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Life's
A
Witch

LIFE'S A WITCH

A WICKED WITCHES OF THE MIDWEST MYSTERY BOOK SEVEN

AMANDA M. LEE

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Prologue

“That’s not going to happen.”

Tillie Winchester placed her hands on her hips and glared at Willa, all pretense of coming to an amiable compromise flying right out the window in the face of her sister’s defiant attitude. She didn’t like Willa. She was pretty sure she never liked her. Even as children they fought ferociously. This dispute wasn’t going to be on the level of cats and dogs, but if Tillie had nuclear weapons at her disposal she knew right where she would drop them today.

“I don’t care what you think is going to happen, Willa,” Tillie said, anger coursing through her. “You’re not taking those girls. They’re staying with me.”

“They’re not staying with you,” Willa scoffed, matching Tillie’s stance and staring her down. She was a bully, but Tillie was a bigger bully. Both women knew this wouldn’t end well. “You don’t have children. I do. I can take those girls and raise them right.”

“Are you suggesting I can’t raise them right?”

“I’m suggesting you don’t know the first thing about taking care of teenage girls,” Willa shot back. “Let’s face it, Tillie, you’ve been nothing more than the fun aunt who gives them whatever they want, whenever they want it up until this point. With Ginger gone”

Tillie narrowed her eyes to dangerous slits. Ever since her sister Ginger’s death two days earlier she’d been locked in battle with Willa over the fate of her nieces Winnie, Marnie and Twila. There was no way she would relinquish the girls to a dismal life with Willa.

“Don’t talk about Ginger like you knew her,” Tillie spat. “You don’t even live in Walkerville anymore. You haven’t lived here in decades. You barely know those girls. You don’t have any claim to them.”

“Ginger was still my sister,” Willa sniffed. “I think she’d want to know that her daughters were being raised in a safe environment.”

Tillie rolled her eyes. “What? Do you think I’m going to teach them how to juggle with knives? They’re long past the running-with-scissors lecture. Winnie is an adult. She doesn’t have to go anywhere. Marnie will be a legal adult in a month.”

“Well, then I’ll take Twila,” Willa said. “I’ll give Marnie and Winnie the option of going with me. If they prefer to stay with you and your ... lax attitude ... I guess that’s on them. Twila still needs guidance, though.”

“Twila is staying with me,” Tillie argued. “She just lost her mother. She doesn’t want to leave her home. We’re all staying together.”

“I’ll take you to court if I have to.” Willa knew the girls would never agree to go with her, and she played the one trump card she thought she had.

“You’re not going to want to do that, Willa,” Tillie said. “If you take me to court, I’ll go. I’ll tell the court every little thing you’ve worked so hard to hide since you moved away from here. I’ll put it out there for public consumption. I know how worried you are about people thinking ill of you.”

“Oh, really? What can you possibly tell the courts about me?” Willa scoffed. “I’ll tell the judge that you dance naked under the full moon, let underage girls help you make wine, and teach them about ... dark arts.”

Tillie snorted. “Dark arts?”

“Everyone knows you’re a witch, Tillie,” Willa countered. “I’ll make sure no court deems you fit to keep Twila.”

“If you even try taking that girl I’ll”

“What’s going on?” Calvin Hoffman poked his head into the room, his gaze nervously bouncing between the two women. “The girls are right outside. They don’t need to hear this.”

Tillie studied her husband for a moment, conflicted. Ginger’s death was a surprise. She’d felt poorly for months, but was bouncing back when the unthinkable happened and a massive coronary stole her in sleep. Winnie found her and was having trouble dealing with it. Still, Tillie wasn’t one to hide things from her nieces – and she wasn’t about to start now.

“Willa is insistent on taking Twila,” Tillie informed Calvin. “She’s going to let Winnie and Marnie decide, which is pretty funny since they’re both adults.”

“I could take Marnie for a month, too, if you really want to be obnoxious about it,” Willa hissed. “I think you’re worried that if I take her she’ll never return. You’ve got them under your thumb here. Freedom might change their outlooks.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Calvin chided, his everlasting patience wearing thin. “Those girls barely know you, Willa.”

“And whose fault is that?”

“It’s your fault,” Calvin charged, not missing a beat. “You chose to leave Walkerville. You haven’t talked to Tillie in close to ten years and you only talked to Ginger once in a blue moon. Those girls don’t know you and they certainly don’t love you. They don’t want to leave their home.”

“I don’t understand how you think you’re even a part of this, Calvin,” Willa snapped. “Just because you married my sister doesn’t mean you get to make family decisions.”

Calvin was taken aback. “Really? Who took care of Marnie when she had strep throat last year and was down for ten days? Who helped Twila build set designs for her school play? Who helped Winnie build a doghouse when she was ten? I don’t remember you being there for any of those things.”

“I’m still a more suitable caregiver than Tillie,” Willie said. “I won’t let those girls run wild through the fields. I’ll turn them into proper ladies.”

“They don’t want to be proper ladies,” Tillie countered. “Why can’t they just be who they want to be?”

“With you as a role model that’s a terrifying thought,” Willa countered. “I’m not giving in on this. I’ll take you to court if I have to.”

“Well, you’ll have to,” Tillie said. “I promise you won’t like the outcome. We won’t see a courtroom until well after Marnie is legal. That means the judge will basically ask Twila who she wants to live with. Do you think that’s going to be you?”

