a child performing at a school pageant. She opened her mouth and began to chant;

'Once in many millennia

Pure magic incarnate

Mother true and intemerate

Father powerful, agile, seductive

Opposites attract, the fates conspire

A meeting incredible, inception ensues

The guard to watch over

A child of destiny'

"What does that mean?!" asked Mya totally bewildered.

"Yes. What do you mean by that?" Leo chimed in. Mama Ruth unfolded her hands and sat down again. She looked at them both rather solemnly.

"What it means, is that this baby was foretold by a very old prophecy. Mya, if you look in your great-grandmother Mairiebelle's books, you'll probably find something about this prophecy." She said.

"Foretold; why?" Leo demanded.

"Because the child is pure magic." Mama Ruth said.

"Pure magic?" Leo asked bewildered. Mya reached out a hand to forestall his questions.

"I've read something about this. I'll show you when we get to the house." She told him. "So you're saying that this child is *that* child? Mya asked turning to Mama Ruth.

"Yes." Mama Ruth said.

"No way," Mya said shaking her head.

"Why not?" Mama Ruth asked like it was some sort of academic question.

"Because…Leo doesn't have any magic!" Mya exclaimed desperately.

"Are you sure about that?" Mama Ruth asked.

"Yes!" Mya and Leo shouted together.

"The uncanny pull you have on people, your lightning fast reflexes, your ability to learn to perform physical feats effortlessly – are these things normal, ordinary, everyday characteristics?" Mama Ruth asked.

Leo and Mya were silent. "How did you know about that last one?" Leo asked at last.

"Like I said, the spirits have noticed you." Mama Ruth said. She pointed a finger at Leo, "You are the Guide." she said, then pointed at Mya, "You are the Guardian." She pointed at Mya's womb, "The mass you are so worried about? That is the Guard." She concluded.

Mya and Leo stared at each other, perplexed.

"So you're saying that everything that's happened, the incredible sex, falling in love, everything…its some sort of predestined bullshit?" Leo asked in disbelief.

"No. Those things had to take place in order for the terms of the prophecy to be fulfilled. Nobody could *make* them happen. If that were possible, some voodoo priestess would have tried it long ago." Mama Ruth replied.

"So what does this *mean*?" Mya asked desperately.

"It means you go home, and let nature take its course." Mama Ruth said compassionately.

Mya stood up to leave, but Leo kept his seat.

"What do you mean about me being the Guide and Mya the Guardian?" he asked Mama Ruth.

“When the child is born, it will need guidance in order to grow up to be a force for good. That is your job, Leo.” Mama Ruth said.

Leo laughed sarcastically, “Me? A force for good? I thought you said you’d heard a lot about me.” he sneered.

“I have, and I know that you have it in you to be a good Guide.” Turning to Mya she said,” Mya, the child will need to be taught magic, that is your job.”

“I thought the child was pure magic.” Leo commented with sarcasm, “Why would he have to be *taught* magic?”

“You have a talent in basketball do you not Leo? Yet you still have a coach.” Mama Ruth told him.

“And the Guard. What is he for?” Mya asked in a dazed sort of voice.

“The Guard watches over the child. He will be in grave danger until he achieves thirteen years of age. Many will try to kill him or take him away from you. The child may also be a danger to himself or others before he learns to control his magic.”

“Great,” Leo said throwing his hands up in the air. Mama Ruth smiled serenely at them.

“It’s a lot to take in. Why don’t we just do this one thing at a time and get through the pregnancy?” she proposed.

“That might be a solution. Or we could just have a proper freak out right now.” Mya said desperately.

“Go home. Sleep it over. Tomorrow is another day.” Mama Ruth told them. “Just one thing though: Do not speak of this to anyone.” She continued.

“Not even Grandma?” Mya asked.

“She knows better than to ask.” Mama Ruth stated.

Chapter 37

Shit Has Hit the Fan

Leo paced up and down in the living room while Mya sprawled in the rocking chair. Grandma Matia sat on the sofa, knitting a sweater. The weather would be getting cold soon. They had gone through Mairiebelle's book and read the bit about the Fates and the child of pure magic. Or rather Mya had shown Leo the section where the information was located and then sat in the rocker staring off into space. As predicted by Mama Ruth, Grandma Matia had said nothing, asked nothing. She had taken one look at their faces and known that there was a problem. Without a word, she'd gone to the kitchen and put some coffee on, producing a chocolate cake as well to go with it. She'd asked if they were hungry and wanted some food – Mya was, but Leo had lost his appetite, although he did drink quite a bit of coffee and demolish half of the chocolate cake; all without a word.

"What *is* intemerate anyway?" Mya suddenly asked the room in general.

"Virginal", Matia said.

"Oh. Well, I guess that *was* accurate." Mya murmured putting a hand to her forehead and rubbing it.

"Are you alright?" Leo asked her, watching her rub her head. Mya gave him a disbelieving look in return and Leo held up both hands in surrender, "Stupid question."

"Soo many questions…" Mya said, still rubbing her head.

"I need to go home." Leo said abruptly." I missed basketball practice today, not to mention school…people are probably looking for me."

"Right," Mya said listlessly. "You should go."

Leo stared at her, and opened his mouth to say something, then closed it again. There was exactly nothing to say. He picked up his jacket and walked out without looking back.

“I don’t think he’s coming back,” Mya told her grandmother.

“I wouldn’t put money on that one if I were you,” Matia said knitting nonchalantly.

“You weren’t there…” Mya began.

Matia put a hand up looking up at Mya and shook her head warningly. Mya closed her mouth again, remembering Mama Ruth’s warning. Was it really that serious? She couldn’t really process it – it was too strange. One minute she was a high school girl with, with... okay, less than average high school problems, but manageable nevertheless; and now she was a seventeen-year-old mother-to-be apparently going to give birth to a child of pure magic who the entire witching community would want to kill or kidnap if they knew about it. And apparently, Leo had some sort of magical ability to attract women. Go figure!

“I am going to bed.” She told her grandmother.

“A good night’s rest is probably advisable.” Her grandmother replied, eyes on her knitting.

§

“Where were you yesterday?” Charlotte asked.

“Yesterday? Could you be more specific?” Leo asked eyes closed as he leaned back against Charlotte’s divan.

“You weren’t in school, you didn’t turn up for basketball practice…it’s not like you,” Charlotte said, moving to insert herself on the divan with him.

“Right,” Leo said distantly.

“So? What happened?” Charlotte prodded irritably.

“There was a rabid ‘gator gone crazy on the farm. It escaped its pen and went into the swamp. Uncle Greg sent me to hunt it.” Leo said.

“Really? A rabid ‘gator? Did Mya go hunting with you, because she was missing from school too.” Charlotte said, narrowing her eyes at him.

“Um…actually, yes. I asked her to use her voodoo powers to help me track it actually.” Leo said, inventing on the fly.

“I didn’t know you were close enough for her to help you with such a dangerous situation,” Charlotte said.

“We are.” Leo replied.” I’ve seen what she can do, and I got to know her when I was repairing her roof. She’s all about service to others so it wasn’t hard to convince her to help.”

“At the expense of missing school? We all know how important that scholarship is to her.” Charlotte persisted.

“There was a rabid ‘gator in the river. She lives on the river. So does her grandmother. I think she was motivated.” Leo said dryly.

“I don’t know if it was the rabid alligator which motivated her or spending time with you-“Charlotte began.

“Are we going to spend all evening talking about Mya?” Leo interrupted, “Because this is getting tedious.”

“I’m sorry. Sometimes I get carried away.” Charlotte said leaning down to kiss Leo. “So, is the freak out over?”

“Freak out?” Leo said.

“When you realized you loved me,” Charlotte said.

“Oh. Yeah, I think that freak out is definitely over.” Leo said.

“So what now?” Charlotte asked, caressing his face.

“Now? Que sera, sera I guess.” He said, then thought with a pang of when Mya had said that to him, snuffing that thought out ruthlessly even as it occurred to him. He leaned in to kiss Charlotte, keeping his eyes open so he could see her blue eyes and her long soft straight straw-coloured hair – the honey gold skin, so pampered and smooth. She was everything a man could want. With time, he could learn to love her. He was sure of it.

§

If Charlotte asks you where you were yesterday, we were on the river, hunting a rabid 'gator.

Mya stared unbelievingly at the note that Leo had just passed to her in Chemistry class. *Did alligators even* get *rabies?* She wondered. She stared at Leo's back until he turned around to look at her then lifted her eyebrows and widened her eyes at him; asking as eloquently as she could, '*What the fuck?!*' He looked nonchalantly back at her, then significantly at the note before turning back to the teacher.

"Ms. Andrewes", Mrs. Sommers called sharply from the front of the class, "What is that you have there? Is it a note? Would you like to read it out to the rest of the class?"

"I don't have a note, Mrs. Sommers." She replied, making the note disappear with the clench of a fist.

"Oh? What was that in your hand then?" Mrs. Sommers asked.

"Nothing," Mya replied, showing both her hands.

Mrs. Sommers' eyes narrowed suspiciously but with no evidence to hand, she could not continue her interrogation so she got back to teaching. Leo turned around and widened his eyes at her in relief; she didn't return the gesture seeing as he had almost got them in trouble, and *she* had had to get them out. *What if someone had seen? And why couldn't he just have waited until after class to have a conversation with her?* It wasn't like Charlotte would see them. She did not take chemistry and was in fact at cheerleading practice - which was on the other side of the school, negating the need for cloak and dagger.

She got the answer to her questions when after class she gathered up her things, expecting Leo to wait for her so they could walk together and talk, but when she looked up, he was gone.

'And so it begins.' She thought with an inner sigh of resignation. She'd known he was immensely disturbed by Mama Ruth's revelations. And when Leo was disturbed, he retreated. But she was immensely disturbed too, and she didn't have time for his drama. God knew she had more than enough of her own. She took her books and went to the next class,

determined to think of nothing but the next five minutes of her life for the rest of the day.

She was depositing books in her locker at the end of the day when Charlotte caught up with her.

“Hello Mya,” Charlotte said pleasantly.

“Hello,” Mya replied absently.

“Did I do something to you? You’ve been very distant lately.” Charlotte told her still in that pleasant tone.

“I’ve been pre-occupied Charlotte, it’s nothing personal,” Mya replied distantly.

“Pre-occupied with what Mya? Anything I can help with?” Charlotte persisted.

“No,” Mya said shortly.

Charlotte took a deep breath, looking around at Ashley and Tina who were with her. They exchanged meaningful glances and then Charlotte asked, “So Mya, where were you yesterday?”

“Yesterday?” Mya asked turning to face Charlotte after shutting her locker, “Why does it matter where I was yesterday?”

“Oh, we were just wondering, aren’t we allowed to know?” she asked, looking significantly at Tina and Ashley.

“Sure you can know if it’s that important to you; I was on the river, with Leo, hunting a rabid alligator,” Mya said.

“Really?” Charlotte asked staring intently at her.

“Yes, really,” Mya replied, beginning to walk away. Charlotte followed her.

“Why were you helping Leo? I thought you hated him.” Charlotte persisted.

Mya stopped walking and turned to look at Charlotte.” I don’t *hate* anyone, Charlotte. Hatred is a destructive emotion.”

“Oh sorry, my mistake. I thought you were upset with him then, over the whole pool incident.” Charlotte said.

“I got over it,” Mya replied. “Now if you will excuse me, my grandmother is waiting for me.”

“Of course Mya. Have lunch with us tomorrow?” Charlotte asked, detaining her with a hand on her arm.

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Mya said, moving her arm from under Charlotte’s hand and walking off.

§

Leo and Miles watched as Charlotte ambushed Mya at her locker. From the ruler-straight posture of Mya’s back, Leo could tell she was angry. *Whatever could Charlotte be saying to her that would cause her to react with anger?* He watched as she walked away from the group, and Charlotte followed. ‘*The Bitch is nothing if not persistent.’* Leo thought sneering slightly, then he thought about what he’d decided just this morning and stopped. If he was going to make it work with Charlotte, he needed to stop with the derisive thinking.

“Doesn’t it make you shit bricks, when you’re girlfriends, are talking?” Miles asked him in an amused tone.

“Only one of them is my girlfriend,” Leo replied.

“Oh? Which one? Mya? Does Charlotte know?” Miles asked straightening up from his slouch.

“Actually, it’s Charlotte who’s my girlfriend,” Leo said.

“Ah.” Miles replied, nodding his head wisely, “and does Mya know she’s been dumped yet?”

Leo’s mouth twitched but he said nothing, just stared at the two girls talking by the school entrance.

“What about the baby?” Miles’ voice said in his ear. Leo turned to stare at him sharply then shrugged.

“We’ll deal with that when *and if* we have to,” Leo replied coldly.

“Are you going to tell me what happened?” Miles persisted.

“No,” Leo replied shortly and curtly.

Miles knew when it was time to leave well enough alone.

Chapter 38

Life Goes On

"Hello." A familiar voice came down the line, but Mya could not quite place it.

"Hello, can I help you?" she asked a bit impatiently.

"This is Andre Parvenu calling for Mya Andrewes. May I speak to her?"

"Speaking," Mya said.

"Oh good, Mya I have some good news for you," Andre said.

"Really?" Mya asked, in a disinterested tone.

"Yes. I spoke with the hospital administration and they are willing to cover your hospital expenses!" Andre said like he was expecting her to jump in the air with joy.

"That's nice," Mya said tonelessly.

"Uh…is something wrong Mya?" Andre asked uncertainly.

"Nothing's wrong. That is really good news. Thank you for calling to tell me." Mya said, "Goodbye."

"Wait! Mya, I wanted to see when you can come in for those tests." Andre said quickly before she could hang up on him.

"Oh, well, how about tomorrow after school? Will they take long? I usually walk home so…" Mya asked.

"Well no worries, if we go late I'll drop you off home. Will you not be coming with your boyfriend?" Andre asked.

"No." Mya said abruptly, "See you tomorrow." hanging up before he could ask any more difficult questions. She sighed deeply and turned to go back upstairs where she was

purporting to do her homework but Grandma Matia was too fast for her.

"Who was that?" she called from the kitchen.

"Just the doctor. He said my hospital expenses will be covered by the administration." She told her grandmother.

"That's good news isn't it?" Matia asked in a gentle tone.

"Yes, it is," Mya said trying to inject some enthusiasm in her voice and pin a smile on her face. She hated that she was so down, but she couldn't seem to do anything about it. Leo's betrayal was like a constantly twisting knife in her chest. Since they'd been to see Mama Ruth more than a week and a half ago, he hadn't so much as nodded at her in the corridor. *Apart from that stupid note telling her to cover his ass.* She was angry at him for running away, but her heart was also shattered in a million pieces and she *hated* that. She wanted to reach down into her chest and physically remove the offending organ, stamp on it and set it on fire. But seeing as she couldn't live without it… How was she to live now?

"Mya, come. Sit. Eat." Her grandmother called.

Mya came to sit. She ate only because if she didn't she would begin to feel dizzy and sick – and because the baby needed the nourishment. She would not be one of those pathetic women in those Mills and Boon novels who lost weight just because a guy left them. She was better than that. She settled down to shovel as much food as she could down her throat in a very determined manner. She hardly paid attention to what she ate, but she made sure she emptied her plate. The vomiting had gotten worse and she had gotten into the habit of eating a few spoonfuls and then waiting for nausea to overwhelm her, and vomiting before continuing with her meal. It made lunch in the cafeteria extremely awkward. She thought back to the lunch she'd had with Charlotte and her crew. Leo had been there, deep in conversation with Miles acting like she wasn't there. Ashley had smiled at her and Teddy Bear had asked after her general health. After that, everyone pretty much ignored her. It was like déjà vu. Except for when she'd had to excuse herself to vomit midway through her meal.

After that, she made sure she was always somewhere else at lunchtime so that Charlotte wouldn't feel compelled to make her sit with them. She made sure she hung out with Charlotte for at least an hour every day just so she'd leave her alone the rest of the time. It

was torture listening to her go on and on about Leo, how wonderful he was being to her, how he had said he loved her… it twisted the knife even deeper. She got good at maintaining a poker face though.

'Perhaps I ought to think about going to Vegas to make my fortune at the crap tables since a scholarship seems ever more unlikely'. She thought ruefully.

No-one was giving a heavily pregnant high school kid an academic scholarship to an Ivy League or any other school. Mya looked down at her stomach; she was almost two months gone already, but her stomach was still completely flat.

'Well, at least that was one thing to be thankful for', she thought, sighing.

"Goodnight Grandma." She said, rinsing her plate in the sink.

"Goodnight Mya," Matia called, she came to her and put her arms around Mya, hugging her gently.

§

School was torture. Leo seemed to be everywhere. And everywhere he saw her he gave her the cold shoulder. He couldn't even afford her the respect of telling her why the sudden change of heart…though she could imagine. As she sat in the waiting room, awaiting her turn to see Dr. Parvenu, she thought back to the last time she'd been here, Leo at her side. It made a difference to know that they had been two of them in this predicament. Now she was alone. She took a deep breath and straightened up. Well, no; not quite alone. She had her baby and the thing with her baby, to keep her company. It would have to be enough.

"Mya!" Dr. Andre Parvenu himself called her name, smiling happily.

She stood up and followed him into the doctor's room. He handed her a hospital gown to wear and she went behind the screen to change.

"I'll have the nurse come and take some blood right now," Andre called from the other room. Mya heard the door open and close.

The taking of her samples didn't take long. Blood, urine, cervical cells…Dr. Parvenu tried to make her wait for him to drop her off home but it was still light out and she thought

she could make it with no problems. When Andre saw he could not persuade her, he let her go on the promise that she would call him as soon as she got home. She agreed and left, Andre promising to let her know when her results would be out.

She walked slowly, not much noticing her surroundings, absorbed in her thoughts. Walking was a soothing activity; it calmed her down and made her feel better. She ambled along, lost in thought, wondering what the medics would find. *If the…thing was a thing of magic, then how come it showed up on the ultrasound? And would she have to give birth to it too?! It looked like it was already bigger than the baby, and from what she'd heard, pushing a baby out was bad enough. But perhaps it would just squeeze past with no fuss, seeing as it was magic; it could probably make itself change shape. She really needed to look up these Guards, see what they were and how they conducted themselves. She needed to go back to Mama Ruth's, get some more information-*

A car was ambling along with her, hooting softly. She started visibly and turned wondering who…and saw Miles peering at her. He smiled and waved, gesturing for her to get in. She hesitated briefly then shrugged.

'Why the hell not?' she thought, *'I'm tired anyway'.*

"My mother works next door to the clinic. I usually pass by there after school. Saw you go in. Is everything okay?" Miles asked.

"Why do you care?" Mya asked indifferently.

"Because I do. And so does Leo." Miles said.

"Yes. I noticed." Mya said, not even having enough energy to make it sarcastic.

Miles smiled. "You know what? I like you. You have some balls. I'm guessing that's why Leo fell in love with you. You don't take any bullshit."

"Miles?" Mya said, "Do me a favour and stop talking."

"Right," Miles said. "Can I get you something to eat? I hear pregnant women have to keep eating all the time."

"I'm good thanks," Mya said shortly, wondering what it would take to shut Miles up. His

concern was actually physically painful. And listening to him talk about how Leo was in love with *her* when he was walking down the school hall hand-in-hand with Charlotte was nothing short of cruel.

They drove in silence for a while apart from Miles asking for directions. He had never been to her house.

"This is me." She said as they reached her gate. Miles stopped the car and she took hold of the door handle, thanking him for the ride as she stepped out. Twilight was just coming in – if she'd been forced to walk it would have been full dark before she got here.

