

THE
LOVEGROVE
LEGACY

A
Breath
of Frost

ALYXANDRA HARVEY



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For my mother. *Je t'aime.*

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Epilogue

Author's Note

Also by Alyxandra Harvey



Breaking into a dead woman's house was easy work since she rarely complained.

Breaking into a dead witch's house was a different matter altogether.

You were as likely to come across some bit of wandering magic as a weeping relative pacing the floor. When a witch died, many of her spells unraveled and the results were unpredictable at best. Moira might get lucky and the house wards would break first. On the other hand, Mrs. Lawton's ghost might push her down the stairs.

She'd have to risk it. One-Eyed Joe wanted what was inside, even if he didn't know it yet. And the old lady's body would be hauled off to the cemetery tomorrow. Moira had no intention of becoming a grave robber.

Moira stayed crouched on the roof next door for over an hour, watching carefully as a household lamp was carried from room to room. The gargoyle on the corner of the Lawton house was draped in black bombazine, like the mirrors inside would be. Mourning extended to all parts of the house, and the ghost was expected to protect its family while the gargoyle slept.

Finally, the lamplight floated upstairs. She waited an hour after it was extinguished, just to be safe. She wished she had Strawberry with her, but her friend was off on another job. And if she took one of the boys they'd want the bigger cut just for being there. Even though Moira had been stealing things to sell at the market since she was nine years old, and some of those boys barely had a year under the belts.

She hopped over the gap between the roofs and slid down a drainpipe to the parlor window on the north side of the building. It was customary to leave it open for the spirit to pass through. Moira didn't mind sharing with a ghost; she was used to sharing the rooftops with vampire pigeons, rats the size of hedgehogs, and Nigel the snorer. She left a muffin on the sill as an offering. Mrs. Lawton might have preferred wine or sweets as many spirits did, but Moira only had one lemon-drop candy left and she wasn't about to give it up for a dead woman with no taste buds.

She wiggled inside, grateful poor girls didn't have to wear corsets, and Madcaps didn't even have to wear dresses. Her trousers were frayed in one knee and two sizes too big, but they were comfortable and allowed her to move in ways that would have snapped the spines of soft aristocratic girls.

The house smelled like whiskey, cheap lamp oil, and a dead body. There was no odor of lemon balm, which was a relief. Warlocks smelled like lemon balm, so she knew for sure that she wasn't stealing from a regular witch. Warlocks just weren't worth the risk. They were ruthless in life and worse in death.

Moira paused, waiting for her vision to adjust to the gloom and assessing her surroundings. The protective eyes painted on the thresholds and over the lintels were draped in black material, just like the gargoyle had been. There was the usual assortment of chairs and trinkets. She didn't know how people lived in such close quarters with so much clutter. She hated the feeling of being inside a building, without a view of the sky or seven different escape routes at all times. Moira's feet burned the way they always did when she was courting trouble. She tried to ignore it, reminding herself that

walls were soft enough to kick through, if worse came to worst.

She knew the upstairs had two rooms and the attic was full of mice. She'd sent her familiar inside earlier in the day, just to be sure. Having a cat as a fetch was infinitely more practical than the wolves and eagles the fancy witches coveted. They might be more romantic than an alley cat, but you couldn't exactly send your wolf-familiar into the body of a real wolf in London to any reasonable purpose, could you? Cats, on the other hand, were everywhere and rarely noticed.

A scrawny russet tabby with a bent ear leaped out of Moira's rib cage. The fiery pinpricks in her heels subsided to a low warning itch. The first time she'd felt Marmalade leave her body, Moira had been thrown up. And then spent the night crying because she thought she was going crazy. One-Eyed John found her and fed her mint tea and told her stories about witches and magic. He'd taught her to avoid the Order and never sell to a warlock without a disguise and that her familiar was her closest ally, literally created out of her own magic.

Marmalade swiped at her leg with a ghostly claw. Blood welled on the scratch.

"You know, Strawberry's familiar is a little white mouse. She brings her flowers." Marmalade knew full well that Strawberry's familiar was a mouse; keeping the two apart was a constant struggle.

Magic clung to the cupboard on the wall and billowed like pink steam out of a teapot. Old lady Lawton was a tea-leaf reader and she'd protected the tools of her trade and the magical artifacts in her home from tampering and theft. Luckily, Moira wasn't interested in those.