“I think that Twila will be happy to get out of here if given the option.”

“That’s not true!”

Tillie’s eyes snapped to the door where Twila, Marnie and Winnie gaped in abject horror.

“I don’t want to leave,” Twila said, hurrying into the room. “Please tell me I don’t have to go with her.”

“You don’t have to go anywhere,” Calvin said, soothing Twila as she cried.

Winnie and Marnie were more defiant than their younger sister.

“You can’t take her from us,” Winnie warned, her blond hair flying as she bobbed her head. “She’s our sister. She wants to stay here.”

“And we want to stay with Aunt Tillie,” Marnie added. “If you try to take her”

“You’ll what?” Willa challenged. “Are you going to cast a spell on me like your precious Aunt Tillie?”

“No,” Marnie replied, shaking her dark head. “We’ll go the old-fashioned route. We’ll burn your house down.”

Tillie pursed her lips to keep from laughing. She loved a good threat.

“And that’s exactly why the judge will give Twila to me,” Willa said, rolling her eyes. “Thanks for

giving me all the ammunition I need in court, girls.”

Tillie took a step forward, her gaze menacing. “We all know why you really want Twila,” she said. “It’s not out of love or familial obligation. You think you’ll have access to some of Ginger’s estate if you take her. There’s one little problem with that scenario.”

Willa’s shoulders straightened. “If you honestly think this is about money”

Tillie cut her off. “When Ginger first got sick, we went to an attorney to set up trusts for the girls,” she said. “All of that money is tied up in a way that you can never touch it. All three girls got equal stakes in the inheritance, and they can’t touch that money until they’re twenty-five. Ginger didn’t want them blowing it when they were too young to realize what they were doing.”

“But” Willa’s face shifted. “How did Ginger expect anyone to take these girls on if there’s no money to raise them?”

“We also talked about that,” Tillie replied, nonplussed. “The house and property reverts to me upon Ginger’s death. I’m the sole owner of the land now. I’m taking care of the girls with my money. I don’t need Ginger’s money to keep them. I’m keeping them because”

“You love us,” Twila supplied.

Tillie cocked her head to the side, considering. “Most of the time,” she finally conceded. She turned back to Willa. “I know what you’re really doing here and there’s no way I’m handing over any of these girls. If you want to take this to court, then we’ll take it to court. You won’t like what I have to say when we get there, though.”

“Tillie is right,” Calvin said, trying to calm the women. “Twila will choose to stay with Tillie and me. A judge isn’t going to hand her over to you when she doesn’t want to go.”

“And I’m going to guess that without any money in the mix, you’ll lose interest in Twila pretty darned quickly,” Tillie added.

Willa’s face contorted. “I ... well, I guess you’ve got it all figured out, haven’t you?”

“I have,” Tillie replied smoothly. “Now get out of my house.”

“I grew up in this house,” Willa argued. “It’s still my house.”

“Not according to the land deeds and law,” Tillie said. She leaned in closer so only Willa could hear. “Don’t you ever come back here, Willa. We might’ve grown up together, but we’re not family. Those girls are my family, and there’s nothing you can ever do to take them away from me.”

Willa pulled back, tugging on her suit coat as she squared her shoulders. “Girls, if you ever want proper role model, you know where to find me.”

“I’m guessing it’s someplace where people don’t notice that big stick hanging out of your behind,” Marnie offered, causing Willa to scowl.

“Don’t think this is over, Tillie,” Willa said. “You’ll regret this one day.”

Tillie made a face that would’ve been comical under different conditions. “Don’t let the door hit you in the ass on your way out, Willa,” she said. “Have a nice life ... and remember what I said. Don’t ever come back here again. If you do, I’ll be dancing on your grave. I might even do it naked.”

Chapter 1

“I don’t think this is legal.”

“It’s legal,” Aunt Tillie replied, nonplussed. “Now put your back into it. You’ll never get that box into my truck if you don’t exert some effort. You need bigger muscles or something. You’re a weakling.”

I brushed my blond hair from my forehead and looked up at my great-aunt wearily. She was in a mood today. That wasn’t saying much, because I can’t remember her not being in a mood. This one was entirely annoying, though.

“I could leave this box here and let you figure out how to get it into your truck on your own,” I threatened.

Aunt Tillie rolled her eyes. “We both know that’s not going to happen,” she said, not worried in the least I would abandon her to her own dirty work. “If you leave this box in the middle of the floor your mother or one of your aunts will trip over it. They’re at the age where a hip injury could lay them up for weeks, and that means you would have to take care of them instead of fawning all over your boyfriend. Do you really want to serve your mother breakfast in bed instead of cuddling up to your long-haired love muffin?”

I scowled, frustrated. She had a point. I didn’t want to encourage her, though. “Is there a reason you couldn’t have packed this wine in three separate boxes? I would rather make three trips with lighter loads than one trip with a box that makes me think my back is about to go out.”

Aunt Tillie shot me one of her patented “I’m going to curse you if you don’t shut up” looks. “What are you still talking?”

“I honestly have no idea,” I muttered, groaning as I strained to lift the box again. It was too heavy. There was no getting around it. I wasn’t strong enough to move the box from the foyer of The Overlook, the inn my mothers and aunts run, to Aunt Tillie’s truck in the driveway. I’m aware of my limitations and I’m not afraid to admit them. “We need help to do this,” I said finally, straightening up. I could brush the sweat from my forehead.