"Mya." Miles' voice stopped her.

"Yes?" she said impatiently, not turning to look at him.

"*Are* you okay?" Miles persisted.

"I'm fine Miles. Thanks for the ride. Goodnight." Mya spoke curtly, slamming the door and walking into her compound.

§

"Mya is not okay," Miles told Leo as they sipped beers at the abandoned cabin later that night.

"There's a newsflash." Leo murmured. He was a bit drunk and his words slurred.

"She was at the clinic today." Miles continued.

"What?!" Leo said, sitting up abruptly. "Why? What was she doing there? Was she alright?"

"I thought you'd moved on from her. I thought Charlotte was your new focus now." Miles goaded him.

"She is," Leo said, staring off into space. "She is. But Mya is carrying my baby. I can be concerned about the baby can't I?"

"If you're so concerned about the baby, why haven't you spoken to her in two weeks?"

Miles asked.

“Eleven days…but who’s counting?” Leo replied.

“Leo, you can’t go on like this. For one thing, you’ve been drunk every one of those eleven days. You’re turning into your mum.” Miles said desperately.

“I can’t…” Leo said, shaking his head sadly, “I can’t do it…again. I just…can’t.” as his eyes closed and he drifted off to sleep.

“What can’t you do Leo?” Miles asked his sleeping form, “Whatever it is, you better find a way because I’m not losing you to drink. I’d rather lose you to Mya.”

Chapter 39

It's Complicated

Andre called early on Friday morning to tell Mya that her results were ready and would she go see him that same day? Mya couldn't really face going to school, she'd been trying her best to keep her spirits up but she had to admit they were flagging. So she told Andre she would be there in a couple of hours.

Her grandmother was not an early riser and she was usually on her way before she got up. Today she had a leisurely breakfast, making up some pancakes for her grandma as well and leaving them on the grill to keep warm, she set out for the town at a slow amble. The weather was turning and autumn was coming in. The world was brown and gold and yellow with streaks of green here and there for variety. It really was quite beautiful to behold, and there was a new life growing in her belly - a completely new person. Surely a world where such things existed could not be all bad. By the time she got to town, she was relaxed for the first time in weeks. The nurse at the clinic was the same one as had attended them the first day they had come. Mya suspected that she didn't quite like her for some reason. She was sure they hadn't previously met so she wasn't sure what that was about but she didn't have the mental energy to pursue it.

"Hi." She told the receptionist, "I'm here to see Dr. Parvenu."

"Right. Have a seat, he'll be right with you." The receptionist said with a smile. Nurse Wots-'er-problem passed by the waiting room, shooting Mya a glance of dislike as she did so. Mya frowned then decided she wasn't going to sweat it. Andre came rushing out and came to take her hand, asking her how she was feeling. While she was glad that he was so concerned, his over solicitousness was a bit disconcerting.

"I'm fine." She answered him.

"What happened to your boyfriend? Did you have a fight?" he asked sympathetically.

“No. He left me.” Mya stated baldly in order to stop his questions.

“Oh. I’m sorry to hear that.” Andre said quietly, “Come this way.” He said holding her lightly on the arm.

Andre settled Mya in her seat and then went to retrieve her files. He did not cross over to the other side of the desk but sat in the seat opposite her. He removed her blood work and showed it to her. Her white cell count was slightly elevated but this was normal, he said, in pregnancy. She was also slightly anaemic, so he recommended some iron tablets for her. Next, came the urine tests. She was free from any UTIs or STDs which would have been a relief to her if she knew what these acronyms meant. Nevertheless, it was obviously good news so… The last was the biopsy which was completely clear of malignant cells.

“What do you think the mass is then?” Mya asked cautiously, curious as to what Andre would say.

“That is the million dollar question.” Andre said, “I’ve consulted with other doctors, a renowned obstetrician, a Johns Hopkins oncologist and a physician, and they agree with me that given your results, the best thing to do is wait, and keep an eye on the situation.”

“Oh,” Mya said.

“You seem less worried than last time,” Andre said quizzically.

“Yes well, a lot has happened since then.” Mya said wryly, “One can only take so much excitement.”

Andre leaned over and covered her hands with his. “He’ll be back. I saw the way he looked at you. That was the real thing. Whatever is causing him to panic right now – he’ll get over it.”

“Yes well…” Mya said trailing off into silence and staring into the middle distance. She took a deep breath and continued. “Whatever he’s going through, I don’t have time to worry about, so maybe you can tell me what next?”

“Now, I give you a prescription and you go fill it out at the pharmacy. Then you make your next appointment with Marcy.” Andre said.

“Who is Marcy?” Mya asked.

“The lovely receptionist,” Andre said very precisely.

“Okay,” Mya said and almost smiled.

Andre wrote the prescription and she went out to the pharmacy to fill it. The receptionist was very nice and gave her a date for her next visit with no hassles. It was just gone 11:30 am by the time she was through with everything. As she stepped out into the sunlight she thought about whether or not to attend the rest of the school day but just couldn’t face it.

“I bet the fish are biting, even now.” She said aloud to no-one in particular as she set off down the street. She spotted Leyla Evans loading what looked like rotting meat in the back of her truck and looked around wildly for some alley to lurk in until she disappeared but too late, Leyla had seen her already.

“Its…Mya right?” she called smiling. Mya nodded reluctantly, making her way toward Leyla.

“I don’t suppose I could get a lift down the river?” she asked Leyla tentatively.

“Of course you can, hop in,” Leyla said pleasantly enough.

Leyla finished her loading and they went off. “No school today?” Leyla asked her.

“Um, home sick actually. I’ve just been to the clinic.” Mya replied.

“Oh, well, sorry to hear that. But I’m glad I was there to give you a lift. How is your grandmother?” Leyla asked.

“She’s well thank you,” Mya replied, relaxing slightly. The journey passed pleasantly enough, and Leyla dropped her off at her gate. She stood and waved until Leyla had disappeared then made her way around the house, to the river.

§

“Soo looks like Mya didn’t make it to school today,” Miles observed to no-one in particular. No-one who was sitting next to Charlotte lost in thought.

"Yeah, funny thing about that," Tina said leaning forward, "You know my dad's on the hospital's administration committee? Well, I overheard him discussing Mya the other day with another committee member. Apparently, she has some sort of medical condition. Some doctor wanted permission to treat her for free!"

"What sort of medical condition?" Charlotte asked all agog.

"I didn't hear that part," Tina said with a shrug.

"Well, can you find out?" Charlotte asked her.

"I don't really see what business this is of ours." Leo interrupted curtly.

"Don't tell me you're not curious Leo! What if it's contagious? We've *eaten* with her." Charlotte admonished.

"I'm sure if it was contagious, she wouldn't be around people." Miles put in.

"She *isn't* around people. She's not in school." Tina pointed out.

"For all you know she was feeling sick today, that's why she's not here," Miles said. Leo stood abruptly and left the table. Walking quickly out of the room in a way that shouted, "Do not, if you value your life, follow me!".

Charlotte turned to Tina, leaning forward confidentially, "So? Can you find out what she has?"

"Yeah, of course." Tina said nonchalantly, "I'll update you tomorrow."

"How about you find out today?" Charlotte asked.

"O-okay. I could do that too. I have a free period after lunch so…" Tina said uncertainly.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Go on! Aaron, drive her." Charlotte said peremptorily. Tina and Aaron shot up immediately and went off.

§

Tina and Aaron walked into the clinic, looking around to see who was present.

“Carrie!” Tina called to the nurse who was sitting at the nurse’s station writing on a pad.

“Hi Tina!” the nurse called Carrie answered beckoning them over.

“Carrie, it’s good to see you. How are you?” Tina asked sitting down.

“I’m fine. What are you doing here?” Carrie asked.

“Well, we heard that our friend was here. Mya? Do you know her?” Tina asked.

“The black girl you mean?” Carrie asked with a twist of her lips.

“Yeah. Have you seen her?” Tina asked hopefully.

“Well yeah. She came in to see the new doctor.” Carrie said.

“What did he say? Is she okay?” Tina asked.

“Well, I don’t know if she’s okay but the pregnancy’s progressing, that’s all I know.”

“Oh,” Tina said hesitantly, exchanging widening eyes with Aaron. “The pregnancy’s fine then? That’s good.”

“I don’t know about that.” Carrie said derisively, “These mixed race babies tend to fall through the cracks don’t they?”

“I suppose they do,” Tina said, not sure what Carrie meant by that. ”Well, we have to be going. It was good seeing you.”

“You too. Say hello to your parents for me.” Carrie said with a smile. They waved at each other, and Tina and Aaron walked out exchanging stupefied glances at the information they’d received.

Chapter 40

The Box of Pandora

"She's pregnant?! Are you sure?" Charlotte asked intently.

They were huddled in a group at the bleachers; Charlotte, Tina, and Ashley. The boys were down on the court at practice.

"Well, according to the nurse on duty, she's definitely pregnant – with a mixed-race baby apparently – she said they tend to fall through the cracks." Tina faithfully repeated, "How could she be pregnant? She doesn't even have a boyfriend."

"Who says you need a boyfriend to be pregnant?" Charlotte said nastily. She regarded Ashley thoughtfully, "You're pretty quiet. Did you already know?"

"What? No!" Ashley replied, "I was just thinking that she must be feeling very scared and alone."

"She's a witch Ashley, if she wanted to get rid of it, I'm sure she would have by now." Charlotte stated, "I wonder who the father is…"

Behind the bleacher on which the girls sat was another group of girls. They tended to hang around whenever Charlotte was near, watching her, listening to her conversations and generally doing their best to insert themselves into Charlotte's world. Since Charlotte and Tina were not bothering to lower their voices, these girls heard every word they said. By Monday, almost every person in the school knew that Mya Andrewes was expecting. The rumours tended to get a little wild, with some believing that she was carrying a devil child, and others saying she was practically a whore and didn't know who the father was. Between these two extremes were other theories about secret boyfriends, as well as cult marriages and everything short of Immaculate Conception. Others said she *had* been pregnant but aborted

the foetus by black magic. The only person who hadn't heard these rumours was Mya herself. So she walked into school on Monday morning completely unaware of how drastically her life had changed.

She wasn't invisible anymore. In fact, a spotlight seemed to be shining on her wherever she went. People pointed and whispered as she passed and she had no clue why. She was walking past the girls' bathroom at lunchtime, headed for a nearby classroom where she could eat a few bites of her pork sandwich before escaping to the loo to throw up when she heard someone hissing her name. She turned in surprise to see Ashley beckoning to her from the bathroom.

"Mya!" Ashley whispered loudly, indicating that she should enter the bathroom.

"Yes?" Mya replied in a normal tone of voice which immediately caused Ashley to make shushing sounds and lead her to a corner. "What is going on Ashley?"

"I'm so sorry Mya." Ashley whispered, "Your secret is out."

"My secret?" Mya asked, brow raised.

"You know your…secret!" Ashley said looking significantly down at Mya's stomach.

"Just what secret is this you think you know Ashley? Speak plainly." Mya said moving closer and staring straight into Ashley's eyes, arms folded defensively.

"Your…pregnancy." Ashley was back to whispering. Mya started visibly, unable to disguise her reaction.

"Who told you?" she whispered, stomach dropping at the thought that Leo could have betrayed her like this.

"Tina found out. She has some connections at the hospital. Mya? Everybody knows." Ashley said with a look of pity in her eyes.

"Everybody as in…?" Mya asked.

"Everybody in school, Mya." Ashley replied, "I'm sooooo sorry."

Mya tried out a smile. It wasn't completely successful but at least it was recognisable as a

smile. “Don’t worry about it, Ashley. Thank you for telling me.” she turned to make her dazed way out of the bathroom when Ashley caught hold of her hand.

“Its Leo’s, isn’t it?” she asked softly.

Mya did not turn around. “Whatever gave you that idea?” she asked her voice surprisingly steady.

“Something’s been going on between you. I’ve been noticing the hot glances you’ve been giving each other for a while now. And Leo’s been drinking like a fish recently – since he apparently told Charlotte he loved her. It’s not really a stretch.” Ashley said with a shrug.

“Yeah well, you’re wrong. It’s not Leo’s.” Mya said.

Ashley shrugged, “Protect him if you want – I don’t see him doing the same for you though.” Mya turned around to stare at Ashley. Her brown eyes had gone black.

“Excuse me,” she said, disengaging her hand from Ashley’s and walking out of the bathroom, slowly.

Mya went to ground under the bleachers in the sports field. She curled herself into a ball staring unseeingly at the wall of trees that stood outside the school fence. There were no tears, she was all cried out. So everyone knew she was pregnant. That was good – one less thing to hide. She was tired of hiding, tired of being tired, tired of hurting.

Maybe I should go home and have some of Grandma’s homemade wine. She thought.

And what about the baby? The part of her that spoke in Grandpa George’s voice argued.

Fuck the baby, it’s supposed to be pure magic; I’m sure it can survive some red wine. The other voice retorted.

You don’t mean that. Grandpa George voice said.

Oh? Don't I? Watch me. Other voice replied.

You have chemistry, you can’t miss this class. The coldly practical part of her interrupted the argument, settling it summarily. Mya got up and went to get her chemistry books. If she was good at one thing, it was school. She wasn’t letting Leo or this situation take that away

from her.

§

Leo knew that Mya had come into the class by the change in the tone of the whispering. He forced himself not to look up, to keep reading his chemistry notes. Or rather, keep pretending to read. He hadn't had much attention to pay to anything since Friday when Miles told him that *they* knew. They knew that Mya was pregnant and were making up all sorts of ridiculous stories about how she got that way. He wanted to hit someone; he wanted to stand up and announce that he was the father of her child; he wanted to shout. Most of all, he wanted all this not to be happening. This is what happened when you didn't plan ahead – the one time…Oh well, nothing to be done. Mya had sat down in the seat next to him. He wanted to turn and look at her but thought that the sight of her might actually hurt his eyes. She was looking at him; he could *feel* her eyes resting on him. Well, he wasn't going to be such a coward as to avoid her eyes forever. He turned his head slowly and looked into her brown eyes. She had a little fleck in one eye, it made her look like she had something in her eye; he hadn't noticed that before. There were bags under her eyes, she wasn't sleeping well. *Well, join the club.* He had been right; it did hurt to look at her.

"Hi," she said steadily.

"Hi," he replied his voice gritty.

"How have you been?" she asked politely.

"Fine," Leo said, getting rather lost in those brown depths.

"*Where* have you been?" Mya asked just as politely.

Leo looked down at his books again. "Don't do this Mya."

"Do what?" Mya asked still looking at his bent head, her eyes burned him.

"Do we have to talk about this now?" Leo asked, looking back at her.

"Yes. When else? When you're rushing off to be with your girlfriend? Or perhaps at basketball? Should I follow you home?" Mya asked, maintaining her even tone which let Leo

know just how angry she was. Leo turned around on his stool to face her.

"Since I was eight years old, I've been looking after my drunken mother and struggling to survive on my own. I've been dreaming of the day life wouldn't be so hard, when I would be able to go *one* day without worrying about someone else. Now…you're asking me to take on not just you and the baby, but enter into this dark and dangerous world with no resources or weapons other than my good looks – your witch said it was a weapon, not me – I'm seventeen years old, and I can't do this. Not again." Leo finished desperately.

"I haven't asked you to take on anything Leo. Never. *You* came to *me*. Frankly, none of this surprises me; I guess I was a fool to think…" Mya trailed off. Then she stood up and turned to look at him, "Goodbye Leo." She said with a finality that went through him like a knife and walked off to her seat. Leo watched her until she sat down then turned around to stare unseeingly at his books. Mrs. Sommers came in and asked them to divide themselves into two groups.

'I can't do this.' Leo decided, gathering his books together and walking forward to inform Mrs. Sommers that he felt sick and then he left the room, feeling just as nauseous as Mya must feel at every meal. He was damned if he did, and damned if he didn't. He got in his car and drove toward the abandoned cabin but then remembered that that was where Mya had told him she was pregnant. He turned the car around trying to think about somewhere that didn't remind him of her. Finally, he hit on Jon's bar. It was dingy and dark and there was alcohol. Perfect.

The Rusty Nail was located in an alley running down the middle of downtown Le Marais. Le Marais was really a tiny town with one long street running from the town entrance to the exit. Along the street were the town shopping centre, with the yoghurt and ice-cream shop, the butcher's, the green grocer's and a small clothing store owned by Grandma Matia's friend Sophia. Along the main street, three little side streets branched off, with Freddie's- the eatery, and the First Mercantile Bank of Le Marais taking up one entire side street. The other two had various small businesses, such as the Evans' alligator Shoppe, a shoe emporium, insurance brokerage, used car dealership and auto garage owned by Jamie McLeod, Jade Evans' on-again, off-again boyfriend, and down a little alleyway off the last side street was the Rusty Nail, Le Marais' dingy bar frequented by the less savoury elements in town and teenagers looking for some booze or wanting to score. It was run by Jon, a middle-aged ex-

con with no last name who was nevertheless known for his great customer service.

"Hey, Jon." Leo called to him as he settled at the bar, "Hit me."

"Seriously? It's two o' clock in the afternoon. Shouldn't you be in school?" a voice said from behind him. He turned around to see Jamie holding a beer and coming toward him – apparently, he'd been sitting in the dark corner.

"Hey Jamie, how's tricks? Shouldn't *you* be at work?" Leo asked in turn.

"I should, but I thought I'd check in on your mother," Jamie said coming to lean on the counter next to Leo.

"Ah. Hence the drinking?" Leo commiserated.

"Yeah. But don't change the subject. Shouldn't you be in school?" Jamie asked trying to look stern.

Leo's mouth twisted, "Let's just say I have girl trouble of my own." He said wryly.

"So what else is new? It's never driven you to drink before…and to ditch school; I assume you're not planning on going to basketball practise while drunk?"

"No. I'm not planning on going back to school today," Leo said definitely.

"Wanna talk about it?" Jamie asked.

"No. How about we drink and not talk?" Leo said.

Jamie shrugged and ordered another round. They drank companionably for a while, their spirits getting steadily lighter as the bottles kept piling up.

"You know I love your mother right?" Jamie asked Leo blurrily. Leo nodded his head slowly in answer. "But she drives me completely nutso! Why does she have to drink so much?" Jamie wailed in despair. Leo shrugged his shoulders, leaning drunkenly against the counter.

"Mya is pregnant. And it's all my fault," he told Jamie sadly.

"Is it?" Jamie said sympathetically, "What are you going to do about it?"

Leo shrugged, "I dunno. Kill myself?" he said droopily, "I mean…I love her, don't get me wrong, but I can't do this again. Mom was bad enough, but starting all over again…with nothing, less than nothing…and a child on the way – a special one at that. I mean, how much strength is a guy supposed to have?! Is it so wrong to just want to have a smooth and easy life?"

"Are you happy?" Jamie asked him.

Leo laughed out loud, "When am I ever happy?" he retorted.

"Good point…does *she* make you happy?" Jamie continued.

"Of course she does. But that has nothing to do with the price of shares on the stock exchange. I have to think about the future!" Leo argued.

"You said she's pregnant this girl? So what happens to the baby?" Jamie asked.

"There are…issues… about the baby, which are best handled by Mya and her grandmother. Her grandmother, in fact, will know what to do for the best. *I* don't know what to do! Frankly, I'm out of my depth."

"So you just abandon her?" Jamie persisted.

"Whose side are you on anyway? Of course, I don't just abandon her. I'll send her money. I'll make sure her hospital bills are paid. Well, the hospital's treating her for free, but I'll send her money!" Leo said.

"Is it money that she needs? Or is it you?" Jamie asked gently.