She crept forward to the dining table. It was covered in a white sheet on which Mrs. Lawton lay in her best dress. Her gray hair was curled and a silver brooch was pinned to her collar. Moira left the place even though it would have fetched a decent price. It wasn't what she was after and it felt rather rude, considering.

She gently pried Mrs. Lawton's eyelids open. They felt like stiff paper. Her right eye was cloudy and vacant, her left perfectly clear and blue as cornflower petals.

The glass eye of a blind witch three days dead.

She popped it loose, trying very hard not to hear the vile popping sound it made when it came free. She tucked it into the pocket of her striped green waistcoat, refusing to gag.

She placed a coin over the eye socket, as payment. It wasn't stealing if you paid for it. And, if you believed in the old stories, you had to have a coin to pay your way to the other side. She hoped it would appease the ghost long enough for Moira to slip out the window.

It wasn't enough.

Mrs. Lawton's spirit sat straight up out of her body and screeched.

"Thief! Thief in the house!"

"Bollocks!" Moira jumped a good foot into the air and then stumbled back against the wall, gasping. Bloody ghosts. Marmalade hissed, fur rising like a boot brush. When no one came running to investigate, Moira released her breath.

Mrs. Lawton didn't drift forward like pollen or moonlight or any of the things poets claimed. Instead, she skittered over the floor-boards as she slammed into Moira, mouth opening wide to show rotted teeth. Her breath was toads and mushrooms and mildew.

Moira clamped between her teeth an iron nail she'd dug out of a rafter. The iron helped, but it didn't banish Mrs. Lawton completely. The ghost's hand closed around Moira's throat. Her touch burned even as frost filled the space between them.

Mrs. Lawton shouldn't have been able to do that, even as a recent ghost. There were wards over every London. Locks on mystical gates and portals. Binding spells. The Order.

Mrs. Lawton didn't seem to care for any of those fail-safes.

And for a dead old lady, she packed quite a punch.

Moira's feet felt branded, as if she didn't already know she needed to get out of here. Now. She was weak as boiled turnips. Her vision started to go gray and blotchy.

Marmalade knocked the teapot over. The handle cracked ominously.

Mrs. Lawton turned her phosphorescent head so quickly her neck snapped.

Marmalade batted the teapot as if it were Strawberry's mouse, rolling it closer and closer to the edge of the sideboard. Mrs. Lawton's grip loosened. She ground her teeth so savagely, one fell out and corporealized when it hit the ground.

Marmalade flicked the teapot once more and as it tumbled, Mrs. Lawton lunged for it, momentarily forgetting Moira. Moira scooped up the dead woman's tooth and tucked it next to her glass eyeball before diving out of the window. She scampered up the first drainpipe she found, flattening herself onto the roof to catch her breath. Her black hair tangled around her, catching in the shingles. A neighbor thundered out of his door in his nightshirt.

When Marmalade jumped up beside her, Moira rolled over onto her feet, brandishing a dagger. The cat calmly licked her paw. Moira let out a shaky laugh. "That did not go as planned, Marmalade," she said. "Let's go home."

She walked the ridge like a circus girl, balancing lightly and keeping her chin high. When she reached the edge she turned right, intending to head home.

Pain gnawed at her, as if her boots were full of angry bees.

She stumbled to a stop, cursing. She wanted to go to her favorite summer rooftop made of slate tiles that held the heat pleasantly. There was even a spot of thatch she'd used to plug up a hole that made for a fine pillow. She kept excellent care of the roofs, as all Madcaps did. A leak meant ladders and repairmen and sometimes the Order's Greybeards with their spells and pointy swords. But without a reason to look up, most shop owners didn't have the time to bother, at least in the East End.

It was different in Mayfair, where rooftops were spelled to keep Moira and her kind away and gargoyles crouched, stuffed with magic. Madcaps had long learned the trick of pacifying gargoyles, nothing else. And anyway, Moira preferred the East End. Home was home, whatever it smelled like. And however many hungry, crazy ghosts roamed.