Summers in Michigan vacillate wildly. One day can be seventy degrees and beautiful. The next can be ninety and so humid you feel as if you’re roasting in an oven. Today was an example of the latter.

My name is Bay Winchester and I’m a witch. No, you read that right. I can talk with ghosts and cast spells. The only things I can’t do are control my great-aunt and the weather. She can control the weather. I’m not powerful enough. I would take control over one of those things in a heartbeat right now. I’ll let you guess which one.

“You’re starting to tick me off,” Aunt Tillie said, wagging a finger in my face. “You’re young. You should be strong. Now ... suck it up and lift with your legs. You’re really starting to bug me.”

“Aunt Tillie, it’s too heavy,” I whined. “I physically cannot do what you’re asking me to do. I’m sorry.”

“Fine,” Aunt Tillie sputtered. “Where are your cousins?”

That was a good question. It was Thursday night and Thistle and Clove were supposed to be here an hour ago. Unlike me, they must have realized Aunt Tillie had chores in store for everyone. I either missed that realization – or they purposely didn’t tell me what they suspected because they wanted me to do all of the heavy lifting. I leaned toward the latter.

“I don’t know where they’re at,” I replied. “We have a big group of tourists in town for the summer festival. Maybe they got a last-minute rush at the store.”

As co-owners of Hypnotic, Hemlock Cove's magic store, my cousins often managed to use their business as an excuse to dodge Aunt Tillie duty. Because I'm the editor of the town's weekly newspaper, I don't have that crutch to lean on. Everyone knows my schedule. It's a real drag sometimes.

"They're hiding," Aunt Tillie muttered. "I told them I needed their help and they're hiding. I'll curse their bottoms blue."

I pursed my lips to keep from laughing. I had no idea whether that was possible – although she'd managed to pull off some truly inventive curses in her time. I was just glad I was putting out observable effort so I would hopefully be free from this week's curse. "Can't you curse them to make them appear and help? We need to get this box in your truck before Landon gets here. If he sees what we're doing ..."

"If who sees what you're doing?"

I froze when I heard the new voice, swiveling quickly to find my boyfriend, Landon Michaels, surveying us from across the room. He had a cookie in his hand, which meant he'd entered the inn through the back door and ran into my mother and aunts in the kitchen.

"Hi," I said, pasting a bright smile on my face. "You're early."

"Uh-huh." Landon's gaze bounced between Aunt Tillie and me. As an FBI agent, he is trained to know when people are lying. I'm a horrible liar anyway. If I were ever held and interrogated I would give up everything and everyone in the first hour. What? I'm not good under pressure.

"I think he came early because he missed you," Aunt Tillie said, opting to take over the conversation in her own way. "He gets little hearts in his eyes when he looks at you."

"I did miss her," Landon agreed.

His office was in Traverse City, so he spent at least three nights a week away from me. It's frustrating, but we're dealing with it. Any case that takes him close to Hemlock Cove – which is more than an hour from Traverse City in northern Lower Michigan – he gladly takes so he can spend the night with me at the guesthouse Clove, Thistle and I share. It's on our family's property but still far enough away to offer privacy. Okay, sometimes we have privacy. More often than not the older women in our family simply barge in whenever they see fit.

"I told you," Aunt Tillie said. "Your love muffin can't stand to be away from you."

"I don't think he likes it when you call him that," I suggested.

Aunt Tillie shrugged, beyond caring. "He'll get over it. Now ... come on. Move that box out to my truck."

I glanced at the box again, frustrated. I bent over to pick it up but Landon nudged me away with his knee.

"What's in the box?" Landon asked.

"It's private," Aunt Tillie replied, narrowing her eyes as he moved closer to it. "You stay out of there, Fed. You need a search warrant to go through my private things, and even then I'll curse you with ants in your pants if you try to touch my stuff."

"Ants in my pants?"

"That's what I said," Aunt Tillie sniffed. "I'll make them those red ones that sting. I don't think you want stinging insects around your manhood."

Landon snorted. I can never tell how he'll react to Aunt Tillie and her threats. Sometimes he finds her funny. Other times he wants to throttle her. His face was unreadable now.

"Tell me what's in the box and maybe I'll lift it for you," Landon suggested.

"It's private," Aunt Tillie shot back. She knew darned well Landon wouldn't agree to help if he knew the contents. "It's woman stuff."

"Woman stuff?"

“You know ... tampons and pads and stuff,” Aunt Tillie said, warming to her lie. “I need an industrial supply because I have estrogen issues.”

As far as lies go, it wasn't Aunt Tillie's finest effort. She labored under the delusion that all men feared a woman's monthly cycle and you could terrify them with discussions about periods and cramps. Of course, with Aunt Tillie in her eighties the threat didn't hold a lot of weight in this particular scenario.

Landon wasn't about to be dissuaded by a bad lie. “Are you seriously trying to tell me that this box is full of tampons and that's why Bay can't lift it?”

“She's a weakling. What can I say?”

Landon scowled and turned to me. “Do you want to tell me anything?”

He knew I was in a bad spot. I had promised to tell him the truth ... even when it hurt. He was aware of our witchy ways and accepted them. He was aware of Aunt Tillie's penchant for breaking the law and, well, “accepted them” isn't the correct way to put it. Still, he takes her antics in stride most of the time. The problem was that Aunt Tillie was downright nasty and vindictive when put on the hot seat.