Leo snorted into his beer. "Nobody needs *me,* Uncle Jamie, …they may *want* me, but they don't *need* me." He said sadly.

Uncle Jamie was shaking his head like he couldn't believe what Leo was saying. "You'd be surprised my boy." was all he said though.

Leo stumbled out of the pub two hours later, leading Jamie down the alley toward his apartment. Jamie lived in the tiny apartment above his garage which was just across the street

from the alleyway in which the Rusty Nail was found. In fact, Jade had met Jamie in that very bar and had gone home with him that first time because his place was so close. Ten turbulent years later, they still tended to get together at the same dingy bar and follow the exact same routine. Leo left Jamie at his door and turned to leave.

"Wait! You're not intending to drive in the state you're in are you?" Jamie asked him, clutching his arm so as to detain him.

"Nah. Home is too close and anyway, I have to go do something at the bank right now." Leo told him. Jamie nodded his head either because he was about to fall asleep or because he understood. Leo wasn't too sure which but he disengaged his arm from Jamie's hand, waving vaguely to him, and set off on foot for the First Mercantile Bank.

"Excuse me?" he slurred at the receptionist, "I need to open a bank account."

The receptionist glared up at him. "Leo Devereux, as I live and breathe, aren't you supposed to be in school? Look at you! Have you been drinking?"

"No, ma'am," Leo said, swaying slightly. He frowned slightly trying to place the receptionist but couldn't. *Did he know her?*

"Chloe Saunders. I just left school last year?" she answered his unspoken question.

"Oh. Hi Chloe. I need to open a bank account." Leo said.

"I heard you the first time. Okay then, here's the form, fill in your details." Chloe said irritably.

"It's not for me. It's for…someone else." Leo said his voice trailing away.

"Okay then, fill in *their* details," Chloe said handing him some forms.

He looked at the paper uncertainly, not knowing what to do with it. Chloe sighed deeply, taking back the paper from him and picking up a pen.

"Name?" she asked.

"What?" Leo answered confusedly

"What is the name of the account recipient?" Chloe bit out shortly.

"Mya Andrewes…that is spelled Mai-a An-dre-wez." He told her helpfully.

"Wonderful." Chloe said wryly, "Date of birth?"

"Hmm…13th November 1973," Leo answered slowly.

It took a while but finally, the form was filled and Leo withdrew all the money in his account and transferred it to the new account he'd created for Mya. It was only a thousand dollars, but he'd been saving painstakingly for nine years to get it there. Still, he did not hesitate. When it was done, he left the bank feeling somehow lighter. At least tomorrow, he would have some *good* news for Mya.

Chapter 41

Guilt and Gullibility

Leo woke up with his head pounding and his mouth feeling furry yet dry. He drained the bottle of water he'd kept on his dresser for just such a purpose and went to drown himself in the shower. He could hear his mother in the kitchen and the smell of coffee wafted toward him from that direction. It looked like Jade was lucid this morning. Leo left the shower, wrapped himself in a towel and went to see what that was about. If there was a problem, he'd rather hear about it now rather than later. Jade was at the cooker, beating some eggs in an apparent attempt to make an omelette.

"Mom? Is anything the matter?" Leo asked in a cautious and low tone, so as not to disturb his throbbing head too much.

"Why Leo? A mother can't cook her son breakfast?" Jade asked.

"A mother can…*you* usually don't." Leo said in a low voice. Then he decided it was too early for this shit and went to change. When he got back to the kitchen, there was a tray laid out for him with coffee, milk, the omelette, baguette slices and cereal. Leo stared at the spread in disbelief.

"Okay mom, spit it out. What's happened?" he asked Jade suspiciously.

Jade gave him a look that wanted to be hurt but was hindered by the fact that it was a legitimate worry for Leo. "Nothing's happened Leo, I wanted to make you breakfast!" she said.

"Fine. Don't tell me." Leo said, sitting down to drink the coffee, black, but ignored the rest of the meal.

"Aren't you hungry?" his mother asked him.

"Actually I'm fucking hung over." Leo replied, "You know how that feels like don't you?" he threw over his shoulder as he left the room to go retrieve his school bag. He came

back with it slung over his shoulder and paused to stare at his mom.

"Last chance to 'fess up, mom." He declared.

Jade gave him a tired smile but didn't say anything.

"Fine 5,4,3,2 your time is up," Leo replied, closing the door softly on his way out only because his head hurt so much.

As he came upon the school gates, Leo remembered that there was something he had to do or had done that he had to report, but he couldn't quite remember what it was…something about money. Had he spent all he had or what? Then it hit him.

Bank account. Mya.

He'd opened an account in her name yesterday and deposited all his savings in it. He parked the car and rooted around in the glove box for the card giving the account details. He would slip it into her locker so she would be sure to see it, without him having to speak to her. He knew that it was cowardly but he just couldn't face her. It hurt way too much. Besides, if he spoke to her, Charlotte might hear of it, and all hell would break loose. His head was hurting too much to deal with all of it right now anyway.

Leo walked down the school corridor, acknowledging greetings and waves with minimal head movement. He felt like he was on a runway with the spotlight trained squarely on him. *Was everybody looking at him or was he imagining it?* He came up to Mya's locker – she was nowhere in sight thank God – and put in the combination. It was her grandfather's death date so it was easy to remember. She must have really loved him. Leo opened her locker and placed the bank card on top of her chemistry textbook. She wouldn't miss it there. He shut the locker and went on his way feeling like at least *something* had gone right today.

§

Mya walked into school feeling tired and unrested as well as nauseous and ill. On top of that, the spotlight from yesterday was back and she felt like she was on a runway with every eye on her. She walked quickly looking at the ground, not acknowledging anyone's overtures, though she distinctly heard Ashley call to her from her locker. Reaching her own locker she unlocked it, reaching in to take her books. She saw the bank card sitting on top of her

chemistry book and picked it up to read it.

ACCOUNT HOLDER: MYA ANDREWES.

FIRST MERCANTILE BANK SAVINGS ACCOUNT 009087638

Mya stared at it then looked around to see if anyone was looking at her, perhaps give her a clue as to who had left this here. But it had been sitting in her locked locker, waiting on top of her chemistry book, the first place she always looked. That indicated it was someone who was close enough to her to know her combination and to know where her eyes would fall immediately she opened the locker. Leo. It could be no one else.

She snorted, staring bemusedly at the card, "Blood money is it?" she said.

She walked over to his locker, the corridor now being deserted as most students had headed off to class and put in *his* combination – the number of his jersey plus the number plate of his car – and opened his locker. She put in the bank card, in the side pocket next to his mirror where *he* would be sure to see it, and locked up after herself. She would not be bought.

§

Leo spent the morning with his head buried in his hands, trying not to listen to all the conversations taking place around him. The hot topic this morning was one Mya Andrewes and how the hell she had managed to get herself pregnant. Speculation became wilder by the hour and so Leo's headache kept pace, getting more unbearable in proportion to the rumours. Miles kept shooting him sympathetic glances but they could not talk, first because of class and then because the rest of the gang was around. Leo was not in the mood to talk anyway. The conversation he'd had with Jamie the day before kept coming back to him in bits and pieces confusing him more than ever. To make matters worse, when he went to dump his books in his locker at lunchtime, he found Mya's bank card sitting in there waiting for him like an avenging angel full of reproach. He took the card and stared at it.

"That girl and her damned pride!" he said aloud.

"What girl?" Ashley asked him, popping up as if from nowhere.

"No-one." Leo said shortly shutting his locker with a bang, "Just talking to myself."

"I see that. You do that a lot?" Ashley asked grinning at him, "You know it's a sign of madness, right?"

"Well, I'm not ruling it out," Leo said, wondering if this was possibly the longest conversation he'd ever had with Ashley directly.

"Leo, can I speak frankly?" she said surprising him further.

"Of course," Leo answered.

"I know," Ashley said.

"You know…what?" Leo asked with a raised brow.

"I know about you and Mya," Ashley said baldly.

"What is it that you know?" Leo asked her looking her in the eye.

"That the baby she's carrying is yours," Ashley said.

"And?" Leo asked facing his locker, not seeing the point of denying it.

"And…I wanna help." Ashley said shyly.

"Why?" Leo asked.

"Because…I like Mya. She's a nice girl. She doesn't deserve all this." Ashley said, a shade reproachfully.

"No. she doesn't." Leo agreed, "But thems the breaks."

" *Thems the breaks*? Really?" Ashley asked in disbelief.

"If you *really* want to help Ashley, convince Mya to take this card…and use it." Leo said abruptly holding out the bank card to her.

"What is it?" Ashley asked curiously, taking the card.

"Everything I can give her," Leo replied succinctly.

§

The throwing up was getting to be a real nuisance. Now even the smell of cooking meat made her dry heave. Grandma Matia had had to change their diet in the last month to pure vegetarian. Which wasn't necessarily a bad thing she supposed. At least it was healthy and Grandma Matia had the best recipes. The rumours in school hadn't piped down, just gotten more insidious, malicious and unbearable. On the upside, she'd come to realise that Ashley was a real friend; she would make a point of waiting for her at the school entrance every morning so she could walk down the hall with her; she would also run interference every time Charlotte was on her case prying incessantly about who the father of her child was. Charlotte had been of the opinion that 'as a friend' it was her right to know whose baby Mya was carrying and if Mya was a good friend she would definitely spill. Mya didn't know why she didn't just tell her already. What was she protecting exactly? Leo certainly didn't seem the least bit bothered about her, or her baby. True, he'd insisted that she keep the ATM card, or rather, he'd sent Ashley to insist…and much as she had her pride, she also had a baby to think of now – so she couldn't afford to spurn him, especially since he was bloody supposed to help her anyway.

Andre meanwhile, had performed another ultrasound and all he could report was that the growth of the mass was keeping up with the growth of the baby. Apart from that, Mya's pregnancy was as normal as could be expected. It completely puzzled Dr. Parvenu and he was consulting other specialists in an attempt to find out what could be happening to her. Mya felt rather sorry for him. He was trying his level best to help her and he couldn't because he didn't have the right tools. Still, Mya appreciated the effort. At least *someone* cared about her baby.

"Oh, enough with the pity party!" she said aloud to herself, making the girls sitting at the next bench in the quad stop their conversation and stare at her. She gave them the thousand yard stare and they quickly turned back to their conversation. She picked up the novel she'd been staring at and put it up to hide her face. She couldn't concentrate on anything, and she'd forgotten where her bookmark had been. The book was the "Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy' by Douglas Adams and it never before failed to raise a laugh from her. Now she

couldn't even *fake* a smile.

Miles came up and sat on the bench next to her. He turned to her and smiled; he'd been doing that a lot- turning up places and talking to her. He was very solicitous of her welfare and while Mya appreciated it – he didn't have to be after all – she had to wonder what his game was…if this was Leo keeping a second-hand eye on her, well she wasn't standing for being spied on; if it was Miles just taking pity on her, well, she didn't need his pity. But when he smiled with that cherubic face he had – he had big green eyes and long curly blonde hair – it was difficult to be rude to him. So they ended up talking almost every day. Outside of Leo's shadow, she realised, Miles was an extremely good-looking person, but since he was always with Leo, his beauty was completely overshadowed by Leo's dark, brooding gorgeousness. They were like Lucifer and Michael – dark angel and light…Mya smiled at the thought of Leo as any kind of angel.

"What are you smiling at?" Miles asked her.

"Oh, nothing. Just stupid hormonal thoughts, not worth mentioning." Mya replied wryly, "So, Miles, what can I do for you today?"

"Nothing. Just wondering how *you* are." Miles said with a smile of his own.

"*Why* are you wondering?" Mya asked.

"What? Friends aren't allowed to be concerned about friends?" Miles asked.

"Are we friends, Miles? Or are you just keeping an eye on me for some reason?" Mya asked him pointedly.

"You tell me, Mya. Aren't we friends? Granted, I'm concerned for you also because you're carrying my nephew, but is that mutually exclusive with being friends?" Miles asked.

"I guess not," Mya replied with a shrug.

"I brought you something you might not have tasted before." Miles continued, holding something out to her, it looked like a triangle shaped type of pastry.

"What is it?" she asked him curiously, taking it cautiously.

"It's a vegetable samosa." Miles said grinning broadly, "Remember I told you we were living with an exchange student from India? Name of Harpreet?"

"Yes," Mya said cautiously biting into the pastry and gasping at how chilli it was.

"Yeah. The Indians love their chilli." Miles said seeing her reaction, "it's good though isn't it?"

"Yes, it is." Mya said taking another bite then washing it down with the bottle of water she always kept with her, "How is that working out by the way?"

"Harpreet? Great. She's very soft spoken, well mannered and she cooks some really delicious stuff for us. We'll be sad to lose her. It's a pity too because I think I could master that headshake of hers given time." Miles said wryly.

"When is she leaving?" Mya asked curiously. She'd met Harpreet at the hospital where she was working as a candy striper in her spare time. She was studying under Dr. Parvenu as a trainee nurse and was staying with Miles and his family for the duration.

"In a fortnight." Miles said, "We're holding a farewell dinner for her next week at Freddie's. You should come."

Mya frowned,"I'm not sure." She said doubtfully, "Won't *he* be there?"

"*He might.* But it's unlikely. He doesn't really do family dinners." Miles replied with a wry smile.

"Okay then, count me in." Mya said, "Though I'm not sure what I'm going to wear…"

"Mya Andrewes! Since when do you worry about clothes?" Miles said in mock surprise.

Mya smiled sadly, "I'm pregnant Miles…clearly, I'm not myself."

Chapter 42

Dinner and Regret

"I asked Mya to come to Harpreet's dinner tomorrow," Miles told Leo as they warmed up for the opening game of the season. Although the season had begun a month earlier, this would be their first game because they got a pass from qualifiers for being regional champions; they were playing St Mary's from New Orleans.

"Did you? Why?" Leo asked pretending disinterest.

"Because…she enjoyed the samosas." Miles said with a shrug, "and she's at least met Harpreet so…"

"So…?" Leo prompted with a lift of his eyebrow.

"So at least she's a little bit invested in saying goodbye to her," Miles said.

Leo smiled, "That is the weakest reason for inviting someone anywhere I've ever heard." He said derisively, "Why are you really inviting her? So that I can't come?"

"Oh, you can come if you want Leo. Not coming is absolutely only your decision, not mine, and certainly not Mya's." Miles said.

"I see we're still preaching…" Leo said.

"Preaching? Nah, I don't preach, you have me mistaken with your conscience or something." Miles said.

"Okay Miles. I get it. I'm a jerk. You don't think I know that?" Leo said exasperatedly.

"You're not a jerk Leo. You're a scared, indecisive, selfish, ostrich. But not a jerk." Miles said.

"Chee, thanks," Leo said, increasing the pace of his jog so he was ahead of Miles. Unperturbed, Miles also increased his pace so he kept up with Leo. While Leo had the faster reflexes, when it came to endurance and fitness, they were head to head. The auditorium was

full of screaming fans. It seemed like everyone in the school had turned up…everyone but Mya, Leo saw as he searched the crowd for that familiar afro pouf. Just because he avoided her like the plague didn't mean he could keep himself from watching her. While he hadn't asked Miles to keep an eye out, he was glad that his best friend took it upon himself to do it anyway. He could participate vicariously in her life through him, and if it was all that he could get; he would take it.

Francis Bacon High won the match 70-63 with Leo scoring forty points. It was one of his best nights of play and he should have been over the moon but all he could think about was how Mya hadn't seen it. Charlotte was all over him after the match, throwing an impromptu party for the entire team at her family's lake house. There was booze and broads and Leo really should have been in his element but there was a huge weight on his chest pulling him down and a Mya-shaped hole in his heart that was causing him actual physical pain. Miles left early and Leo wanted to follow him but the party was essentially in his honour so he had to stick around and schmooze. Around midnight, he gave up the battle and went upstairs to Charlotte's room to call Mya. The phone rang and rang but no one answered. Eventually, he gave up and lay down on the bed to sleep. He was tired enough that the noise of the party didn't even keep him up.

In the morning he woke up with a plan of action all laid out in his head. He crept out of bed so as not to wake Charlotte up and went downstairs to use the kitchen phone.

"Hi Miles, what time is Harpreet's dinner?" he asked when Miles sleepily picked up the line.

"7 pm. Why?" Miles asked with a yawn.

"No reason. See ya." Leo said and hung up. He searched for his jacket among the pile at the door; other people had stayed over, either because they were too drunk to drive or because they wanted to, so there were bodies everywhere. Stepping over several of them, he managed to get out the door, ran to his car and drove off. It was time to stop running – whatever happened, he needed Mya in his life and he was going to get her back, come what may.

§

"I don't know if going for this dinner is a good idea, Grandma. Maybe I should just stay home, and we can watch re-runs of Good Times." Mya said sifting through her wardrobe in search of something to wear while her grandmother sat on her bed, knitting. It was a scarf this time to go with the sweater and the gloves she'd completed. Next was a hat Mya believed. The heavy rains that were expected soon would not be able to make a dent in Mya's armour if her grandmother had anything to say about it.

"I think it's good for you to be out and about with people who like you, Mya. You cannot stay locked up at home forever. Besides, it will take you out of yourself for a bit; you've been a little too broody lately for my taste." Her grandmother replied.

"I *am* already broody," Mya said tongue in cheek.

"Ah, jokes…however stale. Always a good sign." Grandma Matia replied, "If you're worried about what to wear, come with me – I have just the thing."

Grandma Matia's room was downstairs, but instead of turning left at the door to head for the stairs, she turned right…to the room at the corner; Mya's late mother's room. It was usually out of bounds. Grandma had apparently locked the door on that room the day after she lost her daughter, and never gone in there, or allowed anyone else to go in there, ever again. Now she walked unhesitatingly to the door and murmured the opening spell. The door fell open of its own volition and Grandma Matia stepped through, beckoning Mya to follow. Mya hesitated at the threshold, having been too young to recall ever having been in here. The room smelled musty and damp with a vegetative odour permeating the air. Mya thought it was possibly lavender or sandalwood but she couldn't be sure. Grandma Matia was dragging a trunk from under the bed. She opened it to reveal a burst of colour; oranges and purples, browns and yellows dumped in an untidy heap of fabric. Mya reached out and picked up one of the clothes. It was a long sleeveless gypsy dress with two straps obviously meant to be tied around the neck in a bow. The bodice was figure hugging with gathers to shape the bust. The rest of the dress flowed freely to the ground in A-shaped abandon. The hemline was shaped unevenly similar to the look of flower petals on a rose bush. The dress was an impasto of reds, purples and pinks and Mya fell in love with it on the spot.

"Whose are these Grandma?" she asked although she suspected she already knew.

"They were your mother's clothes," Grandma replied confirming her suspicions. Mya

didn't want to ask any more questions in case the topic was too painful for her grandmother. So she busied herself sorting through the pile picking out one outfit then another until her grandmother suggested that she would do better to take the lot to her room and sort them out there, later. For now, she should just pick one to wear so as not to be late for dinner. Mya picked up the gypsy dress without hesitation and went to put it on, thinking that it would be perfect with her chunky jewellery and her new black and purple sweater that her grandmother had just knitted her! Miles had said he would call for her at 6:30 pm and she was just knotting her hair into a complicated plait/ponytail combination when he showed up. She kissed her grandmother goodbye, promising to bring her a doggy bag if she could and was off.

"Hi!" she said merrily as she entered the car.

"Hi. You look nice, is that new?" Miles replied.

"Yes and no." Mya said smiling, "shall we go?"

"We shall," Miles said reversing out the driveway.