And it was safer here, so long as she kept to the chimney pots and the shingles. Mrs. Lawton couldn't follow, not while her body still lay in state. And the other Madcaps left symbols scratched into the tiles, warning of unsteady roof timbers, vermin, Greybeard patrols, and recruiting men. There were even worse than the ladies who came with baskets for the poor and pamphlets about the dangers of living on the street. As if any of the street urchins, Madcaps, or regular orphans ever chose St. Giles or Whitechapel because it was the better alternative. Just ask her brother.

Before the Order had caught him.

A flock of vampire pigeons circled overhead, sending children below shrieking for cover. Moira wasn't worried. Madcaps never fretted over the pigeons. They'd trained them with bloody leavings from the butcher stalls at Leadenhall market. It was one of their few weapons against the Greybeards and even occasionally, the ordinary night watchmen. London was not kind to the poor or the supernatural.

She preferred to control her own life even if it meant sleeping wrapped around a chimney pot for warmth. Dirt and cold rain didn't scare her, not like having her essence trapped in a Greybeard's bottle.

And she didn't particularly like Mayfair, which was fine since its inhabitants loved it enough for everyone.

Which made her wonder why she was now running *toward* it.

But she'd learned, even before Mrs. Lawton, that when the bottoms of her feet itched the way they did right now, she ignored them at her peril. The last time she'd ended up dodging the nightwatch for an hour and a half after she was caught with a handful of stolen pocket watches. The Order might claim you, but the nightwatch could clap you in irons and shuffle you into a poorhouse. She shuddered at the thought and kept running, her trousers rolled above her ankles and her boots marked with sigils for speed. She stayed well south of Newgate prison, raced past courtesans waiting outside the theatres on Drury Lane and along the Strand to Pall Mall.

All because her toes itched.

The alleys between buildings widened. She left the shops that tilted together like dandies holding each other up after drinking themselves sick. She ran until the worn shingles turned to copper flashing and marble columns. The clubs and shops were made of white stone, gleaming like bones. She wanted to stop on one of the flat roofs to catch her breath, but pain stabbed up her ankles and all the way to her knees when she paused too long.

It only receded when she kept moving, kept running, and only toward Grosvenor Square of a few places, all mansions and columns and balconies. A single mansion could have taken up an entire block in Whitechapel. They were fit for aristocrats and royalty, not Madcap girls dressed as boys with pockets full of stolen goods. The gargoyles became elaborately carved art in rose-colored stone and marble, not river clay fired in a coal grate. They still stank of magic though, that curious mixture of fennel seeds and salt.

She kept running, though she didn't know why.

Until she turned around.

She slid down the pitched roof of a window overhang and dangled off the edge, her fingers cramping as she struggled to hold on. Not precisely an improvement.

But what could you expect from magic that made your feet itch?

The sigils painted on her boots gave her cat's feet on the rooftop, but they weren't enough to make her fly. Not only were her arms screaming, but if someone happened to look out of the window, she'd be hauled off to prison as a housebreaker. Gritting her teeth, she swung herself like a church bell, back and forth, back and forth, until she'd gained enough momentum to let go. Flying, it turned out, felt a lot like falling. She hit the steep roof of a stable, landing with a painful thud that made her wince. The neighbor's poodle began to bark.

All around her came the cracking of stone and the splintering of shingles. She heard it even over the clatter of carriage wheels on the street below, the restless horses in the stable, and an orchestra playing music for the fancy folk. They danced while overhead, the magic wards they didn't even know protected them, broke.

Gargoyles of all shapes and sizes, all sneers and smiles, deserted their posts. A few crumbled to dust but most—too many—launched off roof points, dormer windows, and rain spouts. They took to the air, the stretch and flap of their wings leathery and brittle. They cast off pieces of shingle and stone all over London. Moira had never seen anything like it.

With the gargoyles gone, the rooftops weren't safe.

London wasn't safe.

Part 1

Untested

Chapter 1



It was the most boring event of the Season.

Emma was promised dashing young gentlemen in starched cravats dancing until dawn, and kisses in dark gardens. Instead, there were only whiskered old widowers in creaking stays who smelled like lavender water and arthritic cream, and more wall-flowers than seats. As if being a wallflower wasn't bad enough, being forced to stand in uncomfortable shoes that pinched while debutantes cast her pitying glances—and the few young men cast her none at all—was so much worse.