“You're very handsome and I love you,” I offered, hoping my smile would be enough to distract him.

“You're cute,” Landon said. “I love you, too. I still want to know what's in this box.”

Crap! “It's”

“I already told you it's tampons,” Aunt Tillie said, cutting me off. “Why do you always have to stick your nose in stuff that's none of your concern?”

“Because you keep doing illegal things,” Landon shot back, nonplussed. “I know there aren't tampons in there. I also know you only said that because you think I'm afraid of tampons. Here's a tip. Only boys under the age of twenty are afraid of tampons.”

Aunt Tillie wrinkled her nose, her hands on her hips as she stared him down. “Do you want me to show you the tampons?”

Landon swallowed hard. He was pretty sure the box was tampon free, yet he was equally sure Aunt Tillie could conjure a bevy of female hygiene products if she felt like it. Aunt Tillie can make almost anyone back down. Landon is one of the few exceptions. “Show me.”

Aunt Tillie sighed. “You asked for it.”

“Wait!”

Landon glanced at me, feigning patience. “Yes, Bay.”

“She's got wine in the box and she's trying to get me to load it into her truck so she can sell it at the festival this weekend,” I blurted out. “She doesn't want you to know because you'll try to confiscate it. I really hope you don't do that, though, because I can't spend another weekend trapped in a book.”

Landon nodded. “I had a feeling that's what was in the box.” I watched him as he considered how to proceed. The last time he tried to stop Aunt Tillie from hawking her homemade wine she cursed us into a book of fairy tales. No one wanted to go through that ordeal again.

“That's my wine,” Aunt Tillie said. “I can sell it if I want to.”

“Fine,” Landon said, giving in as he bent over and hoisted the box off the ground. He moved toward the front door and I hurried around him to push it open.

Aunt Tillie and I followed him down the driveway, watching as he pushed the box into the bed of Aunt Tillie's pickup truck and latched the tailgate in place. When he turned, he seemed surprised to find us right behind him.

“That's it?” Aunt Tillie cocked an eyebrow. “You're not going to fight me on this?”

“I'm not going to fight you on it,” Landon conceded, pulling me in for a hug. “I did miss you this

week, Bay.” He gave me a quick kiss and then moved back toward the inn.

Aunt Tillie scampered after him. “I’m going to sell it.”

“I don’t care.” Landon linked his fingers with mine. “What’s for dinner tonight? I’m starving.”

“They’re making kebabs, rice, hummus and some other stuff,” I answered, waiting for him to blow. He was too calm. He was never this calm.

“That sounds good.”

“I’m going to sell it and make a lot of money,” Aunt Tillie called to his back. “Then I’m going to roll around in it naked.”

Landon sighed. “I don’t care what you do with the money,” he said. “If you’re going to roll around naked in it, though, make sure you give us notice. I don’t want to see that. I’ll have nightmares.”

“Why aren’t you fighting her on this?” I asked, genuinely curious.

“I don’t want to get trapped in a book, and I figure if she’s selling alcohol at the town festival that doesn’t fall under the purview of the FBI,” Landon replied. “That’s Chief Terry’s problem. I have a three-day weekend ahead of me and I’m not getting involved in any of this crap. I want to relax, eat and spend time with you. That’s all I want to do.”

Landon is handsome in everyday circumstances, but when he’s romantic and sweet he doubles his appeal. “That’s sounds nice,” I said.

“Nothing is going to ruin this weekend,” Landon said, leading me up the steps and pulling up short when my mother appeared in the doorway. Her face was white and she clutched her hands together. “Yeah, I think I just jinxed us.”

I had a feeling he was right. “What’s wrong? Aunt Tillie has been with me. She couldn’t possibly have done something terrible.” I shot Aunt Tillie a worried look. “You haven’t, right?”

Aunt Tillie scowled. “When are you going to learn that I can do anything I set my mind to, including being in two places at once? That being said, I haven’t done anything bad in weeks.”

Landon arched a challenging eyebrow.

“Fine! I haven’t done anything bad today,” Aunt Tillie conceded. “What’s wrong, Winnie?”

Mom is generally good under pressure. She takes on all of life’s little oddities – and Aunt Tillie’s big transgressions – with an air of confidence and calm I often admire. She looked positively apoplectic, though.

“We got a call a little bit ago,” Mom said, hopping from one foot to the other. “I ... well ... we have two guests who will be arriving for ten whole days starting tomorrow.”

“The way you’re acting you’d think it was one of those oasis buggers over in the Middle East,” Aunt Tillie replied, already bored with the conversation. “If that’s the case, don’t worry. I’m sure I can handle them.”

“ISIS, not oasis,” I corrected.

“It’s worse than that,” Mom said.

What’s worse than that? “Mom, you’re starting to worry me,” I said. “What’s wrong? Who’s coming?”

“Aunt Tillie, you’re really not going to like this,” Mom said.

“Then you should’ve told them they can’t come,” Aunt Tillie replied. She wasn’t showing signs of being particularly bothered by Mom’s worrywart nature. “Stop being dramatic. Who is it?”

“Aunt Willa and Rosemary are coming to town for the festival, and they’re staying here,” Mom said. “I felt caught and I told them it was fine. I’m sorry. I”

For a moment, it was as if all of the oxygen had been sucked from the Earth’s atmosphere and we were about to implode. Then Aunt Tillie broke the spell and erupted.

“Over my dead body!”