They arrived to find Miles' parents, Mr. and Mrs. Hargrove and his little sister Jan, all seated at the table with Harpreet. Greetings were exchanged all around as the waiter came around to take their orders. They decided on a communal meat platter and bitings to go with it but also had some vegetable lasagne because Harpreet was a vegetarian and Mya had developed an aversion. The smell of the grilled meat was not overwhelming as no onions or spices had been used to make it so Mya only had to throw up once. As they were just getting down to eat though, a late arrival joined them.

"Hi! I'm sorry I'm late, I had some car trouble. What did I miss?" Leo said sitting down between Miles and his sister. Miles stared at him, stupefied at his appearance while Mya stared down at her plate, heartbeat accelerating wildly. Miles' parents and sister, on the other hand, did not hide their delight at Leo being able to join them. He was a family favourite and Miles was always jokingly complaining that if they could choose a son, they'd choose Leo over him.

Leo was the life of the party, laughing and joking with everyone, and distributing compliments with abandon to all the ladies present. He got to Mya with about every third compliment but she ignored him and concentrated on her plate. Her appetite was gone though

and she would have stood up and left if she wasn't pregnant and therefore afraid to walk home alone in the dark.

After dessert she leaned over to Miles, asking if he could drop her home now. Leo, apparently overhearing, told her not to be silly. This was obviously a family occasion and Miles couldn't leave, but *he* would be happy to drop her home.

"I'll wait thank you," Mya replied coldly.

"Mya don't be silly. Let Leo drop you home. You're obviously tired and you need your rest and he's right, we'll be here a while. Go on…" Miles urged her. She glared at him, wondering if all this had been some sort of plot, but gave in with good grace. There was no need to make a scene in front of other people. She thanked Miles' parents for a wonderful evening and wished Harpreet luck with her future endeavours before walking out of the restaurant, back straight and eyes front – pretending Leo was nothing more than her driver for the evening.

Leo settled her in her seat much as she stiffly moved away and then got in the car and started the engine. He drove slowly toward the turning to her road but as they got there, he parked the car outside Mrs. Jean's pastry shop.

"Why are we stopping?" Mya asked wearily.

"I thought we'd pick up some doughnuts for you and your grandmother to have for breakfast. Then you won't have to get up early to cook." Leo said alighting from the vehicle and heading toward the shop. Mya leaned back in her seat and sighed.

"How thoughtful of you." She said sarcastically to his retreating back. A few minutes later, he was back with the doughnuts, which he placed in her lap. She ignored them and they drove on in silence. He reached her gate and she reached out a hand to open her door and get out when he stopped her, getting out and opening the gate so he could drive right into her compound. Then he got out and opened her door for her, extending a hand to help her out of the car. She ignored the hand and got out under her own steam, thanking him for the ride as quickly as possible and walking toward her porch. She reached the door and found that he'd followed her.

“Where are you going?” she asked rudely.

“I thought I’d say hello to your grandmother,” Leo replied.

“Why?” Mya demanded.

“Because I haven’t seen her in a while and I’m sure she must be wondering what happened to me,” Leo said reasonably.

“She knows what happened to you,” Mya replied in the same tone.

“Well, okay. May I at least say hello?” Leo asked. Mya thought about refusing but it seemed petty so she let him come in. Grandma Matia had already gone to bed though as could be deduced by the darkened living room.

“Well, she’s not here, so you can go now,” Mya said.

“Okay, I’m going. I just want to say first though, that I’ll be back.” Leo said.

“If you want to say hello to her that badly, I can wake her up,” Mya said, feeling that this was getting ridiculous.

“No Mya, I mean I’ll be back for you,” Leo said heading for the door.

This statement proved to be too much for Mya. After the month and a half of the loneliness, anger, and fear she’d experienced, for him to come in here and say such a thing…before she knew what she was doing she’d run at him, jumped onto his back and was hitting him anywhere she could reach with her purse. Leo grunted in surprise but even so, quickly swung her into his arms and carried her to the sofa where he dumped her. She immediately surged forward off the sofa, aiming for his face with her purse and hitting with dedicated determination. He caught hold of her hands holding them away from him as she fought him with everything she had, hitting, kicking and biting.

“Mya, calm down,” Leo said breathlessly, trying to get her under control. But this just seemed to madden her further and she renewed her efforts to hit him.

“Mya. Please. I’m sorry. Please!” Leo tried again, all the while trying to hold her off.

“You’re sorry? YOU’RE SORRY?” Really? Is that the best you can do?” Mya asked in

disbelieving anger, striving to take out his eye.

"Yes! I mean no! It's not the best I can do. I can do better; I will do better. I will make it up to you. I promise." Leo panted, shielding his eye with one arm while trying to gather her in with the other, "This…cannot…be good…for the baby." He said between dodging blows and kicks.

"Oh so now you care what's good for the baby?" Mya asked with a kick to his groin – he blocked it with his knee, bending down on both knees after while keeping hold of her hands.

"Mya, I'm not asking you to forgive me, ever. I don't deserve forgiveness," he said looking up into her eyes, "I'm a bastard and a fool, but the baby needs us both, you said it yourself. So, for the sake of the child, please give me a chance to try…please?"

"Throw that back at me, will you?" Mya said softly.

Leo smiled, "You know I fight dirty. May I get up?" he asked.

"No. I'm enjoying the view from up here," Mya said, but she held out her hand to help him to his feet.

"I was a scared, selfish, indecisive fool, Mya. I'm still scared. And selfish. But I know what I need now, and I know who needs me…I know who I love – it's you or no-one Mya. Please give me the chance to show that I *can* be better?" He said with pleading in his voice and need in his eyes.

"Well. When you put it like that…" Mya murmured to her shoes making Leo reach for her, but she forestalled him, "One thing at a time Leo. You should go now. I should warn you though – repairing the roof won't do it this time."

He smiled, nodding his agreement, "I know Mya." He said and turned to go, turning back quickly to give her a hug before leaving her house. "A mixtape maybe?" he asked with a naughty smile.

Mya sighed, shaking her head as she thought how typical Leo that quip was and wondered how real all this was.

'Time will tell.' She decided, making her way upstairs to bed.

Chapter 43

Baring All

Leo went home, his heart lighter than it had been in weeks. His mother was home, watching TV. She looked sober, which was a new trend that had started a month ago. He didn't want to build his hopes up but it looked like she was turning a corner. She even occasionally cooked edible food!

"Hi, mom." He said as he blew past her heading for his room.

"Leo. Come here." His mother called to him. Leo stopped walking looking back at her with a lift of an inquiring eyebrow. "I just want to speak to you."

"Speak then," Leo said not moving.

"I've been hearing rumours." His mother began.

"I don't have time for this." Leo interrupted continuing on his way.

He went to his room and began to pack everything that Charlotte had ever bought him; the clothes, the shoes, the expensive jewellery, watches, the pager she'd given him just last week so they could keep in touch easier…everything. He took the suitcase out to the car, ignoring his mom's quizzical looks. Tomorrow, he would return it *all.* Once he'd dumped the suitcase in his trunk and closed it, he felt like he had dropped a huge burden that had been strangling him. He was feeling so light headed in fact that he decided to go catch his mother up on all the events in his life.

"So mom, you were saying about those rumours…? He began as he stepped into the apartment.

"Oh, now you're not too busy to talk?" his mother replied.

Leo looked at his watch-less wrist pointedly, "Tick tock, this offer expires in twenty

seconds. What is it you want to know?" He asked her.

"Oh, I was just curious about you and that Le Carre girl. You know that family is dangerous don't you?" Jade said, "The father is psychotic, the daughter takes after her father. and the mother is a drunk socialite. They are not good people."

"First of all, you're two years behind on that rumour…secondly, since you know all about being a drunk, I'll take your word for it – but you don't need to worry about me and Charlotte anymore. I'm breaking up with her tomorrow." Leo said, leaning on the sofa back.

"*Why??"* Jade inquired in what looked to Leo like dismay.

"Because I love someone else, and she's having my baby," Leo replied calmly.

"*You're having a baby*!?" Jade exclaimed in shock, "Since when?"

"Since…" Leo counted in the air, "three months ago." he said.

"Well, it's not too late. You can get an abortion." Jade said urgently.

"Oh, it's very much too late…the baby already exists; it's staying." Leo said straightening up and turning toward his room.

"You're keeping the baby?! Have you lost your mind?" Jade asked, "How will you feed it? *Where* will you live? Because for damn sure you're not bringing some slut to live here – we do not have any space for a baby. And what about your scholarship? Aren't you interested in college anymore? You're always talking about blowing out of this town; you think you can do that with a baby?!" She ranted.

Leo turned walked to his door, turning with his hand on the door handle to say, "Goodnight mom," before slamming the door in her face.

He slept late the next morning, having not had such a good night's sleep since he and Mya stopped speaking. When he finally got up it was with purpose, he showered and dressed quickly and left the house, not even stopping to wonder where his mother was. He drove up to the le Carre mansion and the guards let him in as usual with no hassles. He drove up the driveway to find that it was a full house. Aaron's green Toyota was parked next to Teddy's truck while Miles' Ford Escort was parked under a tree nearby. Leo sighed; he'd hoped to do

this quietly but apparently, it was going to be a break up and a show. He dragged the suitcase out the trunk and lugged it up the stairs. A le Carre minion saw him struggling and came to relieve him of his burden. One last time, he let him carry it into the house for him.

"Leo!" Charlotte screamed when she saw him, "Oh I'm so glad to see you. Come quick, something's wrong with Ashley." She said, pulling on his arm. Leo hurried into the room to see Ashley passed out on the floor; Aaron was smoking in a corner, a frown on his face indicating his version of worry. David was fanning Ashley's face and Tina was sitting cross-legged next to him, head in her hands. Miles was pacing and Teddy was sitting on the sofa watching Charlotte flutter about anxiously.

Leo knelt down and pried Ashley's eyes open. Her pupils were sunk to pinpoints. He leaned down and smelled her breath. The aromatic scent of vomit hit him like a wet cloth. He quickly withdrew his head and looked around for a clue as to what could have happened. Clearly, Ashley had taken something morphine-based but as far as he knew Ashley wasn't a druggie so what was this?

"What happened?" he asked the room in general while listening for Ashley's pulse.

"We don't know!" Charlotte replied, her eyes shining with some emotion between excitement and dismay, "We were just talking…Ashley was sneezing and coughing and David was complaining that she should take something for it and stop infecting everyone. Ashley said she already had taken something, in fact, she'd taken quite a lot and she didn't know why it wasn't working…so Aaron told her that maybe she was taking the wrong thing but Ashley's eyes rolled back in her head and she fell to the floor."

"She must have taken too much cough medicine. It must have had some morphine in it. She's o.d'd. we need to get her to throw up and wake up. Help me, Miles…" Leo said, sticking his hand down Ashley's throat. She gagged but didn't heave or vomit. Leo tried again and this time Ashley surged forward, vomiting all over herself and Leo's shoes. Leo didn't move but began to massage her back, murmuring reassurances the whole time. He made her stand so he could walk her up and down until she was lucid. Ashley was apologising the whole time, about messing up his shoes, taking too much cough mixture, making a mess, causing so much trouble…

“Ashley, shut up,” Leo said, but kindly.

“God, my boyfriend is so wonderful.” Charlotte murmured proudly to the room at large, gazing adoringly at Leo. Leo avoided her eye, leading Ashley to the bathroom to clean her up.

“Thanks so much for the help Leo; I’m sorry about messing up your shoes.”

“Seriously Ash, don’t worry about it,” Leo said rubbing her down.

“What are you doing here? You don’t usually come unless called…” Ashley said.

Leo smiled, “You noticed, did you? Well, today is my last day.”

“Your last day?” Ashley asked puzzled.

“Yep. I’m breaking up with her.” Leo said.

“Ooh. Is that a good idea? Will you tell her why? Would you give Miles and me a thirty-minute head start?” Ashley said.

Leo laughed, “Sure. I got your back. But one way or the other it ends today. I’ve wasted enough time already.”

§

Jade Evans came up to the Andrewes house walking cautiously. She had parked her car at the beginning of the road and walked the rest of the way so as not to announce her arrival. Leo had been spending a lot of time here in the last days of summer and that was when a change had occurred in his character. And the rumours of Mya’s illicit pregnancy had spread far beyond the school. If the witch had cast a spell on him, Jade needed to find out. The gate was unlatched so she pushed it open. The hinge was quite rusty so the gate made quite a noise. She reached out a hand to still its movement and when she looked up again, the witch was standing on the porch. Jade started in fear, but then thought that this was the young witch, surely she wouldn’t harm her.

“Hello, can I help you?” the witch asked her inclining her head in inquiry.

“I…want to talk to you,” Jade said uncertainly. Now that she was here, she wasn’t sure how

to proceed. Should she come right out and ask her if she was carrying her son's child? What was her name anyway? If she called her 'witch' it might be misconstrued.

"Alright then, come in." the witch said to her, gesturing for her to enter the house. Jade hesitated then shook her head – better not to go in.

"I'm fine right here, thank you. I want to ask you a question." she said with more confidence, "are you expecting my son's child?"

The witch stared at her in what seemed like surprise. If her skin was lighter, she suspected that her face would be red – with embarrassment? - But instead, there was a certain glow about her.

"Yes, I am." She said simply.

"I…see." Jade said slowly, wondering how to continue, "aaand, are you going to get rid of the baby?" she asked at last.

"No.," the witch said with a frown.

"Why not?" Jade retorted in turn.

"I…don't see how that is any of your business." The witch said, fire in her light brown eyes, they were so light in fact they almost shone gold.

"If you are trying to trap my son into-" Jade began in a threatening tone.

"I'm sorry but I'm not going to stand here and allow you to imply that *I* tricked your son into anything. I have asked nothing of him, and I suggest you go and talk to him again if that is the impression you have. Good day." Mya said as she walked majestically back into her house and closed the door behind her leaving Jade standing stupefied in the middle of her front garden.

"Well, I never…" Jade murmured, turning around in a huff and heading for her car.

§

Mya stood just inside her doorway, breathing hard. Her emotions were all over the place these days, but offhand she'd have to say that that session had not gone well. Her first

meeting with her child's grandmother and she'd been rather rude! Well, what could she do? The woman had obviously come with some very preconceived ideas and she just wasn't in the mood to tolerate it. Actually, she wasn't in the mood to tolerate much these days. In fact, after losing a night of sleep mulling over things, she'd decided that she really *couldn't* give Leo another chance. She only had so much energy and the baby was taking almost all of it these days. She had to leave some for her academics or she would be doomed.

'Plus, oh I don't know, some energy for myself? … A walk. That's what's needed!' she thought. Her grandmother was at Aunt Sophia's and there was nothing on TV. She needed a distraction. Changing her shoes to sneakers, she picked up a jacket in case it decided to rain, and left the house heading wherever her feet took her.

§

"I need to talk to you," Leo said to Charlotte in a low voice. The living room was pulsating with loud music, 'The Power' by Snap! blaring from the speakers. Tina and Teddy Bear were dancing, Teddy shooting glances at Charlotte every so often to make sure she was still there. David and Aaron were arguing about something in a corner and Miles was paying attention to Ashley for once, making sure she was alright.

"Do we have to talk right now? I'm having fun!" Charlotte said, standing up and pulling him up as well so they could dance. Leo stood reluctantly, wondering how he was going to get her to listen to him. After Ashley's little incident, she'd made a huge fuss about what a hero Leo was and then insisted they needed to celebrate. Leo tried to protest, saying that Ashley at least shouldn't drink, and the rest of them would do well not to as well if only to keep her company. Everyone assumed he was joking and 'gin and juice' was availed in large quantities. As a result, the room was very merry. This break up was not going at all as planned.

"The Power' faded away and Madonna's 'Papa Don't Preach' came on next. Tina and Teddy were loudly singing along and Charlotte was swaying from side to side, taking Leo with her. When they got to the part where Madonna declared that she was '*keeping her baby*!' Charlotte stopped dancing to say,"Speaking of keeping babies, has *anyone* managed to find out whose Mya is keeping?"

Leo stopped dancing, “Mine.” He said.

“Excuse me?” Teddy Bear of all people said, stopping to dance abruptly.

“I. Said. The baby is mine.” Leo said. Aaron, David, Tina, Charlotte, and Teddy burst out laughing at this.

“Very funny man,” Aaron said still smiling.

“I’m not joking.” Leo said unsmiling, “in fact, I only came by to break up with you Charlotte. It's time I was there for my family.”

Charlotte snorted in derision, then stared at Leo, not sure if he was pulling her leg or not. Leo walked over to the suitcase sitting in the corner. It was Louis Vuitton, and Charlotte had bought it for him for their New York trip last year. He opened it, revealing all the things that were tossed helter-skelter inside.

“I’ve brought your stuff back. You can check that it’s all there.” Leo continued, then he turned around to look at Charlotte, “I’m just asking one thing when you get me back for this, please come for me, alone. This isn’t Mya’s fault. I chased *her.* I lied to you about making her sleep with the retarded dude from the graveyard. I made her sleep with *me,* and then I asked her to lie about it- to you and everyone. Then I slept with her *again* because my pride couldn’t take that she didn’t want me – I practically forced her that time too. We didn’t mean to fall in love…it just happened, I don’t even know how. But we’re having a baby, and I need to be with her. I need to be there.” Leo finished desperately.

Everyone in the room fell silent while George Michael’s ‘Freedom ‘90’ blasted from the speakers.

Then Charlotte said extremely coldly, “You are joking.”

“I’m afraid not Charlotte,” Leo said. Charlotte closed her eyes, shaking her head from side to side. No-one else moved a muscle.

“No. NO. No. NO!!” Charlotte said getting louder with every no until she was almost screaming. A maid ran in to see what the matter was and had a glass figurine thrown at her for her trouble. Leo stood perfectly still, staring at the increasingly hysterical Charlotte in

front of him. His hands stayed at his side, his body completely undefended. Miles tensed, ready to throw himself in front of Leo if things went south.

"You're lying." Charlotte said, eyes flashing, hair all over the place, looking quite insane, "You're…you're trying to torture me. That's what you're doing. You would never…why? She has nothing, she *is* nothing. Trash. Riffraff. A piece of shit I picked up off the ground because she entertained me. You never even liked her. This is a lie." Charlotte concluded.

Leo could see she was halfway to convincing herself and opened his mouth to protest but she got there before him.

"No! enough. I refuse to hear any more. Teddy, come. Drive me." She ordered peremptorily, marching out the door. Teddy gathered up his keys and ran after her. Charlotte was standing at his passenger door tapping her foot. Teddy walked quickly to open her door and let her in.

"Where to?" He asked tentatively.

"The witch's place," Charlotte said coldly. Teddy nodded his head and started his engine. The rest of the crew who had followed them outside got in their various cars to follow. Leo ran to his car and drove after them. If they were going for Mya, he had to be there to run interference or God knew what Charlotte would do.

Mya had walked almost halfway to town before she decided she was tired and sat down on a stone at the side of the road to rest. It was a balmy day, with the sun just peeking out of the clouds and precipitation in the air. She had lifted her head to enjoy the cooling feel of the wind on it when she had the roar of engines. Who could be coming along this road, on a lazy Sunday afternoon such as this she couldn't imagine. Especially since it sounded like more than one engine…she stood up to see who was coming when a huge red truck came barrelling down the dirt road. She could see that Teddy Bear was driving and Charlotte was in the passenger seat. She would have thought nothing of it, except for Jade Evans' visit this morning. Had Leo told *everybody?* She wondered what to do now – they were driving, she was on foot – it wasn't like she could run. So she decided to stand and wait for them. Behind the truck, was Aaron's Toyota and she could just see Miles' Ford Escort taking up the rear. A full contingent. This did not bode well for their future relations.