She longed for the forests of Berkshire and the stars overhead. She stifled a yawn since her chaperone, Aunt Mildred, would lecture her all the way home that yawning was neither pretty nor polite behavior. Neither was tapping one's foot to the music, eating too many pastries off the buffet table, or laughing loudly. In short, anything remotely amusing. Worse yet, Gretchen was hiding in the library and Penelope was in the garden with the very handsome and muscular Mr. Cohen. Penelope somehow managed to consistently flirt with social scandal and skip away unscathed. But that left Emma alone, once again.

If only Lord Durntley would trip on his way to ogle Lady Angelique's bosom. If only he'd crashed into the footman and toss the tray of custard tarts so it could land on Lord Beckett's abysmal toupee.

If only something *interesting* would happen.

She leaned against the wall, even though young ladies weren't supposed to lean, slouch, or otherwise bend. With nothing left to distract her, she took the small bottle out of her reticule, winding the ribbon around her finger and letting the candlelight shine through its murky depths. It was rather strange-looking to be jewelry and didn't appear to contain any kind of perfume Emma would even want to smell, let alone smear on her wrists, but it was the only thing she had of her mother's. She carried it as a sort of talisman.

She'd only actually seen Theodora Day, Lady Hightower, three times in her entire life. Three identical Christmas mornings at their country estate, chaperoned by the housekeeper, five footmen, and a great-uncle she hadn't seen since. Each time, her mother sat in a chair by the window, staring into the woods, pale as the snow outside. She hadn't even blinked when Emma approached to sing her carol. She never spoke, except to scream the one time Emma tried to hold her hand.

Four debutantes drifted Emma's way, giggling and trailing chaperones and admiring younger sons of earls and viscounts. "Lady Emma," Daphne Kent simpered formally, even though their families were friendly and they'd known each other since they were children. Now that they were out of society, they were meant to acknowledge each other with long boring titles and curtsy and talk about nothing at all. "What a unique bauble." Her eyes sharpened. Emma had no idea why. She'd never been interesting to Daphne, and likely never would be.

The other girls, Lady Lilybeth Jones, Lady Sophie Truwell, and Lady Julia Thorpe curtsied in greeting, perfectly in unison. They wore identical white dresses, ornamented with beaded ribbons and ostrich feathers in their hair. Emma curtsied back, barely stopping herself from rolling her eyes. Gretchen wouldn't have stopped herself at all.

"Isn't it just a lovely ball?" Sophie smiled. "I vow, I've never seen such beautiful roses." There were enough yellow roses in the ballroom to sink a ship. Their scent mingled with perfumes, ha-

pomades, and the melting beeswax from the candles.

Emma stifled a sneeze. "Lovely," she agreed.

"Did you hear? Belinda has had an offer already!" Lilybeth squealed as if she couldn't help herself. "From Lee Hartford!"

Julia glanced away, mouth tightening. "She's only sixteen."

"Don't be jealous," Daphne said. "You'll get your chance. Anyway, he's only a baron's second son. Your father should look higher."

Lilybeth tittered. Sophie looked sympathetic. Emma just blinked. It was as if they were speaking a foreign language.

"Pardon me," Julia murmured before walking away, the pearls in her hair gleaming. Her hands in their elbow-length gloves were fists at her sides.

"Never mind her," Daphne confided. "She's quite desperate. She fancied herself in love with Lee Worse, she fancied him in love with her."

"You're positively wicked," Lilybeth said.

"Hush," Sophie added. "We'll be overheard."

Daphne, for all her fluttering eyelashes and simpering smiles, looked smug. Until she realized the young men were watching, and then she blushed prettily. Emma felt bad for Julia. The other girls turned to look at her expectantly. She didn't know what to say. She didn't want to get married. She didn't want to poke fun at others to be noticed. She didn't want to wear white dresses, as expected of all debutantes in England. She simply didn't fit. She never had.

"I think Julia's very nice," Emma said finally, just to fill the silence.

Daphne shook her head on a sigh. "Let's go, girls," she added, pityingly. They moved off like a flock of geese, whispering and giggling. One of their beaux trod on Emma's foot as he hurried to follow and didn't notice enough to apologize. Emma gave serious consideration to tripping him. Especially when he jostled her hard enough to make the ribbon slip off her wrist.