Chapter 2

“Aunt Tillie, you need to calm down.” Mom was atwitter with nervous energy. “Pitching a fit won’t help matters.”

“Says you.” Aunt Tillie stalked toward Mom, but Landon snagged the back of her shirt and hauled her back before she could get close enough to slip her hands around Mom’s neck and start squeezing.

“Tell me why this is such a big deal,” Landon instructed, refusing to release Aunt Tillie’s shirt even as she bucked and yanked against his efforts.

“Let me go!”

Landon ignored her. “Is this the same cousin and aunt we met in the horrible fairy tale world?”

I nodded. “Aunt Willa is Aunt Tillie’s sister.”

“She’s the devil’s seed!” Aunt Tillie howled. “I can’t believe you invited that woman to my house!”

“Aunt Tillie, she asked.” Mom couldn’t stop fidgeting. “She was very pleasant on the phone. She said she wanted Rosemary to see Hemlock Cove – although she keeps referring to it as Walkerville – and I didn’t see the harm.”

“You mean you were spineless and refused to tell her where to stuff it,” Aunt Tillie countered, furious as she finally managed to yank her shirt from Landon’s grip. “I’m going to smite her to within an inch of her life.”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort,” Mom argued, regaining some of her composure. “Aunt Willa and Rosemary are taking only one room. That’s all we had. I hoped the idea of sharing a room would be enough to dissuade her, but it wasn’t.

“It doesn’t matter, though,” she continued. “We have other guests at the inn. You cannot pick a fight with Aunt Willa when we have guests. I won’t allow it.”

Aunt Tillie rolled her eyes. She wasn’t afraid of my mother. Well, she wasn’t afraid of my mother most of the time. My mom is terrifying in her own right when she wants to dig in her heels. Aunt Tillie suddenly becomes judicious in picking her battles when that happens. I had a feeling she was going to pick this battle to win.

“What’s going on?” Thistle asked, popping through the open doorway with her boyfriend Marcus close on her heels, the sun glinting off her purple hair. “What did Aunt Tillie do now?”

“Listen, fresh mouth, this has nothing to do with you, so you’d better shut it,” Aunt Tillie snapped.

Thistle made a face. “Who slipped meth in your Cheerios this morning?”

“Aunt Tillie just found out that Aunt Willa and Rosemary are coming for a visit,” I explained, leaning into Landon as he slipped an arm over my shoulders. He couldn’t fathom why everyone was freaking out, but he knew when the Winchester witches were about to run off the rails and he was already preparing himself. “They’re going to be here for ten days.”

“Oh, gross,” Thistle said. “Well, I take back what I just said. I’m with Aunt Tillie on this one.”

Mom scowled. “Since when are you on Aunt Tillie’s side? After she cursed you into the book, you vowed never to be on her side again.”

“Things change,” Thistle replied dryly. “I can’t stand Rosemary. She’s a righteous little snot.”

“She’s not a kid anymore,” I reminded her. “She’s probably a righteous big snot now.”

“Who is Rosemary and why does that name sound familiar?” Marcus asked, his handsome face devoid of the horror infiltrating the rest of us.

“She’s our second-cousin,” Thistle explained. “Her mother, Nettie, is our mothers’ cousin. Her grandmother is Aunt Tillie’s sister. They’re all real jerks. Aunt Tillie turned them into villains in her

fairy tale world.”

“Ah. Now I remember.”

“Now, Thistle, we don’t know that they’re still jerks,” Mom chided. “We haven’t seen Rosemary since she was a girl.”

“Yeah, at the summer camp from hell,” Thistle said. “Do you remember what happened at that summer camp?”

“Yes, and we’re not speaking about it,” Mom hissed. “You’re not helping matters.”

“I remember what happened,” Aunt Tillie said. “I told my sister I never wanted to see her stupid face again. In fact, I’ve told her that so many times I’ve lost count. Still, I was really firm that time. How dare she come back here!”

“You also cursed Rosemary with a spell that made her break out,” Thistle said, smiling at the memory. “I loved that spell.”

“Well, we’ll do something worse this time,” Aunt Tillie said, huffily climbing the steps. “I cannot believe you invited that woman into my house. Don’t you remember what she tried to do?”

“I do remember,” Mom said, choosing her words carefully. “I know you’ve never gotten along with Aunt Willa – and I don’t blame you for hating her – but she’s still family. Have you ever considered the possibility that she might want to make amends?”

“You’re so naïve.”

“Aunt Tillie, I’m sorry you’re upset,” Mom said, changing tactics. “We’re adults now, though. Aunt Willa can’t warp us to her way of thinking. I know you were worried about that back then.

“No matter what – not then or now – could Aunt Willa make us stop loving you,” she continued. “You were always there for us. We’re loyal to you.”

“If you were loyal to me you wouldn’t have invited that hag into my house,” Aunt Tillie shot back. “Don’t kid yourself. She’s not coming back here to get to know you and your girls. I’m sure that’s what she told you, but it’s not true.”

Mom bit her lip and I could tell that Aunt Tillie hit that particular nail on the head with a sledgehammer.

“She’s not coming back because she cares about any of you,” Aunt Tillie seethed. “She’s coming back because she wants something.”

“What?” Landon asked.

“To drive me crazy!” Aunt Tillie flounced into the inn, a little thought bubble filled with mayhem practically dancing over her head.

Landon glanced at me. “I think that’s going to be a short trip.”

“I think you’re right,” I muttered.