'Where was Leo?' she thought in panic.

Chapter 44

Things Come to A Head

Leo was going as fast as he could, but Teddy was driving like a madman and Aaron was high on pot so he wasn't being too careful either. They probably would have already had an accident if it wasn't Sunday and the roads were empty. He was praying like mad that Mya wasn't home, that she was off somewhere doing something mysterious and therefore not easily found. Just then Teddy stopped his car abruptly, swerving to the side of the road and almost hitting the wooden fence that separated the road from the forest. Mya run out from in front of the car, almost climbing the fence to get away from the truck. Leo's heart stopped for a moment.

'*Really? The one time I pray sincerely for something you almost get her killed?!'* he railed angrily at Whatever deity might be listening. He stopped his car in the middle of the road and began to run.

"Mya!" he shouted trying to get her attention, but it was all on the advancing apparition screaming words at her that Leo couldn't hear, but from Mya's expression he could deduce that Charlotte wasn't inquiring after her health. He increased his pace, finding himself repeating the word 'please!' to Whatever might be listening. The apparition formerly known as Charlotte had reached Mya and was shouting something in her face. Mya climbed down from the fence and stood to stare into Charlotte's face. Leo could not make out her expression but she seemed calm. They were almost of a height, Mya was a little taller but close enough that they could stand head to head. Charlotte was talking non-stop and Mya made no attempt to interrupt the tirade but stood still and listened silently. Teddy, Aaron, David, and Tina stood behind Charlotte like a string quartet waiting for the conductor to turn. Miles and

Ashley stood behind them, hands tightly clasped. Leo came up gasping and pushed his way to the front of the group. He saw the relief in Mya's eyes when she saw him and moved faster.

"…don't know what games you think you're playing, but I promise you, you picked the wrong girl to play them on." Charlotte was saying quite nastily. Leo inserted himself between Charlotte and Mya, putting Mya squarely behind him.

"I told you Charlotte, none of this is Mya's fault." He said breathlessly to Charlotte.

"I can't believe you're defending that whore!" Charlotte cried. Before he knew it, he had slapped her across the face. He stopped, frozen in shock that he could hit a woman, even one as crazed as Charlotte.

"Don't call her that." He said automatically, still too much in shock to know what he was saying.

Charlotte held the cheek he'd slapped in her palm, her face suffused with colour, blue eyes huge with shock. Then she whirled around and grabbed the car keys from Teddy's unresisting hands. She ran to the driver's side of his car, got in, revving the engine with more force than strictly necessary, and reversed.

Leo turned around, and he was just opening his mouth to ask Mya if she was okay when the sound of a fast-approaching engine made him turn back around. Charlotte was bearing down on them with a murderous look on her face.

There was no time to think.

Leo picked Mya up and *threw* her over the fence. He took the full force of the truck as a result and flew into the air, landing askew, left leg lying under him at an awkward angle. Mya began to scream and scream and scream and Miles ran forward shouting Leo's name, afraid to touch him, afraid to leave him there.

Charlotte reversed the car again and Miles got between Leo and the car with a determined look on his face. Ashley ran to Aaron's Toyota, which was the nearest car. Charlotte was bearing down on them again, but she was aiming for Mya, not Leo. Miles tried to run, get in front of her somehow, but Teddy's big truck tore through the fence like it was made of paper

and bore down on Mya like an avenging angel.

Mya saw it coming and began to run. Ashley started Aaron's car and followed. Charlotte was catching up to a frantically retreating Mya, foot pressed firmly on the gas. Ashley floored her accelerator, coming at Charlotte from an angle, trying to head her off. Just as Charlotte caught up to Mya, Ashley caught up to Charlotte. She drove into the passenger side of the truck, causing Charlotte to merely knock Mya down rather than run over her before she was jerked off her path. Mya was knocked off her feet and fell, just as the land sloped downward. As a result, she rolled down the hill, narrowly missing being crushed under the left front wheels of the truck. She fell into a tiny pond conveniently located at the bottom of the small hill. The breath was knocked out of her, and she had some bruises, but she was alive.

'Was Leo?' she thought in panic, trying to get up from where she was. It would probably have been wiser to lie still. Charlotte was still in possession of the truck and still murderous but she had to go to Leo, see if he still breathed. There was a huge pain in her chest and panic filled her breast at the thought of him possibly being dead.

'Please, please, please' she called to Whomever might be listening, *'I will do anything. Please just let him be alive.'* She thought as she scrambled up the small hill. Ashley was at the top, grappling with Charlotte. Teddy was hurrying toward them. Miles, Tina, Aaron, and David were congregated around where Leo had fallen. Mya limped toward them, praying all the while. Miles and David leaned down holding Leo's chest to see if he was still breathing. David stood up and hurried off toward one of the cars. He got in Miles' Ford Escort and drove it toward where Leo was lying. He took a piece of tarp from the trunk and then started rooting around on the forest floor. By the time Mya made her slow way toward them, they'd gotten a makeshift stretcher rigged and were attempting to get Leo onto it without moving him too much.

"He's alive?" Mya asked Miles urgently.

Miles nodded, "Barely. You? " He asked looking up at her, his face was ravaged with grief and pain.

"I'm fine. Help him!" Mya said, kneeling down to help with the stretcher. A shooting pain hit her as she bent her back and she stopped moving immediately, trying and failing to suppress her gasp of pain. Tina came toward her, urging her to come with her to Leo's car so

she could drive her to the hospital. Mya refused until they had gotten Leo into the other car, and then the two cars drove off together. Mya tried to stay conscious, she felt like if she passed out, she might come to and find that Leo had gone. Halfway through the journey though, her body gave out.

Dr. Parvenu was on duty at the hospital when Mya and Leo were brought in. Mya was known to be his patient and so he was called in when they arrived. He immediately checked her for signs of bleeding from the uterus and found that she was spotting but the bleeding was not really serious. She seemed to have suffered a concussion and there was swelling of the spine occasioned by blunt force impact on her lower back. Andre was rather worried about this, but an ultrasound showed that both the baby and the mass with it, were intact.

Leo on the other hand was not doing so well. His left leg was broken in three places and one of his cracked ribs had punctured a lung. If they did not stop the bleeding soon, he would drown in his own blood and die. Other than that, were several cuts and bruises consistent with direct impact by a heavy fast-moving object. The kids who brought them in were not talking, all they would say was that there had been ‘an accident’. They claimed to have found them already hurt and brought them to the hospital. Leo was taken to surgery immediately while Mya was under observation in the minuscule High Dependency Unit.

Miles sat with his head in his hands, crying helplessly. Ashley, who had arrived later, tried to console him, but she was also at a loss at what to make of all this. Tina, Aaron, and David were huddled together, talking in whispers.

“We should probably call people. Mya’s grandmother, Leo’s mom?” David said unexpectedly.

“Does anyone have Mya’s number?” Aaron asked.

“I do.” Ashley said quietly, “She’s quite old, her grandmother, this will be a shock. What shall we tell her?”

“Nothing. We will say absolutely nothing. As far as we know, Mya was in some sort of accident; we found her, and brought her to hospital.” Tina declared, “Same with Leo.”

Ashley looked troubled at this statement and Miles ignored them all, head still in his

hands. Dr. Parvenu blew into the waiting room from surgery and Miles stood up at once.

“How is he?” he asked the doctor anxiously.

“He is as well as he can be. We managed to stop the bleeding and repair broken bones. The rest is up to him.” Dr. Parvenu said.

“Put them together,” Ashley said suddenly.

“I beg your pardon?” Andre said, inclining his head toward her.

“Mya and Leo. Put them in the same room. They’ll heal better that way.” Ashley said shyly.

Andre smiled kindly at her, “You just might be right young lady.” He said cheerfully, “I’ll see to it.”

Chapter 45

A Death in the Family

Grandma Matia was rocking in her chair, dozing fitfully. She'd spent the whole night at the hospital, watching over Leo and Mya as they slept. Mya's aura had been steady, pulsating a strong and solid aquamarine, with that royal purple ring circling her middle. Leo's was weak, fading to pink, with edges of black. Grandma Matia watched it for a while, wondering how she could help. Mya was restless, stirring occasionally in her sleep and surging to almost full consciousness before settling back into sleep. They had given her some sort of sedative, in spite of the baby. Every time she stirred, her aura would shift, reaching for his. And when she did that, his aura would darken, almost achieving its customary red. In the end, Grandma Matia decided to move their beds closer together, so that she could link their hands. She thought about how to do it without creating any alarms and at last, she decided that the only solution was to make the room smaller. She performed a shrinking spell that reduced the 8 by 10 room to a 6 by 8. That was enough. If she put a stool between them, she could link their hands. Immediately their hands were linked, the colour of Leo's aura began to strengthen. By the time Matia left in the morning, it was almost back to full red.

She was exhausted, however, too exhausted to sleep. Suddenly the room became chilly. Matia gathered her shawl around her, shivering in the cool air. Winter was coming early it seemed.

"*Matia?"* a voice said in her inner ear. A voice she knew, from when she was a child. Her grandmother Mairiebelle…Matia opened her eyes, then closed them again, denying the sight in front of her.

"*Matia?"* Mairiebelle said again urgently, "*Its time."*

Matia shook her head in denial, "No. I'm not ready. *She's* not ready." she said desperately, almost pleading; eyes scrunched shut like if she didn't look, then it would not be real.

"*Matia, she must go on now, without you. It is time. You have gone as far as you can on*

this journey." Mairiebelle said.

"I can't leave her alone! What will she do without me? She cannot lose someone else so soon!" Matia said to the array before her desperately. Her mother stood just to her right, saying nothing, gazing at her with love and understanding in her eyes. Her daughter, Malia, stood to the left smiling at her in delight. Grandma Mairiebelle stood directly in front of her, speaking for the group. The room was full of generations of witches. Seated on a stool in the corner was Abramelin the Magus, in full dress regalia – ceremonial cane in hand. He stared around him curiously, ignoring the proceedings in favour of studying his surroundings.

"*She won't be alone Matia*. *She has her Mate."* Mairiebelle said kindly enough, "*Come now, of your own accord, and you may keep your connection open, to be used in times of need. Force us to take you, and you lose the right to Help."*

"Okay. I am ready." Matia said sadly. Mairiebelle held out a hand to her, and taking it, Matia stood up and went with her dead family; leaving her mortal body behind, rocking in the chair.

§

"Mya!" a voice called to her as if from a great distance. Mya opened her eyes slowly looking around. Her grandma Matia was standing before her, only she was different from the way she usually was. She looked younger, and she had a kind of glow that Mya had never seen before. She smiled at her.

"Grammy?" she said, wanting to tell her grandma how different she looked but forgetting the words. She frowned, wondering if she was getting Alzheimer's. If so it was pretty early…it must be the blow she'd suffered.

"Mya! Concentrate." Her grandmother told her, "I have something important to tell you, and you must listen."

"I'm listening Grammy." Mya murmured, eyes heavy with sleep.

"Mya, I'm sorry but I must leave you." Mya frowned, wondering what her grandma could mean by that, "I must leave you, but you will not be alone. You have a Mate, and you have your child. And I will always be with you, watching over you. This is not goodbye – this is

I'll be seeing you." Matia's voice faded as she came to the end of her sentence.

"Grammy?" Matia murmured, trying to keep her eyes open. There was no response; her eyes closed, and she slept.

§

Leo woke up and looked around the room, wondering where he was. He turned his head and saw Mya staring up at the ceiling, tears streaming down her face. He opened his mouth to call to her but his mouth was too dry to produce any sound. He reached out his hand and tried to touch her. The movement drew her attention and she turned her head to look at him. He lifted his eyebrows, asking with his eyes what was wrong.

"My grandmother is dead," Mya said baldly. Leo's eyes widened.

"How do you know?" He whispered in a croak.

"She was here, she told me," Mya said. Leo noted with detachment that he did not find this statement strange at all. He reached for her, and she put her hand in his. He tried to squeeze it but found he was too weak.

"You are not alone." He whispered, forcing the words out of his dry throat. She forced a smile and squeezed his hand, holding his hand in hers.

"Are you okay?" he asked with no voice. She smiled more genuinely at him, turning to face him on her bed.

"Am I okay? You're the one who decided to be Superman and take the full force of a truck on your body! Are *you* okay?" Mya asked in turn. Leo smiled, closing his eyes. He was so tired…

The next few days saw Leo improve drastically in health. By the second day after regaining consciousness, he was sitting up in bed trying his best to cheer Mya up. For every step of improvement he took, she seemed to become more depressed and listless. She couldn't seem to keep *any* food down anymore, projectile vomiting any nourishment that Leo coaxed her to eat. Eventually, Andre decided to put her on a glucose drip – her weight was dropping dangerously and he was worried her grief would literally kill her if they did not do

something. Teddy the Bear came to plead with Leo not to say anything about what really happened. Charlotte was confined to her room at the Le Carre Mansion – heavily sedated. It was the alcohol mixed with extreme shock that made her act the way she did, Teddy argued. They should just leave it in the past. But Leo was too afraid for Mya's life to risk it, and he told the sheriff everything that had happened, demanding that Charlotte be remanded in prison for almost killing them. The sheriff, like everyone else in town, was a little afraid of acting against the Le Carre's. He called Mr. Le Carre, or rather Mr. Le Carre's assistant, and apprised him of the situation. A helicopter was sent, and Charlotte airlifted to New York, where she was out of the sheriff's jurisdiction.

They'd been in the hospital a week when Mama Ruth came to see them. The swelling on Mya's lower back was receding and her bruises were healing. Yet she was still confined in bed, weak and listless with grief over her grandmother's death and her inability to keep any food down. The baby was constantly monitored, as was the mysterious mass. So far, so good. Leo was mending, albeit slowly. His leg was in a cast and his ribs were taped. His forehead was bandaged and he was not allowed to move much. Coach Maxwell had come by to see him, bringing the entire team with him. They had some good news – Leo had won a full basketball scholarship to the University of Louisiana! The doctors had said that the damage to his limbs was not permanent, and as long as he could get back to his earlier form by start of semester, 1992, he was in. Leo smiled, gratified that all the hard work had paid off, but his mind was full of worry for Mya. He wracked his brains for a way to get her to come out of her funk but came up with nothing. Mama Ruth stretched out her hands and took Mya's between them, closing her eyes. Leo sat up anxiously, wondering what she was doing, not trusting that it was anything beneficial to Mya. Mya opened her eyes and looked at Mama Ruth.

"She's dead," Mya told her miserably.

"She has passed on, but she is still here, with you. You know that, don't you Mya?" Mama Ruth said extremely gently.

Mya shook her head, the easy tears starting in her eyes again, "I don't feel her Mama, Ruth. I don't feel her at all."

"Do you feel *anything* Mya? Your aura is cloudy and dull with grief. You must pull

yourself together. For your sake and the sake of the child you carry…and this young man who lies beside you." Mama Ruth said, gesturing at Leo with an elegant flick of her hand.

Mya turned to look at Leo. It was the first time she had really looked at him since the day she'd told him her grandmother was dead. He smiled painfully at her, his face still black and blue with bruises. Mya reached out for his hand, and he took it, squeezing her hand with all his strength – which wasn't much.

"Hi," he said softly. She smiled at him, the smile turning down with wry apology after a moment.

"I've been tiresome have I?" she asked him.

"No." he replied.

"Liar," she said with affection. Leo let go of her hand, moving the blankets off him and attempting to get out of bed. Mya's eyes widened in alarm. "What are you doing?!" she asked him.

"I'm coming over there," Leo said determinedly, lowering his good leg to the ground.

"No! Leo stop!" Mya said in alarm, sitting up for the first time since she woke up and attempting to get out of bed. Mama Ruth reached for her and Mya thought she would try to prevent her, but instead, she helped her to get down safely from the bed. Leo was still attempting to move his bandaged and splinted leg across the bed and Mya crossed the foot or so that separated them, with Mama Ruth's help and laid a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"I'm here," she said, almost falling down. He reached for her, to keep her steady, but he didn't have the strength and they both would have ended up on the floor if not for Mama Ruth. She asked Leo to move over and helped Mya to sit on the edge of his bed. Leo took her hand in his and lay back down.

"Hi." he said with a sigh and smiled, "Good to have you back."

"I don't know about 'back', but I'm here," Mya said, holding tightly on to him. Leo pulled her hands, wanting her to lie next to him.

"No. I'll hurt you," Mya said anxiously.

"You won't. Please?" he said pulling insistently. She came to him, lying down beside him, and placing her head on his shoulders.

"How is the baby?" she asked Mama Ruth.

"His aura is strong." Mama Ruth said with a smile, "he has weathered this storm better than both of you."

"Yes well, he's protected by all that amniotic fluid." Mya said wryly, "and the…guard. How is it?"

Mama Ruth inclined her head to the side, "the guard is not subject to human injury." She said.

"Well, that's good then isn't it?" Leo interjected.

"Yes…you should try to stay as close as you can from now on. You need each other more than you can possibly imagine." Mama Ruth said, making Mya sit up, moving as far away from Leo as she could in the confines of the bed.

"I don't think we should be making any plans right now. I haven't even buried my grandmother yet."

"You will be in here a while. Sophia and I…we laid her to rest. She is at the bottom of the garden that she loved so much." Mama Ruth said, then seeing the stricken expression on Mya's face she continued," In this weather, a body does not keep for long. When you get out, you will complete the burial rituals and give her the sending off that she deserves. Remember that it is only her body that is under the earth. The rest of her, the part of her that is Matia, is free to remain here with you, watching, comforting and loving you. Just as she always has." The tears were flowing freely again down Mya's face. Leo took her in his arms, holding her as close as he could.

"I hate that you're so heartbroken." he murmured into her plaited hair, "I wish I could take the pain away, into myself."

"It's enough that you're here. With me." Mya replied, looking into his eyes – hers open

and vulnerable with love. Leo stared back, bending forward slowly to fit his lips to hers. They kissed very gently, yet even now, in the midst of pain, heartache, and injury the beast of passion still held them captive and they disengaged before matters got out of hand. Mama Ruth smiled with satisfaction and took her leave.

“Do not fear. You are not alone. I will be back. If you need me, call. I will hear you.” She said, walking out of the room.

Leo looked at Mya in inquiry, “When she said call…” he asked cautiously, “she meant by phone right?”

Mya smiled. “Well, considering she has no telephone, the answer to that question is no,” she said.

“So…?” Leo asked, not sure he wanted to know the answer.

“So, you call her name, and she will hear.” Mya said matter of factly, “Don’t worry your pretty little head about it okay?” she continued saucily, throwing his words back at him. Leo smiled widely, looking pleased. Mya’s eyebrow lifted in inquiry as to the cause of his delight.

“You’re making non-witty comments. Always a good sign.” He said in satisfaction, grinning frankly now.

Chapter 46

Funeral Rites

Two weeks later, Mya was cleared for discharge. After much discussion among various interested parties, it was decided that both hospital bills would be settled by the Le Carre family provided both parties agreed to waive the choice to seek legal redress for their troubles. Leo was reluctant to agree to this deal until a restraining order was put on Charlotte so she couldn't come near Mya or her child for the foreseeable future. That would have made it hard for them to be in the same school, since the restraining order specified that they should maintain a distance of 100 yards from each other, making attending the same lessons awkward. However, Charlotte was still in New York, and her father decided that she should finish her high school there, mix with a better class of people and all that.