The perfume bottle fell to the floor. It broke in half, leaking thick fluid that smelled like rot and roses. A crystal bead rolled out, coming to a stop against her foot. She stared down at it, annoyed. "That was my mother's," she snapped, but he was already gone.

She bent to gather the pieces. One of the shards sliced into her left thumb, drawing blood through the thin silk of her glove. Around her, a country dance was in full swing, polished shoes squeaking and skirts flouncing. Aunt Mildred searched the floor for her and her cousins. If Emma crossed the room in order to make her way to the library to hide out with Gretchen, she'd be caught. She needed a quiet corner. For some reason, holding the broken pieces of her mother's perfume bottle made her want to cry.

She eased backward until she was mostly hidden by the potted palms. She slid along the wall until she came to the nearest doorway and then stepped into the relative peace of the hall. A silver candelabrum filled with beeswax candles burned on a marble table. The soft, humid scent of orchids and lilacs drifted out of the conservatory. She pulled off her stained glove so as not to instigate one of her aunt's mind-numbingly dull lectures, and practically dove into the indoor garden.

Extensive windows and a curved glass ceiling held in the warmth and moisture of hundreds of flowers. The marble pathway wound around pots of daffodils, lilac branches in glass vases, and banks of lilies pressing their white petals against the windows. She tried to see the stars through the ceiling but mist clung to the glass, obscuring the view. Instead, she contented herself with wandering through the miniature jungle, listening to the faint strains of a waltz playing from the ballroom.

It wasn't all she heard.

The soft scuff of a shoe had her turning around, frowning. "Is anyone there?"

~~She thought she caught a shadow, but it was gone before she could be sure. It wasn't the first time since her coming out that she'd thought someone was watching her. Only it didn't just feel like being spied on.~~

It felt like being hunted.

It made no sense. Who would bother to spy on her? She was the seventeen-year-old daughter of a earl. She was barely allowed to visit the chamber pot without a chaperone. Nothing interesting ever happened to her.

Shivering, she reminded herself not to be a goose. There were a hundred reasons why someone would walk through the garden room and not want to be seen. Like her, they might be hiding from a chaperone. Or more likely they were looking for a private place to steal a kiss. That was why there were so many strict and tiresome rules about proper behavior; no one wanted to follow them in the first place.

Thumb throbbing and still holding what was left of her mother's keepsake, Emma forced herself to go deeper into the scented shadows. If only to prove to herself that she wasn't one of those girls who were afraid of every little thing.

Although sometimes, fear was the only logical response.

And not only because the ground lurched under her feet, as if it had turned into the deck of a ship in a storm. She grabbed the nearest table to steady herself. Pots of orchids rattled together. The room lurched again, making her belly drop. Her ears popped. A vase of calla lilies tumbled to the polished floor and shattered. She felt as if there was ice melting off her, or invisible chains falling away. It was the strangest thing.

But still not as strange as a girl stumbling out of the leaves, covered in blood.

Chapter 2



She crumpled before Emma could reach her.

The girl's brown hair fell in ringlets out of its pins, dragging on the ground. Her eyelids fluttered. Emma thought her name was Margaret, but couldn't recall for certain. They'd made their curtsies to the queen together last month, wearing ostrich feathers and ridiculous court-ordained panniers.

Now she was wearing blood.

Emma dropped to her knees beside her. "Where are you hurt?"

Margaret moaned, managing to open her eyes. "I don't know." She jerked suddenly and began to weep. "Feels like the time I fell out of a tree when I was little. Broke my collarbone."

Emma gingerly pushed her hair off her shoulder, wincing at the bump protruding under Margaret's pale skin. "You've broken it again. The earthquake must have knocked you off your feet."

She shook her head. "No, there was ... can you feel it? It's so cold."

Pain must be confusing the poor girl. And no wonder. Blood filled the hollow of her cracked collarbone and dripped down her arm, soaking into her gloves. It looked worse than it had just a second ago. "I'll get help." Emma leaped to her feet.

She rushed down the path, clutching the hem of her gown so it wouldn't trip her up. "I need a doctor," she called out, sliding the last few feet along the slippery flagstones. She could hear agitated voices in the ballroom. "Someone help—" She crashed into a man just inside the door, partially obscured by ferns. He caught her in his arms, steadying her.