“SO, do you want to tell me what all the hoopla is about?”

Landon held my hand as we leisurely strolled back to the guesthouse after an uncomfortable dinner. Since most of the newly arrived guests heard all about Winchester dinner theater from earlier guests, they thought Aunt Tillie’s attitude was part of the show. That was the only bright spot of an otherwise dismal meal.

“It’s kind of a long story.”

“We have all night, Bay,” Landon replied. “I would like to know what I’m in for since these people are arriving before dinner tomorrow. I have a feeling they’re going to ruin my weekend.”

I frowned. That was another bombshell my mother dropped right before we left The Overlook. We were expected to be at the inn before breakfast the following morning to discuss how to welcome Au

Willa and Rosemary with fake open arms. Apparently my mother and aunts were going all out to make them feel welcome.

“I don’t really know Aunt Willa,” I admitted. “I think I’ve seen her three times my entire life – and not one of those visits was pretty. She and Aunt Tillie truly hate each other. It’s not like when Clove, Thistle and I swear that the others are dead to us when we’re upset. This is true hate – actual malevolence.”

“Is Willa older or younger?”

“She’s the youngest in the family,” I replied. “If you believe Aunt Tillie, that’s why Aunt Willa acts entitled and is altogether unbearable.”

“Do you believe that?”

I shrugged. “I don’t remember her being nice,” I answered. “She’s kind of one of those relatives who lives in memory shadows. I remember her face ... and I remember her being cold ... but I really don’t have distinctive memories of her.”

“Why does Aunt Tillie hate her so much?”

“There are a lot of rumors regarding that,” I said. “According to Aunt Tillie, her sister came out of the womb warped and depraved. Apparently Aunt Tillie and Aunt Willa always fought, and my grandmother was the buffer between them.”

“I was under the impression that your grandmother and Aunt Tillie were close.”

“They were,” I said, stopping along the path that led to the guesthouse to stare at the sky. It was a beautiful night, even if the humidity from earlier remained. “My grandmother was the middle child, so she was kind of the peacekeeper. She and Aunt Tillie were close. I guess she refused to completely cut Aunt Willa out of her life like Aunt Tillie did, though. She was convinced that one day they would all be one happy family.”

“That doesn’t sound likely given what I’ve heard about Willa,” Landon said. “When did things really go sour?”

“If you believe the family gossip – which I kind of do in this case – Aunt Willa went after Uncle Calvin when Aunt Tillie was dating him,” I explained. “Apparently she threw herself at him, and Aunt Tillie caught her.”

“And she’s still alive?”

“I think it got ugly,” I replied. “Aunt Willa left Walkerville – which is what Hemlock Cove used to be known as – right after graduation. She met some guy and married him. To this day I’ve never met him. She had one daughter named Nettie, and she spent most of her time south of us.

“When we were growing up, Aunt Tillie would tell us horrible stories about Aunt Willa,” I continued. “We thought she was some sort of boogeyman until Mom set us straight and told us she was just a really terrible person and not some magical monster as Aunt Tillie painted her.”

Landon snorted. “Aunt Tillie does have a way of making people see what she wants them to see.”

“I think the real problem was that Aunt Willa showed up and tried to take Mom, Marnie and Twila away from Aunt Tillie after my grandmother died,” I said. “Mom was already an adult and Marnie was really close to adulthood. When Aunt Willa realized she could never get her hands on them, she threatened to go after Twila.”

Landon was taken aback. “She wanted to separate them right after their mother died?”

I nodded. “She threatened to take the matter to court, but Aunt Tillie warned her that Grandma tied up all of their inheritance in trusts that no one could touch. They didn’t get the money until they were twenty-five.

“Aunt Willa thought Aunt Tillie was getting money for taking them in,” I continued. “When she found out Aunt Tillie got the property instead and planned to use her own money to take care of everyone, she immediately backed down and left Twila with Aunt Tillie.”

“So she just wanted the money?”

“That’s what it seems like,” I replied. ~~“Through the years we saw Aunt Willa a few times. Aunt Tillie banished her from town the day she tried to take Twila. When she did show up, it was always uncomfortable.”~~

“I’m surprised Aunt Tillie didn’t curse her back then,” Landon mused. “I don’t understand why this woman would want to come back, knowing how everyone here feels about her.”

“I’m sure she has an ulterior motive,” I said. “We just have to watch her and see what it is.”

“Tell me about Rosemary,” Landon prodded. “You seem to really dislike her.”

“I’ve only met her a few times, too,” I answered. “She was a complete and total brat. We saw her at a few family reunions that were held away from the inn, and then Aunt Willa forced her on us one summer at camp.”

“I went to summer camp once,” Landon said. “I don’t remember it being much fun even without horrible cousins to complicate things. All I remember are mosquitoes and sleeping in really dirty cabins.”

“Rosemary teamed up with Lila,” I explained. “They ... went after me because I was always such an easy target back then. I could see ghosts, and they thought I was being weird.”

Landon brushed a stray strand of hair from my face. “I like that you’re weird. You don’t have anything to be ashamed about there. Stop worrying about stuff like that.”

“Well, Aunt Willa doesn’t like weird things and she certainly doesn’t like any talk about us being witches,” I supplied. “Aunt Tillie is going to be at her witchy worst, because she knows it will drive Aunt Willa crazy.”