Leo felt that just because his leg was broken and his ribs were cracked was no reason for him to be holed up in a clinic. He wanted to go home when Mya was discharged and insisted against the wishes of Dr. Parvenu, Pinot, *and* Ross. He was seventeen years old and so able to decide for himself what to do, and he opted to leave. Miles came to pick him up, taking him out to the car in a wheelchair, which the hospital was lending him for the duration.

"Home?" Miles asked him.

"Mya's," Leo replied from the back seat which was the only place he could stretch out his splinted leg. An unsurprised Miles drove him over to Mya's, driving as slowly as possible to avoid bumping Leo. Mya had gone home two days before, her Aunt Sophia coming to get her from the hospital and taking her home at her insistence. Aunt Sophia had offered her room and board in her house for the rest of the school year but Mya wanted to be in her home for the birth of her child. Not only for sentimental reasons; her child was in danger from unknown elements, and for all she knew, she would need to draw from the power of her ancestral line to defend herself and her child before too long. She needed to be at the source. And she needed to study up, and practise, before shit started hitting the fan. Grandma was gone and it was up to her to protect the next generation of witches. Plus, she had to complete

the burial rituals for her grandmother, if only so she could say a proper goodbye.

The rituals lasted seven days. The first day was the Lighting Of The Candles, in which a hundred candles were lit and kept alight all night in order to give the spirit light on their journey to the other world. A gathering was held and songs in praise of the *Loas* or gods were sung all night.

On the second day, the candles were extinguished, and silence was kept all night. It was a Night Of Reflection and introspection. The mind of the congregation was cleared in case the dead had a last message they needed to deliver. Sometimes messages came, sometimes they did not, sometimes they came in dreams, sometimes one went into a trance.

The next night was a Celebration with singing and dancing, eating and drinking. The life of the dead was celebrated, and tears were put aside.

The next night was a Night Of Purging. A council was held and the Loa, Papa Legba was called upon. Papa Legba was the Gatekeeper to the spirit world, there could be no traffic with it without passing through him. Anyone who had an issue with the deceased came forward to have it resolved. They told their grievance to Papa Legba and he spoke to the deceased, giving them a chance to answer.

The fourth night was division of the goods and carrying out of the deceased's last wishes. If there was a will, it was read on this night.

The fifth night was for settlement of disputes as brought about by the will. All conflicts of interest were to be resolved and a peaceful settlement reached among all interested parties.

The sixth night was the Night Of Flowers, where herbs for protection, care, and love were spread over the grave to appease the spirit of the dead. In the case of a great witch such as Matia had been, other prayers were said by the shaman and salt spread around the grave to prevent the spirit from leaving her grave to walk among the living.

The seventh night, was a Night Of Farewell, a ceremony for the living, in which they were able to say their final goodbyes to a loved one. All of this was accompanied by a great deal of food and music, singing, and dancing.

By the time Mya left the clinic, Mama Ruth and Aunt Sophia had gone a long way in

arranging for the rituals. Uncles, cousins, witches, and warlocks were streaming in from all over the Bayou. Matia had lived a long life, and she had many friends and not a few enemies. They all came for the ceremony.

When Leo arrived at Mya's, preparations were being made to begin the rituals that very night. Huge cauldrons of food were bubbling all over the backyard and the house was full to overflowing. Miles pushed Leo in his wheelchair to the edge of the porch then told him to wait while he went to look for Mya. Mama Ruth came out to see who had arrived and when she saw Leo, she smiled, pointing at his wheelchair. It rose and came to rest at the top of the stairs.

"Come in." Mama Ruth said. Leo pushed himself into the house, looking around in wonder. In all the time he had been here, he had never seen so many people in the house before. Miles emerged from the stairs leading to Mya's room, followed closely by Mya herself. Her face broke into a smile when she saw him, but he could see the ravages of grief and suffering not too far beneath. He held out his hands to her, and she came to him unhesitatingly.

"What are you doing here?" Mya asked him, breaking their embrace, "Andre didn't mean to discharge you for another two weeks yet!"

"Yes well, man proposes and God disposes, haven't you heard? What's going on?" he replied, keeping hold of her hand.

"Its Grandma's wake." Matia said, "Will you stay?"

"Of course we will. Just tell us what to do." Leo said, with an eyebrow lift at Miles to be sure he spoke for both of them. Miles inclined his head in agreement.

"Well, I was just resting up because we'll be awake all night. Would you all like to join me? Plenty of mattresses everywhere." Mya said smiling at them cheekily.

"And how will I get upstairs?" Leo asked her half joking.

"Like this," Mya said, repeating Mama Ruth's gesture that caused Leo's wheelchair to lift. It was a tight fit because the staircase was narrow, but they got him upstairs where they retired to her room to await the ceremonies. Despite his bravado, the trip from the clinic

exhausted Leo and he was asleep in minutes. Mya and Miles sat up talking, with Miles asking about what the rituals were about and so on. Mya explained things to him, but eventually, she too succumbed to sleep so Miles wandered back downstairs to observe the preparations.

§

Leo woke from an extremely sound sleep to find that he was alone in Mya's room with a lady of indeterminate age. Her hair was grey but her eyes twinkled with merriment commensurate with a two-year-old and her face was rosy and unlined. She was smiling at Leo and looked to have been doing so for a while as he slept. It was rather disconcerting.

"Hello." She said cheerily when she saw that his eyes were open.

"Er…hello." He replied uncertainly.

"You're hurt." She informed him helpfully.

"I see that," Leo replied cautiously, wondering where this was going.

"Would you like me to help you?" the woman asked with an inquiring tilt to her head, her eyes still twinkling with merriment.

"Who are you?" Leo finally asked, unable to restrain himself.

"I'm Evangeline." The woman said, "Shall I help you?"

"Help me with what?" Leo asked increasingly at a loss.

"Well, I can help with your leg, and also your ribs. The other bruises are healing well enough, and you have already taken care of your heart." Evangeline said matter of factly. Leo stared at her in stupefaction. "So? Shall I help you?" Evangeline persisted.

"erm…okay," Leo said hesitantly.

Leo wouldn't have thought it possible but her beaming intensity went up a notch or two at this and she reached out both hands and fastened them around his injured leg. He wanted to pull away but didn't see how he could do it. She closed her eyes, and he closed his as well in fright, wondering if he should risk shouting Mya's name or not. A red light suffused his field of vision and he opened his eyes to find that his leg had a red glow around it. The glow was

faint, to begin with, but it grew in intensity as the colour solidified until it was the colour of frank blood. As the colour intensified, he felt the strength return to his limb and when she finally removed her hands from his leg, he suspected that he could walk on it just fine. She transferred her hands to his ribs and the same thing happened again. The red glow appeared and deepened, and the pain and constriction receded as the colour solidified.

"There. That's better isn't it?" she asked him. Some of the glow had left her cheeks and the brightness in her eyes was dimmer.

"Are *you* alright? He asked her, reaching out to touch her arm.

She smiled and the brightness returned to her eyes, "Oh, you are a sweet boy. Yes, I am fine, thank you kindly for asking. We'd best get downstairs, the ritual is about to start."

"Right. Thank you" Leo said, cautiously transferring his foot to the ground and attempting to stand up. He found that he could do so with no problem and thought with trepidation of the conversation he would have with Andre when he went for his check-up.

"Ah! Let me help you with that pesky bandage." Evangeline said, taking some scissors from Mya's sideboard and cutting through the bandages like they were made of papier mâche, "there you are – good as new." She said with satisfaction. Leo's trousers had been cut off at mid-thigh to accommodate his bandages so he searched frantically in Mya's closet for something else to wear. He had a pair of jeans he'd left here; he just hoped Mya hadn't burned it in a fit of pique after his cowardly disappearance. He found it rolled up at the back of her closet and sighed in relief. Evangeline continued to beam at him as he took off his old trouser and put on the jeans. He mentally shook his head and gestured for her to go before him. They went downstairs to find that the candles were just being lit. The singing had already begun.

Chapter 47

Aftermath

Matia had left a little surprise in her will. The house and its entire contents including the vegetable gardens, the hothouse full of exotic flora, the cow and the chickens, she left to Mya. No surprises there. There were a few personal bequests to her friends and colleagues, including the crocodile teeth which went to Mama Ruth and her knitting needles which she gave Aunt Sophia. The shocker was the three acres of land she left for Leo. Apparently, the Andrewes land extended quite a way into the forest, spanning three acres that used to be plantation land but was now overgrown forest. A plantation house stood in solitary splendour in the middle of this land, being reclaimed by the forest around it as vines grew over the gently crumbling stone. Mya and Leo had taken a walk over to it to have a look. Leo was quite excited to own his own land and could see possibilities in the crumbling building.

"Seriously? That thing doesn't look safe. Don't go near it." Mya declared sceptically as Leo enthused over the place. He had not gone back home since Miles had driven him over from the hospital, not even to get his clothes. Instead, he'd asked Miles to get them for him. The funeral had been a roaring success, and no-one outside of Mya's witching circle and Miles had seen that Leo was no longer wearing his cast. Leo wanted to keep it that way. Better to avoid uncomfortable questions.

"Why do you think she left it to me?" Leo asked Mya pensively, staring at his new property.

Mya shrugged, " I'm sure she had a reason. She always did." Mya's face darkened with remembered grief, and seeing it, Leo asked her to walk with him further into the forest because he thought he'd spotted a clearing. He wanted to distract her from her thoughts, but he also wanted to see the extent of the clearing. They held hands as they walked, and sure enough, a small clearing was soon located. It wasn't far from the plantation house and Leo speculated that it probably had once been part of the front garden. There were no trees growing here, and the grass was soft and pleasant to walk on. Leo took off his shoes, urging

Mya to do the same. He held her around the waist, swinging her around to kiss him. He let his passion have free rein for a minute before pulling it in. Although they were living in the same house, they were not sleeping in the same bed. Mya was too depressed, and there were still stragglers from the funeral peppering the house. This was the first time he'd been alone with Mya since they shared a hospital room. He held her face in his hands, looking down at her with all the love he felt evident in his eyes.

"Mya." He said

Mya smiled at him, not saying a word, just looking back at him. They stared into each other's eyes for a long time.

"Marry me," Leo said abruptly. Mya's eyes widened and she pulled away from him.

"No!" she said sharply turning away and folding her hands.

"Why?" Leo asked calmly enough, making no attempt to touch her, "Don't you love me?"

Mya laughed derisively, "Yeah. That's why."

"Then, why not, Mya?" Leo asked, "I at least deserve an answer…" he persisted when she didn't move or speak.

"Just because Grandma left you this land doesn't mean that we have to get married," Mya said.

"Are you really that insecure or just deliberately blind?" Leo asked her back. Mya was silent.

"Are you sure?" she asked him, not turning around.

"I've been sure from the moment I returned the Cartier watch Charlotte gave me. I loved that watch. If I could give it up for you then this must the real deal." Leo said. Mya laughed reluctantly and turned around slowly.

"Well, okay then. When you come back from college, we'll get married." She said. Leo's eyebrow lifted.

“When I come back from college? You mean like in five years? 1996? September? Assuming I don’t get held back or anything?” Leo asked

Mya giggled, “ Yes. Wasn’t that what we’d planned before you…” she stopped talking abruptly.

“Before I chickened out and abandoned you?” Leo finished for her.

Mya’s mouth twisted, “Well, yes. However, I think saving my life and the baby’s life and throwing yourself in front of a speeding car cancels that out.” She said.

“Yes. Well, at the risk of throwing suspicion on my motives again, I was thinking more of maybe getting married next week. Nothing big. Just you, me, a couple of witnesses and the priest. What do you say?”

“You know what I say. You’re supposed to finish college first!” Mya persisted.

“And you were supposed to be living with your grandmother so she could help you with the kid. Am I supposed to leave you alone to manage? I mean, I totally deserve the low opinion of me, but…not even I would leave you alone here, with a small child who is possibly in danger from who knows what, to go off to college for four years. And you can’t leave here, right? You might need the power of your ancestors. So what do you suggest?” Leo said.

Mya looked helplessly at him, shaking her head, “ I can’t do that to you. College basketball is your dream. Maybe being drafted into the NBA? You really think I would take that away from you?”

“ You haven’t taken it away. I hereby voluntarily relinquish it. Other things take precedence.” Leo said, “So is it yes or no? Either way, I’m not going anywhere.”

“Mya stared at him like she was trying to read his mind and divine his feelings, “ It can’t be next week. I’m still in mourning. We have to wait at least a month.” She said at last. Leo smiled, leaning down to place a chaste kiss on her cheek.

“Thank you, Mya.” He said, removing a ring from his pocket, “ This belonged to my grandmother on my dad’s side. She gave it to him for his son’s wife, and he left it with me

when he took off. I've been saving it to pawn on a rainy day, but now it turns out that I need it. Will you wear it?"

Mya smiled into his eyes while holding out her hand for him to place the ring on.

"Hey, let's not make this official. Let's take the month and you can think about it, and if you feel that you'd rather take the scholarship and go to college, I will understand. No harm, no foul." Mya said breathlessly.

"Thanks, Mya, but no deal. You said yes, and you can't take it back. Your ass is mine." He said with a wide smile.

"Oh, how fucking romantic," Mya said with a smile.

"*Now* she wants romance…" Leo replied getting down on one knee, and taking her hand in his, "Mya Andrewes, will you make me the happiest man on earth by consenting to be my wife?" he said with an ironic tilt to his head.

Mya put her other hand to her forehead and affected to feel faint, "Oh my stars," she said in a southern belle accent, "This is all so sudden."

"I take it that's a yes." Leo said standing up, " Ouch, my leg is killing me."

"That's what you get for going down on your knees. Just because Evangeline knitted the bone doesn't mean your body doesn't need time to completely heal, you know?" Mya said censoriously. Leo glared at her.

"Shall we go?" he said holding out a hand to her.

"Yes. We shall." She replied, taking his hand.

§

Leo woke up with the idea fully formed in his mind. A boarding house, but not just *any* boarding house- one with a period theme. A nineteenth-century boarding house with period piece furniture and modern amenities disguised to fit in with the décor. He might be able to sell people into going back in time, but they'd still wanted to have a telephone handy and to keep up with the latest episode of their favourite soap. The plantation house was crumbling,

but the foundation was sound and most of the stone used to build it was still there, scattered about the building. The ambiance was conducive to selling it as a romantic retreat for the romance-novel obsessed female and her hapless mate. He stretched out his hand to wake Mya up but saw how soundly she was still sleeping and decided to leave her to it. She did not sleep nearly enough. He got up and went downstairs to get the coffee rolling. The fridge was packed with food from the wake plus contributions from random townspeople who dropped it off with a story for Mya of some random act of kindness that Matia had done them. They definitely would not have to cook anytime before Christmas, possibly New Year's. The house was silent which was strange after having so many people underfoot for a while. The last of the stragglers had left the day before so it was just Leo and Mya in the house. Leo was a little worried that it would hit Mya afresh that her grandmother was gone, so he decided to keep her extremely busy.

"Maybe we should go to school…" he reflected aloud. '*But how to explain his leg? Fast healing abilities? It's my superpower.'* Leo thought, smiling to himself.

"School might not be such a bad idea." He continued.

"Who are you talking to?" Mya asked from the doorway of the living room.

"I was just deciding that we should go to school today, plus I have an idea for the plantation house, remind me to tell you about it," Leo said, pouring coffee into mugs and getting some pound cake out of the fridge. It wasn't as good as Mya's but…

"We're going to school? Who died and made you the decider?" Mya asked coming to take her mug but ignoring the cake. Leo pushed it toward her with a warning glare.

"First of all, eat. Second, *decider* is not a word. Third, we've missed enough school as it is, aren't you the one who's supposed to be the goody two shoes? Is this opposite day?"

"You're very bossy," Mya said sulkily.

"You're very thin for a woman who is almost four and a half months pregnant. Eat. Now." Leo commanded.

"Considering you haven't seen me naked since before the accident, how would *you*

know?" Mya asked in a rather flirty tone.

"My superpower is x-ray vision," Leo said picking up the pound cake and stuffing a piece into her mouth by force.

"Okay, okay, hold your horses, I'm eating," Mya said, taking the cake from him. It was more like nibbling but she got the whole thing down, plus a second cup of coffee with cream and sugar.

"Speaking of seeing you naked," Leo said coming round the kitchen counter to stand behind her, and put his arms about her waist, resting his head on her shoulder, "I take it that lame flirty statement means you're ready to make love again?" he said while nibbling on her ear.

Mya hunched her shoulders in reflex turning around to look at him, " I didn't know we were waiting on me." She whispered, staring into his eyes.

Leo bent his head to hers and fastened his lips to hers. The kiss got deeper and more passionate very quickly. Leo's hands were trembling with emotion and he fumbled at her nightshirt trying to get it off without removing his lips from hers. Seeing as it wasn't made of smoke, they had to part momentarily to get it over her head. Mya took the opportunity to get Leo's shirt off as well and then they smacked back together with an impact like a possum's tail hitting the water. Mya's hands were down Leo's pants clutching his hardened member like she wanted to tear it off and eat it. Leo helped by hooking his thumbs into his pants and pushing them down. Then he got his own hands on her breasts, squeezing gently while kissing her neck, the hollow made by her collarbone, emphasised now with her weight loss, and the delicate swell of her belly. His hand drifted lower, touching just the tip of her mound of Venus. Mya jerked like she'd been electrocuted and Leo returned his lips to hers, kissing her with all the passion he'd been keeping on a leash. He picked her up and deposited her on the counter stool, taking her legs and placing them one on his shoulders like they were the straps of a pair of overalls. This left her completely open to him and he drove into her wetness with one decisive plunge. She cried out and her vagina muscles immediately began to pulsate with her approaching orgasm. She fell backward onto the kitchen counter and he took firm hold of her, letting his body dictate the rhythm of his thrusts. She was moaning as she came in one long continuous cataclysm of pleasure and he thrust faster and faster feeling

the beast bearing down on him, coming to claim him in an all-consuming burst of emotion. The orgasm, when it came, caused him to go rigid in a rictus of extremity before leaving him feeling as boneless and insubstantial as the waves on a calm sea. Suddenly he understood what the term ‘consummate’ actually meant.

“We’re still going to school.” He told her, as they lay on the sofa in exhausted repletion.

“Yes, Massa. Whatever you say Massa.” Mya said in a faux slave accent causing him to slap her lightly on her bare ass.

“Come on, up you get Kunta Kinte, school’s waiting.” He said, getting up and pulling her with him.

§

“Hi. Who do I speak to about a loan?” Leo asked the chick sitting at customer care in the bank. She looked slightly familiar…

“You again!” Chloe Saunders said with a smile, “ Just realised you gave away all your money did you?”

“What?” Leo asked puzzled, then his brow cleared. She must be talking about the account he set for Mya. “Oh, no, I…have a business idea I need financing for.”

“Ooh la di da,” Chloe said flirtatiously, “Moving up in the world I see.” She said.

“Yes, and getting married too,” Leo interjected pointedly.

“Oh,” Chloe said deflated.

“So, who do I see about a loan?” Leo asked again.

“Your account manager should be able to help you. He’s over there.” Chloe replied indicating a group of desks with seriously suited men seated, looking stern. Leo walked slowly over, taking deep breaths and telling himself to just relax and be his normal charming self.

“Hello.” He said to the group in general, “ I’m looking for the personal accounts manager?” One of the suited men looked up and indicated that Leo should sit. Leo did,

wondering now that he was here, where he should start. The account manager nodded encouragingly and Leo took his courage in both hands and smiled.

"Hi. I've recently come into some property that I'm interested in developing." He began. Once he had gotten the ball rolling he found it was easy to continue. He explained his idea for a boarding house and how he intended to market it. The account manager listened keenly, stopping him occasionally to ask a question or seek clarification.