"Not that way, love. The tremor knocked a candle into the curtains. Ballroom's on fire."

She recognized the voice and stifled a groan. "Not you," she muttered.

Anyone but Cormac Fairfax, Viscount Blackburn, heir to the Earl of Haworth.

They hadn't said more than a word to each other in months, not since that night in the gardens when he'd kissed her. The next week he'd gone away to school and refused her letters and turned away whenever she entered the room.

She still had a fierce desire to kick him.

He'd recently turned nineteen, and was tall with strong shoulders under his navy blue coat. His cravat was simply knotted and blindingly white under a severe jawline. His dark hair was tousled, and his eyes narrowed with disgust. She'd hoped he'd gotten ugly since she'd seen him last, at Lilybeth's dismally boring birthday celebration.

No such luck.

He was just as handsome, just as lean, but the edge of danger was new. She wished it wasn't. He raised an eyebrow and looked ready to make some pithy comment when he noticed the blood on her thumb. He seized her wrists. "You're hurt."

She squirmed in his grasp. "I am now," she said, trying to break free. "Let go."

He was too busy staring in horror at the broken perfume bottle she was clutching. She had to admit the odor was unpleasant but it didn't deserve that kind of reaction, surely. Especially not with wisps of smoke starting to drift out of the ballroom behind him.

"Where did you get that?" he asked, oblivious to the danger.

“Never mind that,” she snapped. Didn’t he know how fast fires could spread? “There’s an injured girl back here. We need to get her out.” She yanked out of his hold, throwing him a dark glance over her shoulder. “Are you coming or not?”

He followed, grim-faced as the corridor filled steadily with smoke. The flickering of the fire in the ballroom seemed to have a curious violet hue. She thought she smelled lemon balm and fennel seeds.

Margaret had managed to push herself up into a half-sitting position. Her cheeks were clammy, her eyes red with tears. “I smell smoke,” she said, coughing.

“It’s all right,” Emma said with more confidence than she felt. “We’ll get you outside and with a little the smoke someone’s already fetching a doctor, I’m sure.”

“What’s your name?” Cormac asked.

“Margaret York.”

“Gently then, Margaret,” he murmured, bending to scoop her into his arms. She gasped when the movement jarred her collarbone. “Sorry, not far now.” His comforting smile died when he glanced at Emma. “The door,” he snapped.

She yanked it open, glaring back at him. If he hadn’t been holding an injured girl, she might have thrown a potted orchid at his head. He carried Margaret outside, laying her carefully in the grass. He took off his coat and placed it over her for warmth.

Smoke crept out of the ballroom windows like dark snakes. The lawns were crowded with frantic guests. A gentleman in old-fashioned buckled shoes fainted. Footmen raced about, opening doors and sweating under their powdered wigs. The light was too bright at the windows, the smell of scorched silk wallpaper and paint wafting out. More footmen raced from the kitchens with buckets of water.

“I have to help with the fire,” Cormac said to Margaret. “But you’ll be fine.” He turned to Emma. “Can I trust you not to get into any more trouble?” he asked acidly. She’d never seen him with this temper. He was usually draped over some girl or another, smirking.

They both watched him go, his white shirt tight over the muscles of his arms and back.

“He’s divine,” Margaret murmured.

“He’s a prat,” Emma returned. Margaret just smiled. “I have to make sure my cousins are out,” Emma added. “And fetch that doctor for you. Will you be all right here?”

“As long as I don’t move,” she assured her through gritted teeth.

Emma went right through the hedge, not bothering to go around it. She found Penelope standing on a bench by the fountain looking disgruntled. Mr. Cohen was nowhere to be seen. “Have you seen Gretchen?”

Penelope shook her head. “I was looking for you.”

“She’s probably still in the library then.” They went around the side of the house. Gretchen was always in the library. Not because she loved novels the way Penelope did, but because it was the only decent place to hide. She loathed these affairs and when she couldn’t avoid them, she snuck away as soon as she could.

“I hate this ball,” Penelope muttered, sounding more like Gretchen than herself.