“I’m fine with that,” Landon said, this thumb grazing my cheek as he studied me. “I hate to say it – and I’ll probably deny it if you ever tell anyone – but I’m with Aunt Tillie. Why would your mother let these people come to the inn, knowing how everyone feels about them?”

“I don’t know. I think ... I think my mother doesn’t want to admit that some people are truly evil,” I replied. “In her mind she probably thinks she can do the one thing my grandmother always wanted to do.”

“Reunite her sisters?”

I nodded.

“Bay, sometimes people don’t want to change,” Landon said. “It sounds as if your Aunt Willa is one of those people. You need to be careful. If she really is up to something”

“I know,” I said, filling in the silence. “I wouldn’t worry too much about Aunt Willa trying to pull a fast one, though. Aunt Tillie will be on her faster than you attack the plate of bacon at breakfast every morning.”

Landon smirked. “Speaking of that”

“Yes, Mom is cooking bacon tomorrow morning,” I said. “Your weekend can start off with a cholesterol-fueled bang.”

“That’s good to know.” Landon grabbed my chin and planted a huge kiss on me, taking me by surprise. “I missed you, my little witch. Let’s go and enjoy the rest of the night together before Armageddon hits, shall we?”

His grin was too cute for words. “What did you have in mind?”

Landon slung an arm over my shoulder as we returned to our walk. “I’m so glad you asked. I’ve been dying to talk about how much I missed you for hours. I’m ready to show you.”

Sometimes he’s really good for my ego, and tonight was one of those times.

Chapter 3

"I smell bacon," Landon said, grinning as we walked into The Overlook's kitchen the next morning.

"I'm just relieved it's not me," I muttered, my mind wandering back to one of Aunt Tillie's curses.

"Not me," Landon said, tickling my ribs. "That was the curse of my dreams."

It wasn't the curse of my dreams, but I couldn't help but giggle. He has a weird way of being able to make me smile – even if I'm expecting the world as I know it to end in a few hours.

"You two look happy," Mom said, lifting her eyes from the hissing frying pan and smiling at us. She's grown fond of Landon, mostly because she believes he's her only shot at marrying me off and possibly getting grandchildren one day. "I'm glad to see someone smiling."

"I'm just excited for bacon," Landon said, sneaking his hand under Marnie's elbow and grabbing a slice from the plate in front of her. Marnie swatted at him, but she didn't put a lot of effort into it.

"Bacon makes everything better."

"I'm going to get you a slab of bacon for Christmas and call it a holiday," Mom grumbled, turning to me. "Are you going to give me crap today?"

I widened my eyes. "What did I do? You were just saying how happy I looked."

"I know you," Mom replied. "Rosemary terrorized you when you were a kid. You can't be happy about seeing her."

"No one is happy about seeing her," Landon supplied, reaching for another slice of bacon. This time Marnie caught him before he could steal his intended bounty. "I'll tell you right now, though, if she's mean to Bay I'm going to be mean to her."

Mom studied Landon, her face unreadable. After a moment, she shuffled closer to Marnie, grabbed two slices of bacon from the plate, and wordlessly handed them to Landon. "I'm pretty happy you're the one who stole my daughter's heart," she said. "Even when you argue with me, you always have her back. I like that about you."

Landon took the bacon and bowed. "You could reward me with a chocolate cake tomorrow if you really feel that way."

Mom smirked. "You have a way about you," she said, shaking her head. "Fine. We'll have chocolate cake tomorrow."

Landon winked at me, content in his victory. "Did you hear that? Your mom is making me cake."

"You're going to need that cake to put up with Aunt Willa and Rosemary," I said, breaking an end off one of his bacon slices and popping it into my mouth.

"I will share just about anything with you," Landon said, shooting me a look. "I draw the line at bacon."

I rolled my eyes. "Well, then maybe I draw the line at sharing my mom's chocolate cake."

"Oh, we both know that's not true," Landon replied, nonplussed. "You like it when I'm all sugared up, because then I have more energy for ..."

Mom cleared her throat, causing Landon to straighten. The more time he spent around my family the more comfortable he became. Sometimes he forgot himself.

"I was going to say that sugar gives me more energy for reading books and taking long walks under the moonlight," Landon said.

Now it was Mom's turn to roll her eyes. "Yes, well, I'll let that one slide today," she said. "I have enough on my plate. Speaking of that, where are Clove and Thistle?"

"They should be here any minute," I replied. "The guesthouse has one bathroom and six people stayed there last night."

“Yeah, we had to conserve water and shower together,” Landon said, winking at my mom and hopping out of the way when she tried to swat him with her spatula. “The others should be down pretty soon.”

“You have a smart mouth,” Mom said, waving the spatula in Landon’s face. “You’re going to want to cut out the sex talk if you don’t want to make Aunt Willa die of a heart attack.”

“I don’t really care what she thinks,” Landon countered. “From what I understand, she’s a horrible woman. I also understand that this ... Rosemary ... was mean to my blonde. I’m not going to put up with that. So if she’s mean to Bay now, I’m going to say something. You’ve been forewarned.”

“Landon, I understand that you want to stand up for Bay” Mom broke off, uncertain. “Actually, I don’t know where I was going with that. Forget what I was about to say. I always want you to stand up for Bay. I would appreciate it, though, if you didn’t do anything until Aunt Willa and Rosemary prove that they deserve it.”

“I can live with that,” Landon said, grabbing my hand. “Come on, Bay. Let’s go see what Aunt Tillie is plotting. I need to know if I should pick up more fire extinguishers in town today.”