"From what you've said, it seems you have this land, but no capital at all. Am I right?" the account manager, whose name was Bob, said.

"Yes, that's right. However, I have the value of the land as collateral for the loan, as well as the existing plantation house on it. Besides, I think I can immediately begin to use the land commercially. The clearing I told you about would be a very romantic location for outdoor weddings." Leo argued, leaning forward in his anxiety to convey his point.

"I see you've given it some thought. I'll have to discuss it with my superiors, but I think we may be able to help you. Let me have something in writing by the end of the week, and perhaps we can get moving." Bob replied.

Leo leaned back in relief and happiness, "Thank you, sir. I will." He said standing up. Mya was in the car waiting for him, he couldn't wait to tell her. She had thought he was coming into the bank to withdraw some money from *her* account. The thousand dollars he had given her was intact – she hadn't used a cent, much to his chagrin. But that money was hers and he was never touching it.

"Guess what!" he said as he blew into the car.

"What?" Mya asked looking up from her books. It looked like she was trying to catch up with all the work she'd missed in one evening.

"I got a loan," Leo said.

"Wonderful. I didn't know we needed one. What happened to the money in the account?" Mya asked.

"That's yours. I got it for my boarding house. You remember I told you about it this

morning in the shower?" Leo said.

"The last part of your sentence would explain why I didn't hear the first part," Mya said in her defence. "So you really want to convert that ruin into a boarding house?"

"I don't want to. I'm *going* to." Leo said.

"Okay. Let me know what I can do." Mya said. Leo reached out, pried her hand from her book and kissed it.

"You're already doing it." He said smiling at her.

§

Mya's next check-up went smoothly. She'd gained a bit of weight although most of it was the baby growing steadily, taking all the nourishment it needed from Mya's body. Andre gave Leo a long lecture about making sure Mya ate at least five small meals a day while he checked his leg disbelievingly. He was at a loss to explain the miraculous healing of Leo's injuries, and Leo himself wasn't talking. He said it was the steady vegetarian diet they were living on because of Mya's inability to stand meat, but Andre was damned if he'd ever heard of a vegetarian diet speeding up the knitting of broken bones. Still, in the absence of an alternative explanation, he had to accept it.

"So how are you guys doing for money?" He asked Leo.

"Andre! That's a rather rude question don't you think?" Leo admonished jokingly.

"I'm concerned. Are you guys alright?" Andre asked.

Leo smiled, "I don't wanna ruin my rep by sounding corny but Andre, sometimes love really *is* enough."

§

The wedding kept being postponed, first to accommodate the mourning period, then because exams were coming up, next it was too cold in December for an outdoor wedding and Leo wanted their wedding to be a template for just how romantic their clearing could be. He had dubbed it Wuthering Heights for reasons best known to himself and while Mya's

enthusiasm was nowhere near as intense as Leo's he made her see what he saw. Meanwhile, he had spoken to the yoghurt and ice-cream shop, and every morning at 6 am, a truck was outside the gate, come to collect the day's milk. Leo had learned to milk the cow…Mya offered to do it, but Leo wouldn't hear of it. The first few milkings were a disaster, with maybe two cups of milk being the final product. But he learned fast. By week's end, he was milking like a pro; he didn't enjoy it though, and he was already talking about getting a pump. Mya thought a pump was a bit much for just one cow, but of course, Leo wasn't planning for there to be just one cow for very long. Apparently, they had enough land for at least ten. Mya's head was tired just listening to all of Leo's ideas, but she went along and supported him as much as she could. He even inspired her to speak with Levi, the town apothecary about supplying him with medicinal herbs from her greenhouse as well as salves and creams. She also took over from her grandmother in the field of benign magic, seeing one or two people a week, who had issues she could manage. She got better and better at the magic but also learned that there was a psychology to it as well. Oil of peppermint may be good for stomach pain, but a patient was likely to get better quicker if they felt that some hocus-pocus had been done over their elixir, to make it more potent. It amused Mya no end when she made things bubble or foam and got instant cures even when she didn't really use anything medicinal. Illness was very much in the mind sometimes. She was reluctant to charge for her services but Leo solved that problem by offering to be the cashier. So each patient was asked to deposit the amount they felt was commensurate with the help they were asking for with Leo, and they were not allowed to mention this amount to Mya, who saw them in the attic. This in a way helped the patients as much as Mya because they felt that they had paid for exactly what they got, and this became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Mrs. Crenshaw, for example, came by at twilight one day just as they were sitting down to dinner, wanting to see 'the witch'. Leo took her into his office, which was just a room that used to be used for storage but now proudly held a desk and some chairs. They were really for the boarding house, but in the meantime, Leo was using them as his office furniture. The desk was nineteenth-century oak, scratched in places, but well-preserved. The chairs were Victorian and therefore built for comfort. Leo gestured Mrs. Crenshaw to have a seat then told her how it worked. She would deposit a sum with him that she felt was commensurate with the size of her problem, and when she went to see Mya, she was to say nothing about it. Mrs. Crenshaw held out an emerald stone, about the size of a cashew nut and asked, "Will

this do?"

Leo stared at it for a moment then held out his hand for her to drop it in, "I think it will do just fine." He said, " remember, not a word to Mya."

Mrs. Crenshaw nodded and went off to the attic, where Mya waited. Leo stared at the emerald, wondering what Mrs. Crenshaw could possibly want that could be worth this. He shrugged his shoulders, '*Not my business.'* He thought, opening the safe he kept in the hidden compartment of his desk drawer and depositing the emerald next to other bits and pieces they'd got from other people. *If Mya knew just how much her magic was bringing in, she would totally freak!* He thought.

Mrs. Crenshaw was explaining to Mya about the pain in her left side that had been with her since she lost her husband in the Vietnam war. Mya looking at her aura which was sickly green on the left side, and leaning toward yellow on the right, could see that her problem was not just physical. Her soul was hurting, and it needed healing. Mya asked her a few questions, apologising if they were painful. How did he die, her husband? Did she get the body back? Was there some unfinished business between them? Was there anything more than that on her mind?

There was indeed, but Mrs. Crenshaw was reluctant to say. Mya gave her some *Aloe Barbadensis Miller* to add to her tea every day for a month. She also told her to write a letter to her dead husband and burn it at the full moon in a bed of his favourite flowers. She was to watch it burn as she thought about only the good times they had together. But first, a prayer to Papa Legba, imploring him to intercede with the spirit of Mr. Crenshaw. Candles were lit on the small altar which held the mask of Papa Legba, and three bowls of offerings proffered containing corn, candy, and rum respectively; Papa Legba's favourites. Mya sang the incantation three times then sent Mrs. Crenshaw on her way with good wishes. Sure enough, Mrs. Crenshaw was back four weeks later with an apple pie she baked herself, to report that she was feeling 100% once again and to thank Mya sincerely. Mya was happy to see that her aura was now as yellow as the nearest sunflower and told her she was glad to have helped.

That night, she had a strange dream. She was at the clinic, but she didn't know why she was there. Perhaps she had a check-up with Dr. Parvenu. Funnily enough, though, she was sitting in the ICU and there was a craps table in front of her with the most curious assemblage

of people playing on it, right there while nurses and doctors milled about, and went about their business like they couldn't see them. There was an Amazon of a woman with red hair who was mainly watching as the others played. Keeping a possessive hand around her waist was a diminutive olive-skinned gentleman who played with his other hand. There was an old world gent with a mustache that actually curled at the ends like he was Hercule Poirot or someone like him. Lastly was a boy; he was the only one who seemed to see her in the whole room. He was staring at her in fact, eyes shining with what looked like gratitude.

"Thanks for setting me free Mya," he said.

"Do I know you?" Mya asked him curiously. He couldn't be more than ten years old if he was a day.

"No. You don't know me. But you know my mother." he said.

"Oh? Who is she?" Mya asked, standing up and moving closer to the craps table in her curiousity.

"Never mind. Just know that you helped set us both free today," he said. Suddenly everyone around the table was looking at her, and smiling like she was some sort of saviour or something. Mya took an uncertain step back.

Suddenly the boy went very still.

"I hear them," he said.

"Who?" the tall Amazon looking woman asked.

But the boy said no more, he was looking through the wall like he could see something everyone else couldn't. Suddenly he was obscured by a strange blur of grey smoke that seemed to adhere to his shape. Suddenly it was gone, and so was he. Mya woke up with a start.

"Baby?" Leo murmured sleepily, disturbed by her movement.

"It's nothing. Go back to sleep." Mya said, trying to get her heart to slow down.

Leo sat up and stared at her, "Tell me." He whispered hoarsely, his eyes heavy with sleep.

So she did.

It was easier to fall asleep after that. Sharing really was caring.

Being Leo's fiancée wrought a change in Mya's social life, and the fact that Charlotte tried to run her over did not hurt her either. Suddenly girls who had never looked twice at her wanted to be her best friend. Mya didn't have time for such fair weather friends, she was too busy trying to get through her work as quickly as possible before the baby decided to come and render her a homebody for a while. Ashley and she became closer though, and without the malignant influence of Charlotte clouding their relationship, it blossomed. It was also useful that Miles was always underfoot and Ashley had plenty of opportunities to get him to notice her, though he still didn't, much to her chagrin. She confided in Mya that she was at her wits' end. Mya wanted to help but didn't really know how. She invited them for lunch a lot over the weekend, and dinner, dragging Leo away to help her in the kitchen so that Ashley and Miles could have some time alone. Still, no joy. Miles was attentive enough and friendly, even solicitous of her welfare. But he didn't so much as kiss her fingertips. It was frustrating.

The sun came out again in February and Leo asked Mya to set a date. Mya was of the opinion that they'd waited this long, they could wait till until the end of the school year…Leo disagreed, stating that his baby was not going to be born to an unwed mother if he had anything to say about it, and it was her own fault if she had to get married with a distended stomach. *She* was the one who refused to marry him earlier, while she was still flat-bellied. Not that she was exactly a beached whale. Her stomach did swell, but even at six months, a large sweatshirt disguised her state completely. Her hair was growing at an unprecedented rate, and so were her nails. Dr. Parvenu told them it was the presence of so much Growth Hormone in her system and while the Diana Ross – looking afro was manageable, having to cut her nails every three days was a nuisance. She had to though, otherwise she would make Leo bleed. Mya discovered that as the nausea diminished, her sex drive went through the roof, and it was she, not Leo, passing notes in class asking for lunchtime rendezvous in the janitor's closet. Leo was *not* complaining though, the natural rise in internal temperature occasioned by a speeded up metabolism created an extremely interesting atmosphere inside Mya's vagina and the use of ice-cream and menthol featured heavily in their sexual activities. Pregnant women were apparently rather creative in the sexual field, Leo was learning to his bemusement, and he understood why old-school men liked to keep their women barefoot and

pregnant.

Coach Maxwell was one person who was not pleased with the happy couple. When Leo told him he would not be taking the scholarship, he almost broke down and cried. He took the opportunity at every practise to let Leo know what a chance he was throwing away, and how much he would regret it for the rest of his life. Leo listened patiently, nodding his head and agreeing with Coach. Then he would go and warm up and play a spectacular game. His usual proficiency seemed to have gone up a notch or two; he could seriously do no wrong. It pained Coach Maxwell no end to see it. Mya was pained too. She sat at the corner of the bleachers at every match, marvelling at how amazing Leo was on the basketball court. His lightning fast reflexes left the opposing team in confusion. Now they had the ball, now they didn't. She could not believe he was giving it all up – he looked so happy out there. She tried her level best to convince him that she would be fine if he went to college, but he smiled at her too, and nodded agreement with what she said, and then went off to milk the cow or do the accounts like it was all in a day's work for him.

Jade Evans was also rather displeased with the recent turn of events. She told Leo that he needed to cut 'the witch' loose or risk losing his mother. Seeing as Leo had spent the last nine years planning exactly how he would get away from Jade and her malignant lifestyle, he wasn't exactly bothered. Mya, on the other hand, was in acute distress at being the cause of this rift. However bad she was, Mya could not imagine that Leo did not miss his mother desperately. She even went so far as to go to Jade's house to reason with her. She got the door slammed in her face for her trouble, as well as the sign of the evil one brandished at her. Leo was inclined to laugh which rather upset Mya because she did not really think it was a laughing matter.

"Baby, I am extremely touched that you took the time to go and try to reason with my mother, but a bigger waste of time I can't imagine. My mother's a superstitious bigot and a drunk; whatever made you think she'd listen to you?" Leo said, attempting to contain his laughter.

"Well, I don't know! I'm pregnant, aren't I? I'm not supposed to make sense." Mya said, still upset. Leo came up to her and kissed her deeply, hands drifting down to squeeze her ass.

"You're wonderful to care so much," Leo murmured into her mouth, " but you really

shouldn't have. I *really* don't care if I never speak to her again."

Chapter 48

Wuthering Heights

The building of the boarding house was taking almost all of Leo's time. Every day after practise, he'd drive straight to the site to check on the day's progress. He wasn't the only one, Bob the account manager seemed to be personally invested in the success of the venture and was out at the site at least three days of the week, discussing business strategy with Leo and Miles. Miles seemed just as obsessed with the boarding house as Leo. On the weekends, he and Leo would join the workmen in building up the walls or arguing with suppliers over the authenticity of the wood they delivered or else going off to auctions and private sales that he or Leo had heard of, to pick up furniture and other period pieces. They were mostly stored in the basement of the house, and the greenhouse, or basically anywhere they could fit. It was mad.

When he wasn't working on the boarding house, he was planning the wedding. They had no money to spare so they had to think outside the box. Flowers were no problem, they had a garden full of them. Mya's mother's wedding dress was to be adjusted by Aunt Sophia to fit over her swelling breasts. The dress fell free from just below the bodice, but the bodice was made to fit – and Malia Andrewes apparently had not been as well endowed as Mya, even when she wasn't pregnant. The school agreed to lend them chairs and Tina and Ashley were going to do decorations. Aaron and David contributed tents, in case of any sudden rainfall. Miles, as best man, obtained the wedding rings from New Orleans although Leo did pay for them – Mya's uncle Jules had a jewellery shop there and he gave them a good price. Mama Ruth insisted on stepping in as de facto mother of the bride, providing most of the food, aunt Sophia refused to be left out, so she provided the drinks. Teddy the Bear volunteered his truck to run errands. He had been down in the dumps since Charlotte left so everyone appreciated him coming out of himself to volunteer like this. Uncle Greg was providing a barbeque feast worthy of a king, in his own words…In short, the wedding practically arranged itself!

Although Ashley and Tina had offered to decorate, it wasn't really necessary. Wuthering Heights was a beautiful spot, and in spring, the flowers were just starting to bloom and the trees to green. It was a picture. Leo had been right when he said it was the most romantic spot in which to hold a wedding. They'd decided to do it during Easter Break, the first week of April.

"What about your bachelor party?" Mya asked Leo.

"What about it?" Leo asked in turn eyebrow raised.

"When is it?" Mya asked.

"How is that any of your business?" Leo replied.

"Ashley and Tina apparently want to hold a hen night and they thought it would be a good idea if it was on the same night so…" Mya said impatiently.

"Why? So you can crash our party?" Leo snorted.

"I assume your party will be in some strip joint or somewhere else equally sordid, so no." Mya said with dignity, "Never mind anyway, I'll just tell them to pick a day."

Leo relented, "It's the day before the wedding. And no, we won't be going anywhere sordid. Uncle Jamie is holding a party for me at the Rusty Nail."

Mya's lips twisted but she refrained from pointing out that the Rusty Nail was considered quite sordid by the average law-abiding citizen. Instead, she said, "Well, good. Will you stay at Miles' after or go home?"

"*Go* home? What you mean to my mom's? No. I'm coming back here." Leo said.

"You can't!" Mya protested.

"Why not?" Leo asked taken aback.

"Because…the bride and groom aren't supposed to be together the night before the wedding! It's bad luck." Mya said.

"Is that what they teach you in witch school?" Leo asked amused.

"No. That's what people say." Mya mumbled. Leo laughed and Mya tried to hit him on the shoulder but he caught hold of her hands and kissed her hard instead. Kissing led to touching, which led to clothes everywhere and Leo deep inside her, adding to the stains on the sofa as he pumped steadily inside her and Mya moaned her encouragement. It didn't take long to come for either of them. Mya's vagina muscles closed around Leo's shaft, milking steadily as she screamed soundlessly. Her ecstasy brought on his and he was emptying his seed into her with a heartfelt groan.

"Fine." he said as he lay collapsed on top of her, breathing hard, "If you don't want me to come home, I won't. But let the record note that I'm not happy."

Mya smiled stroking his hair lovingly, "Of course I want you to come home. I just don't want anything to go wrong with our wedding day." Leo turned his head to kiss her. He was still wedged deep inside her, and the kiss aroused him again. He flipped her over so she was sitting on him and groaned aloud as she began to move.

"Oh God Mya, I love you." he murmured.

§

"So seriously Uncle Jamie, no strippers, right? I just want some good clean fun, go to bed relatively early, be up bright and un-hungover tomorrow for the wedding. Deal?" Leo insisted.

Uncle Jamie shook his head sadly, " I don't know who you are anymore Leo." He said.

"*I* don't know who I am anymore. I do know that I'm much happier though, so…don't spoil it for me." Leo said.

"Okay, okay, good clean fun, whatever." Uncle Jamie said ushering him into the Rusty Nail. Miles was there, and Aaron, David, Teddy, Coach Maxwell, the rest of the basketball team, his classmates, Uncle Greg and Bob, the account manager. They all yelled in welcome when they saw him, and someone went to crank up the jukebox.

Jon had outdone himself, supplying actual champagne for the party and some of the best

pot on the market according to David Grey. Uncle Greg got rather high and entertained them all with wild stories of his youth in the swingin' sixties. Apparently, he'd joined a commune briefly because of a girl but then was distracted by all the free love on offer. It was a fun night and everyone enjoyed themselves, especially when the twins jumped out of the huge wedding cake wheeled in by Jon. Leo gave Uncle Jamie a look of deepest betrayal, and he shrugged back helplessly. The twins did a double lap dance on Leo's lap and he gamely let them do it to 'Poison' by Alice Cooper, before slipping a twenty in each of their tiny thongs and sending them Uncle Jamie's way. He thought about spending the night at Miles' place and found to his surprise that the thought of spending the night away from Mya rather depressed him. They had been together every day since her grandmother's funeral and he found that he slept much better when he slept with her. Was he to have a broken night's sleep the day before his wedding? Leo got up on the bar counter to get everyone's attention.

"Hey guys, guess what? What if I told that I know somewhere where a large bunch of women are gathered *right this minute*! Is that something you'd be interested in?" he asked the congregation of testosterone in front of him. A wild yell of approval went up among the drunken mass.

"Come with me then!" he said jumping off the counter and heading to the door.

The convoy of cars drove down the dirt road until they reached Mya's gate. All the light's were on in the house and there was a fair amount of noise. Leo walked up the steps and knocked on the door. Ashley peeped out of the living room door and gave a scream when she saw him at the door like he was Freddy Kruger come to murder them all in their beds. This brought the other girls pouring out of the living room to see what the fuss was about. They all stared stupefied at Leo.

"Hi." He said waving at them, "Can we come in?" there was more screaming and fluttering about but finally Ashley came and opened the door. "Where's Mya?" Leo asked her, not spotting her among the screaming mass.

"In the living room," Ashley said, leading the way. Mya was sitting in her grandmother's rocking chair, enjoying a huge slice of chocolate fudge cake.

"Hallo." Leo told her smiling, "Enjoying yourself?"