Emma cupped her hands around her eyes, peering through her reflection into the shadowy rooms of the Pickford mansion. Penelope climbed into the bushes and did the same. The bite of smoke covered the usual smells of Mayfair: horses and roses. “I’ve found her.” Emma tapped on the glass.

On the other side, Gretchen poked her head around a bookcase, frowning. She appeared to be holding a pink dog. She pulled open the window. “What on earth are you doing out there?”

“Didn’t you feel the tremors?” Emma asked.

“A few tremors require you both to stand in the rosebushes?”

“The house is also on fire,” Emma added. “You might have noticed?”

“It is?” Gretchen sniffed deeply. A warning bell rang from the front door, alerting the watch and the neighbors. If the wind picked up, the fire could spread throughout the city, ravenous and pitiless. Gretchen handed the dog to Emma, before hiking up the hem of her ball gown and sliding out of the window. Beside her, Penelope raised her eyebrows. “What is that? Candy?”

“It’s a dog.”

“If you say so.”

Gretchen patted it absentmindedly. The dog licked her nose frantically. “I don’t have biscuits,” she said. “You look like a tea cake. Honestly, I’m embarrassed for you. And I hope you bit Lady Pickford for doing that to you,” she said conversationally.

Smoke drifted between the trees. “If only it would rain,” Emma said.

The sky opened overhead like a broken water jug. Rain pattered over the roof, soaked their dresses and tangled their hair like seaweed. In moments, the gardens were a maze of ruined silk, mud, and slippery stone. A balding duke slid on his perfectly polished shoes right past them and into a hedge. A dowager who usually limped on a diamond-studded cane gathered up her hem and darted over the lawn, her wrinkled knees bare. Prim Aunt Mildred was shouting something about the apocalypse. Footmen passed buckets to one another, emptying the ornamental pond.

“Doesn’t this seem rather odd?” Emma asked, frowning. Earthquake, fire, Cormac. Something wasn’t right. She worried at it like a loose tooth.

Gretchen snorted. “I’m holding a pink dog. Odd doesn’t quite cover it.”

“Daphne just fainted,” Penelope pointed out, crossing her arms so her dress wouldn’t cling to her figure. Her grandmother would never forgive her the impropriety. Her parents wouldn’t care; they rarely came out into society. The other fashionable girls in their thin white gowns were soaked through, corsets, ribbons, and legs outlined in great scandalous detail. A young lord tripped over his own foot when he turned and saw through Emma’s wet dress. Penelope shifted to cover her, glowering at him so fiercely he hid behind a tree.

Gretchen tilted her head as chaos continued to boil around them. “Daphne is playacting,” she said dismissively. “And not very well, I might add. Who faints in such a comfortable position? Not to mention she ought to have toppled right into those rosebushes if gravity was at all involved.” She sighed. “And that footman is barely strong enough to hold that kind of bucket. He’s doing it all wrong.” She thrust the wet dog at Penelope. “Here, take the tea cake, would you?” She dashed away toward the struggling footman. “Lift with your knees, not your back, muttonhead!”

Emma watched her go, resigned. Gretchen would now classify this as the best ball they’d ever attended since she’d avoided the actual social gathering in favor of hauling buckets of water and battling a fire. In the rain, no less. Gretchen loved the rain. Emma was less enamored with it. She pushed her soggy hair out of her face where it clung uncomfortably to her forehead. At least it would help stop the fire from spreading. Already it seemed less virulent, its burning jagged teeth easing from bite to nibble.

“I suppose we ought to help,” Penelope said dubiously. She spotted Mr. Cohen cowering under the cover of an elm tree. “That tears it,” she muttered. “Let’s, shall we?”

Emma followed her gaze. “I thought you liked him.”

Penelope glanced away, her cheeks red as berries. “Not anymore.”

She scowled. “What did he do?”

“Nothing. It’s not important.”

“Penelope. I’m wet and cold and perfectly willing to shove him into the shrubbery.”

“He called me fat.”

Emma hissed out a breath. “I beg your pardon.”

“It’s nothing, really.” She forced her voice not to wobble. “He embarrassed me, is all.”

“Think how embarrassed he’ll be when I wrap his smalls around his fat head.”

Penelope, feeling decidedly more cheerful, had to drag Emma toward the burning house, where they stood uncertainly at the edge of a line of shouting men. Someone broke the window from inside the ballroom, glass cracking into the hollyhocks. Smoldering drapes followed, coiling like a smoke-breathing serpent.