We found Aunt Tillie sitting at the head of the dining room table, her gaze fixed on an empty space at the other end. I was pretty sure she was imagining Aunt Willa sitting there and wishing she had the strength to set someone ablaze with the power of her mind. That was one trick she hadn’t yet mastered. Lightning was another story.

“What are you doing?” Landon asked, slipping into the seat next to her. We were early. The other guests were still upstairs. That was probably a good thing.

“I’m debating how I’m going to kill Willa,” Aunt Tillie replied, not missing a beat. “What’s painful but not messy?”

“You realize I’m with the FBI, right?”

“That’s why I’m not going to involve you with my plan,” Aunt Tillie said. “I’m not an idiot.”

“Oh, well, good,” Landon said, shooting me a reassuring wink. He wasn’t worried about Aunt Tillie killing anyone. He was worried about her releasing unholy havoc on Hemlock Cove to prove her dominance, though.

“Aunt Tillie, can I ask you something?”

Aunt Tillie shifted her attention to me. “Don’t worry, crybaby. I won’t really kill her.”

I scowled. I hated it when she called me that when I was younger. It was downright annoying as an adult. “That’s not what I’m worried about.”

Aunt Tillie waited.

“Did Grandma think Aunt Willa was a good person? Is that why she refused to cut her out of her life?”

“Your grandmother was a good person, and that’s why she couldn’t completely cut Willa out of her life,” Aunt Tillie replied. “She ... had a heart of gold. She was the best of us all.”

“Would she have changed her mind if she knew Aunt Willa tried to take Mom, Twila and Marnie away from you?”

“If she knew that she’d have burned Willa’s house to the ground,” Aunt Tillie answered. “Ginger could take a lot. She would not take anyone messing with her girls.”

“Kind of like you, huh?”

“Oh, I’m meaner than Ginger ever dreamed of being,” Aunt Tillie countered. “I loved your grandmother, but she had a weak imagination. I’m not encumbered by that little personality defect. When I kill Willa, it will be inventive.”

“Like what?” Landon asked, clearly enjoying the game.

“Well, I was considering hedge clippers, but that will ruin the carpet if I do it inside, and you know how your mother feels about messes.”

Landon patted the seat next to him to entice me to sit. “You don’t want to do anything that leaves body,” he said. “Try to think of something involving fire.”

“Don’t encourage her,” I warned, settling next to him. “If she thinks you’re on her side, she’s going to play up to her audience.”

“I am on her side,” Landon said. “I don’t like anyone who was mean to you. That includes family members.”

“You put up with Thistle,” I reminded him.

“Yes, well ... that’s sister stuff,” Landon argued. “You guys fight like sisters, and that means low blows land every so often. I’ve learned to live with that.”

Aunt Tillie snorted. “You’re smarter than you look sometimes.”

“Thank you ... I think.” Landon shifted his gaze to me. “Do you have a lot of work to do today?”

“No.”

“How about I drop you at the newspaper and then we get lunch?” he suggested. “I want to stop by to talk with Terry about a few things.”

“It had better not be about my wine,” Aunt Tillie interjected.

“No promises,” Landon replied. “How does that sound, Bay?”

“It sounds good,” I said. “I can finish all my stuff up in an hour or so. Brian wants to have a meeting about some new grand plan he has to boost circulation for *The Whistler*.”

Brian Kelly owned the newspaper where I worked. Other than me, the only other regular staff included a layout person and photographer – and they were part-time. Since Brian’s grandfather left a stipulation in his will that said he couldn’t sell *The Whistler*, he was constantly devising ways to boost circulation and advertising to fatten his wallet.

“I don’t like that guy,” Landon muttered. “He keeps looking at you as if you’re on the menu and he wants to order a la carte.”

“Nice.”

Landon squeezed my hand. “I can’t help it if I feel territorial,” he said. “You’re mine, little witch.”

“Ugh, you two are like a bad romance novel,” Aunt Tillie muttered. “If I’m going to set anyone on fire, it’s you two.”

“Oh, what a sweet sentiment,” Thistle said, breezing into the room with Marcus, Clove and Sam on her heels. “What did I miss?”

“The fact that purple hair went out in the nineties,” Aunt Tillie replied, gracing Thistle with a snarky smile.

“Ha, ha,” Thistle intoned. “I thought we were working together this week since we have a mutual enemy. Has all of that gone away because you’re crabby in the morning?”

“Sit your butt down,” Aunt Tillie ordered. “We need to have a strategy session.”

“Does anyone else think these guys are being overly dramatic?” Sam asked, taking his spot next to Clove at the table. He was the newest member of our little group, thanks to his romance with Clove. He was still getting used to our witchy ways. “These people can’t be as bad as everyone makes them out to be.”

“Have you ever seen *The Walking Dead*?” Aunt Tillie asked.

“Yes.” Sam’s face was neutral, but his eyes glowed with mirth.

“You know the zombies?”

“Are you saying that Aunt Willa and Rosemary are like zombies?” Sam asked. “If so, that means they’re slow moving and we can take them.”

“No, dumbass. I’m saying that they’re like the cannibals who ate that guy’s leg in front of him while he was still alive,” Aunt Tillie countered. Of all the men in our lives, Sam was her least favorite. He’d grown in leaps and bounds in her estimation in recent months, but she wasn’t exactly fond of

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