"Immensely," Mya said. "I should be mad at you for coming but…this cake is delicious." She continued, licking the chocolate off her fork.

"Lucky fork." Leo murmured before the room was taken over by the mass of people coming in from the hall. Someone turned the music up louder and soon the party was jumping. Leo sat on the floor leaning his head on Mya's knee. "I tried." he told her, "but I couldn't do it."

"It's cool. I'm glad you're here. I wasn't looking forward to being away from you either. To be quite honest, it was depressing." Mya confided, still stuffing her face with cake.

"Depressing is exactly the word," Leo said smiling up at her. They watched their friends and family dancing and drinking. Jon had come along with drinks. Aunt Ley was teaching the girls how to do the twist while Uncle Greg hindered rather than helped. "This is better," Leo said.

"Yes." Mya agreed. Leo stood up and held his hand out.

"Come on, dance with me," he asked her. He pulled her out of her chair into his arms and they slow danced to Kiss by Prince, singing the words to each other and stopping to kiss every time Prince said, "*I just want your extra time and your*…" Mya was frankly laughing at him every time he sang, '*you don't have to be rich, to be my girl'* and he could see how it was amusing.

As Ashley watched them, her eyes misted with joy in the presence of so much love. Miles watched them too, then he turned away feeling a distinctive pain in the region of his heart. He was happy that his best friend was happy, and in Mya, he had found a new friend. *But God damn it, it hurt like a motherfucker to see them together*.

§

At the Park Avenue apartment where Charlotte was currently in residence, having just returned from a shopping spree at Ralph Lauren, her father was on the phone with the manager of First Mercantile Bank, Le Marais.

"Thank you for the information. We shall talk some more soon." He said and hung up,

just as she came into his study.

“Guess who that was?” he asked her.

“Who?” she asked with total disinterest.

“ Wilbert Marsden, he runs the bank in Le Marais.” Charles Le Carre told his daughter.

“Oh?” she replied, with a bit more animation.

“Yes. And you’ll never guess what he just told me.” Her father prompted.

Charlotte stopped fussing with her gloves, “ what did he just tell you?” she asked with a sigh.

“Well, it seems your boyfriend has taken a loan, to build a boarding house on some land The Whore’s grandmother left him.” He said.

“ Hmm…” Charlotte said perking up, “ and are we going to let him do it?”

“Yes.” Her father said.

“Why!? Teddy told me he’s actually marrying that whore!” Charlotte whined.

“Because you tried to run over a pregnant woman! Even if she *is* a nigger…it wasn’t a popular move. Neither was injuring the town basketball star player; that was even less popular. We need some goodwill to operate you know? So we’ll give things time to calm down and then…” her father trailed off.

“And then…?”Charlotte asked smiling.

“And then we shall see if he will be able to repay his loan…or not.” Her father replied, smiling back.

§

At a quarter to midnight, the party began to wind down and Ashley declared that the living room and Grandma Matia’s room were girl territory, while the boys could go sleep in the basement. There was a certain amount of good-natured grumbling at Ashley but

eventually, everyone divided up and went to sleep in their designated places. It looked like almost the entire wedding party was staying over. Leo went with the boys to settle them in for the night. He and Miles stayed up talking on the porch for a while before Miles began to yawn so much that Leo sent him to bed. He knew he should also go and sleep but he was wide awake. When that happened usually, he'd wake Mya and engage in a little slap and tickle until they were both exhausted, but tonight she was surrounded by a wall of oestrogen so thick, he dare not attempt to breach it. He sighed, deciding that he could at least *try* to get some sleep so he stood up to head up to his room. No-one was there after all, and it was a lot more comfortable than a mattress in a basement full of drunken men. He was just creeping up the stairs when he realised he wasn't alone. Mya was also making her surreptitious way to the bedroom.

"Hey," he whispered to her as he came up to her at their door. She started violently then boxed him in the stomach for scaring her.

"Why must you always sneak up on people?" she said irritably.

"I wasn't sneaking. I can't help it if you're deaf," he whispered back. They entered the room, shedding their clothes and got into bed. Leo was kissing her before she had a chance to completely lie down and they tumbled into bed together. The kissing got extremely passionate and was soon joined by scratching and biting. Leo bore Mya down onto the bed before him, kissing her mouth, eyes, nose before fastening his teeth in her neck in a biting suck as if he was a vampire. He entered her pushing her legs up on either side of her so that he could have full access. Passion ruled him and he rammed into her with no mercy. Not that she asked for any. On the contrary, she egged him on, meeting each hard impact with a thrust of her own. She was making mewling sounds and Leo put his mouth on hers so that she was moaning into his mouth and he was growling into hers.

"Now." he rumbled disengaging his lips for a moment before biting down on her lower lip and thrusting hard and deep at the same time. His release was prolonged enhanced by the continuous shuddering of the body beneath him. Mya's arms were outstretched on either side of her, eyes closed and body arched as she let the orgasm take her as it would. After, they both collapsed on the bed, kissing in that smug way that says '*nobody else has ever had what we have*"' without words.

They lay in exhausted repletion, Mya lying atop Leo in utter contentment. The spreading wetness took them both by surprise. Mya sat up, wondering if this was cum juice, or was she losing control of her bladder? She got off Leo, too puzzled at what could be going on to be embarrassed. Leo sat up, at a loss.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I…think…my water broke," Mya said slowly, studying the puddle.

"WHAT!?" Leo said, getting up and searching frantically for something to wipe himself down with. "Why would you say that? You're not due for another month yet."

"AAh!" Mya screamed, bending over reflexively.

"Mya!! Are you alright?" A naked Leo came to support her as she collapsed onto the bed.

"Phew! I think I just had a contraction." Mya said, looking up at Leo. He looked down at her in horror.

"No. Make it stop. It's not time yet. I'm not ready. We're not ready. Make it stop!" Leo was getting hysterical. Mya reached up and slapped his face, hard.

" Get dressed Leo, you have to take me to hospital. Now." Mya said preternaturally calm.

That seemed to steady Leo and he took a deep breath. "Okay…okay. No need for violence…Clothes. Dressed. Yes, I can do that." he said picking up his clothes from the floor. He wiped his abdomen with the sheet and wore his jeans and a sweatshirt. Mya got dressed in her oldest dress and picked up her already packed hospital bag. Leo came and took it from her.

"Let's go," he said.

Chapter 49

Child of Destiny

The arrival of the bachelor/bachelorette party in the emergency room created quite a stir

in the sleepy clinic. Luckily, Dr. Parvenu was on duty and he rushed Mya off to the triage room for examination. Leo was given a gown and sent off to change. The rest of the party settled themselves on whatever benches and chairs they could find. When Leo got back to the examination room he was told that Mya was 7cm dilated.

"Is that bad?" he asked. His palms were sweating…it would have been quite fascinating if he had the attention to spare for it. He did not recall ever being so scared in his life.

"It means she's close to delivery. First babies are tricky; they can either come very fast or really take their time. This one looks like he's coming fast." Dr. Parvenu said cheerfully, almost rubbing his hands in anticipation. "At last, we'll get to see what the mass is."

"Yes, we will," Leo said quietly, meeting Mya's eyes over Andre's head. Dr. Parvenu gestured to the nurse and she began to wheel Mya into the delivery suite. Mya stretched out her hand to Leo asking him with her eyes not to leave her. Leo squeezed her hand reassuringly walking along beside the nurse. Labour was hard, the contractions were coming harder and faster and Mya was gritting her teeth trying somehow to contain the pain by holding tightly to what she could, which was Leo's hands. His fingers were quite discoloured and bruised from all the squeezing but he murmured not one word of complaint.

Grandma Matia was on the other side of the gurney, hands on either side of Mya's aura. It had deepened to a blue so dark it looked almost black. As they held hands, Leo's aura surrounded hers, so she was deep blue on the inside and blood red on the outside. A ray of purple made an arch over her swollen belly. It sparked with movement, shooting flames of gold now and then. Matia heard them talking;

"Come, Marcus, it is time." A voice said.

"No. I want to sleep. Leave me alone!" the one called Marcus replied.

"It will not be safe for you in here much longer. Do you not feel it?" the first voice said.

*"*You *said it's not safe out* there! *I want to stay here Armand. You can't make me leave." Marcus said.*

"You are right, I can't. But she *can." Armand replied.*

Matia had been joined by others by now. Grandpa George was a protective shadow behind her. Malia stood at her daughter's head hand in hand with her husband; praying for quick delivery and healing for their daughter and grandchild. The others hung back, watching, Mairiebelle at their head. They were here, in case of need. Abramelin the Mage was at the rear of the group, cane stretched out, murmuring incantations and drawing runic symbols in the air. Not to be outdone, Mekatilili danced around the group, pinching a herbal mixture of snuff and sneezing it at the group at measured intervals. Behind this group was another. They moved silently, forming a perimeter around the tableau. They were armed to the teeth – it was obvious they were ready for a fight. They all looked alike; grey eyes, black hair, tall and fighting fit. They wore clothes from whatever age they came from, but somehow, they all looked similarly dressed. They were fewer than the first group but no less vigilant. Already there were rumblings in the world of magic. Those who spoke to the Other Side knew that Something was about to happen, though not what. Better to be safe than sorry.

Andre was right though, the baby came fast. Before they knew it, the head was crowning, sporting a full head of curly black hair. Leo exclaimed in shock when he saw it, leaving hold of Mya's hands in order to walk down to the foot of the bed where her legs made a V, between which, the curly black head appeared and disappeared rapidly. Andre was murmuring encouragingly to Mya to push when he said as he rubbed some sort of oil around her vagina. A contraction took Mya and she screamed, while Andre urged her to push.

"One more time Mya!" he encouraged, "Give it everything you've got." Mya bore down as hard as she could and this time when the head appeared, it did not disappear. Dr. Parvenu took careful hold of the head, urging Mya to one more effort. She pushed with all her strength and Marcus George Devereux came shooting into the world, directly into the arms of his startled father. His tears were immediate and deafening and an extremely pleased Andre commented happily on what a good pair of lungs he had on him, all the while massaging Mya's womb in order to remove the afterbirth. A contraction hit Mya and she bent over, pushing out the afterbirth. Andre presented the scissors ceremonially to a still frozen Leo, inviting him to do the honours and cut the cord. Leo wanted to know if it would hurt Mya, making her laugh.

The mass of people all had their hands held out as they stood in a circle around the tableau in the birthing room.

"Peace, peace, peace…" echoed around the room as all Mya's ancestors joined together in one mind to mask the magical turmoil in the room from any outside ears. Marcus was screaming with frustration and fear. Sparks were beginning to fly about, deftly caught or deflected by Armand.

"Calm yourself Marcus, or you will hurt them. Do you wish to hurt them?" Armand asked.

"No," Marcus said, a bit sulkily.

"Rein it in then. Breathe deep, and breath out. She will feed you soon, and then it will be better." Armand said.

"Peace…peace." Echoed around the room.

"I really can't distinguish one pain from another right now, so have at it," Mya said rather cheerfully for someone who had just pushed a melon-sized object out of a lemon-sized hole. Leo cut the cord to general applause, and the baby was taken away to be cleaned. Leo hardly had a chance to look at him, but he seemed fairly normal – all requisite number of fingers and toes, and his eyes were closed so he couldn't see what colour they were – he didn't glow or emit sparks or do anything at all unusual. Then Leo noticed the boy standing beside the makeshift crib, staring at the baby. The boy seemed to be about two years old, with black hair and grey eyes. Though he'd never seen a two-year-old with eyes that old; Leo did not miss the resemblance to himself. In fact, the boy could have been his twin, when he was two years old. *If* his two-year-old self had had a face that was patently blank and eyes that seemed a thousand years old. Nobody else seemed to have seen him. He turned to look at Mya and found her looking at the boy as well. She turned round to look at him, lifting her brow in puzzlement.

Who was he? She asked with her eyes.

'I am the guard', a voice said in Leo's head startling him badly. By the look on Mya's face, she heard him too. *'You may call me Armand. Do not be afraid.'*

'Armand is my middle name.' Leo thought at the boy.

"Yes." The boy replied.

"Why can no-one else see you?" Mya also thought at him, Leo's eyes widened, wondering how he could hear Mya's thoughts.

'You hear because I hear.' The boy said and turning to Mya he answered her question, '*Only people of your bloodlines can see me. No one else.'*

"*What are you?"* Leo mentally asked

"I am the guard" the thing calling itself Armand said again. *"All will become clear in time. Now you must feed Marcus. He is hungry."*

"Marcus?" Leo and Mya thought together.

"Yes. His name is Marcus George Devereux." Armand said.

"According to whom?" Leo demanded.

"You Leo. That is the name you chose for him." Armand said.

Leo was silent, having no rejoinder to this. The baby was brought to Mya and she put him to her breast where he latched on with enthusiasm equal to any his father had displayed when sucking the same breast. Leo was sent off to change his clothes and to inform the waiting room full of partygoers that they had a son. He found that the partygoers had been busy.

"It's your wedding day," Ashley said to him.

"Correction, it *was* my wedding day. Now it's my son's birthday." Was Leo's dry rejoinder.

"Who said it can't be both?" Ashley said excitedly. "We talked to the priest and he agreed to come to the clinic chapel to marry you!"

"Seriously?" Leo said, not believing his ears.

"Yes!" Ashley squealed.

"I don't know…Mya is tired, she's been through a lot." Leo said dubiously.

“Oh, nonsense! All she has to do is lie on her bed and say I do. We’ll do the rest.” Ashley said, dismissing his misgivings. She beckoned to her minions and they went off to Mya’s room. Miles smiled at him from across the room and he went over to him.

“So. I hear I’m getting married today.” He said to him.

“Yeah. Your suit’s in the car.” Miles said.

“Et tu, Miles?” he asked him, nevertheless heading out to the car to retrieve it.

Andre lent them his office so they could change. The priest turned up at ten a.m. for the ceremony and the whole boiling mass converged on the tiny chapel. Mya refused to be wheeled with her bed but consented to sit in a wheelchair with the baby in her lap. Uncle Greg wheeled her down the aisle. In spite of the gruelling labour she’d gone through, she was glowing and resplendent in her mother’s wedding gown. Her feet were bare because they were too swollen for her shoes but Ashley had put flowers in her hair and Leo thought she was perfect. Beside her wheelchair, walked the guard known as Armand. His expression was as blank as it had been in the birthing room, but since only Mya, Leo and the baby could see him, that was not a problem. Mya and Leo only had eyes for each other anyway. As Uncle Greg reached the front of the room, Leo stretched out his hand, and Mya took it. They turned to the priest as he intoned, “Dearly beloved we are gathered here today to join Leo Devereux and Mya Andrewes in holy matrimony…”

‘Danger’ Armand said just as the priest declared them man and wife. Leo looked down at him wondering what…? Then his eye caught movement at the chapel door and he turned his head quickly. Two ninja-look-a-likes were lurking in the doorway, watching the baby. He looked at Mya, eyes widening in alarm and she looked back at him with the same expression. The priest was looking inquiringly at them, having said, ‘You may kiss the bride’ and waiting for them to do so.

‘What do we do?’ Leo asked Armand.

‘Kiss the bride.’ Armand replied, startling Leo further. Nevertheless, he bent his head and kissed Mya, who held the baby in her lap. A strange light seemed to suffuse them, it coalesced around their joined lips but seemed to emanate from Marcus. The light shot forward like a speeding bullet and divided in two as it headed for the two figures at the door.

As it hit them, they exploded in a burst of light and colour and disappeared like they had never been. Mya and Leo were frozen in the kiss, wondering why no-one else reacted with terror or anxiety.

'*They cannot see.'* Armand informed them helpfully.

Mya and Leo drew apart and the room erupted in applause. Andre made shushing gestures, trying to get people to pipe down. They *were* in a hospital after all.

The party was held in the doctors' lounge. Dr. Ross was not around, and Dr. Pinot decided to turn a blind eye to proceedings. Dr. Parvenu was in the thick of things, talking and laughing with the bride and groom.

"It's unfortunate that you won't be able to consummate for at least another six weeks!" he ribbed Leo, " Thankfully you'll have the baby tiring you out daily so the time will probably fly."

"Aha ha ha. Your humour is almost as bad as Mya's." Leo told him dryly. "Besides, we were already married. That piece of paper is a mere formality."

"What a romantic thing to say!" one of Ashley's minions exclaimed in ecstasy, going off to repeat it to her friends. Mya herself was drooping. She had been up for about thirty-six hours straight, at least five of those hours having been spent pushing a baby out of herself. *Not to mention the adrenaline rush of extreme terror just experienced…* She hated to admit it but she was exhausted. Leo saw that she was fading fast and lifted her off her chair, baby and all and waving to the crowd and thanking them for everything, he took her off to her room; Armand an ever-present shadow behind them.

After resting throughout the day and night, with Leo curled up on the other bed in the room, Dr. Parvenu informed her that an ultrasound was in order so that they could find out what happened to the mass. Mya tried very hard not to look at Armand, who was sitting beside the crib where baby Marcus lay. The baby's grey eyes were open and seemed to be aware, but Andre assured them that that was not possible at his age – especially seeing as he was premature.

"Okay, when?" she asked him quietly, so as not to wake Leo.

“Now is good,” Andre said.

“Right,” Mya said, glancing over at Leo. She didn’t want to do this alone but he was tired too.

“Shall I wake him?” Andre asked solicitously, seeming to read her mind.

“N..no” Mya said reluctantly, and Andre promptly reached over and prodded Leo awake.

“He’d probably want to be there anyway.” He said to her with a shrug.

They went to radiology and Dr. Parvenu did the Ultrasound. Mya’s womb was free of any growths, masses or any other mysterious substances.

“That’s strange…” Dr. Parvenu declared, “It seems to have disappeared.”

“Has it?” Leo asked leaning forward to see.

“Yes. It's completely gone.” Dr. Parvenu said turning to look at them with a shake of his head.

Mya and Leo exchanged glances. “Well, that’s good isn’t it?” Leo asked.

“I suppose.” Dr. Parvenu said. “Still I’d like to do some tests to be sure.”

They were wheeled back to Mya’s room and a nurse came to take Mya’s specimens. Once she’d left, Mya held out her hands for Leo to come to her.

“Now what?” Mya asked her new husband.

“Fuck knows,” Leo replied.

~ fin~

Annemarie Musawale

Hi. Thank you for reading. I do hope you enjoyed the story. Be sure to sign up to the mailing list to get early notification for when the next book in the series is published. Don't forget to leave me a review; I would love to hear what you thought.

Excerpt from Child of Destiny – Marcus Devereux

Chapter One: Home

The black and yellow jeep drew up in the driveway and the baby looked out at the house in curiosity. A stranger seeing it for the first time might think it slightly dilapidated, yet it had a certain character to it. One could tell it had seen a lot in its time. At least, that's what the baby thought. Armand looked at Marcus, wondering not for the first time what he was to do with him. It had fallen to him to guard this remarkable child and while he was more than willing, he really was not very good with children. His own child had grown up without him all those many millennia ago. Was it really 4000 years? Time really did fly when you were having fun…or not. He had been too caught up in his search for eternal life to pay attention to the child – once he'd been sure that the prophecy did not pertain to him- he lost all interest if he was being perfectly honest. Its true what they said; you should be careful what you wish for.

"Are you okay? You look pale." Leo spoke from the driver's seat as he undid his seatbelt. Marcus' father was his own many times great-grandson, and he'd been witness to the pain Leo went through *because* his own father abandoned him at eight years old. It would seem the Devereaux men were just not built for parenthood – though Leo seemed to be shaping up to be the exception.