“Why does Emma look like she’s swallowed a bee?” Gretchen asked when her cousins pushed the way toward her.

“Mr. Cohen called Penelope fat,” Emma replied.

Gretchen’s smile died. “Did he, now?”

Penelope now felt perfectly vindicated and couldn’t quite recall why she’d let Mr. Cohen hurt her feelings in the first place. “It’s nothing.”

“I hope he wakes up swollen like a balloon,” Gretchen muttered.

While her cousins stewed and plotted painful vengeance involving Mr. Cohen swelling to such proportions that all the buttons popped off his evening wear and he ended up naked in the ballroom, Penelope couldn’t help but admire the parade of half-dressed men under a flash of lightning. “Well, now,” she grinned appreciatively, wounded pride utterly erased. “There should be more fires, don’t you think?”

“What?” The sight of Cormac in his shirtsleeves, the wet fabric clinging to his muscles was particularly distracting. Emma felt compelled to stare, as if under some sort of spell. She blinked rain out of her eyelashes when Cormac went blurry. She had to remind herself that she’d sworn to hate him. She turned her attention back to the buckets sloshing from hand to hand, until her fingers cramped. Smoke stung her eyes and seared her throat.

“And I had no idea Tobias was so well-muscled, did you?” When the rain faded to a patter in the leaves, Penelope pouted. “Drat. What a shame. If we’re not all going to die horribly in flames, I’d rather like to see more shirtsleeves.”

Emma was still wondering why the sight of Cormac lifting heavy buckets and wiping mud off his face made her feel so peculiarly warm. Even her toes in her paper-thin dancing slippers were hot. She must be catching a fever from standing out in the storm. Cold water spilled down her dress but she barely noticed. The rest of her was burning with sweat and screaming muscles. She didn’t look up from the endless parade of heavy buckets until Gretchen came out of a cloud of smoke, grinning and covered in soot and dirt. “Fire’s nearly out.”

The rain started to fall again, the wind pushing it mostly toward the house. The cousins remained relatively untouched, darting under the widespread boughs of an oak tree.

“Should rain be able to do that?” Penelope asked, perplexed. “Not that I’m complaining but . . .” She shook her head. “Do you think someone slipped laudanum in the lemonade? Because this is turning out to be the strangest night.”

The pink dog leaned against Gretchen’s ankles, looking miserable. She bent to scoop him back up into her arms so they could shiver together. The guests became a river of silks and wilted cravats pushing toward the waiting carriages.

“I need to find the doctor,” Emma remembered.

“Why?” Gretchen looked instantly concerned. “Did you burn yourself? You should have left the buckets to me.”

“I didn’t get near enough to burn myself,” Emma assured her. “But a girl was hurt during the tremor. She’s broken her collarbone.”

“I thought I heard someone say the doctor was with the ladies near the hideous cherub statues,” Gretchen said. “They sent someone to fetch him as soon as the curtains caught fire. I’ll get this doctor back to Lady Pickford, after I inform her the fire was no doubt penance for abusing this poor thing with pink fur and ridiculous ribbons,” she added, spotting Lady Clara self-administering smelling salts.

“I’ll get your Aunt Mildred to the carriage,” Penelope added to Emma before picking her way through the wet grass.

Covered in mud and soot, Emma went in search of the doctor. She found him surrounded by pale ladies clutching smelling salts, and a footman with a nasty burn on his forearm. His shirt was charred into tatters. She told the doctor where Margaret was waiting and then returned to join her so she wouldn’t have to wait alone. The main path was currently congested with girls in various states of dismay, both feigned and unfeigned, surrounded by attentive young gentlemen eager to help. Cutting through the garden seemed the path of least resistance.

She really ought to have known better.

She’d already had every indication that the night was an unmitigated disaster. She wasn’t sure what made her assume the worst was over. Chronic optimism, perhaps.

Or chronic madness.

It did run in the family, after all.

Chapter 3



Cormac stalked toward Emma, abandoning a group of soggy men congratulating one another. There was such dark intensity in his chiseled features that she instinctively backed up. She hit the tree behind her but Cormac didn't stop his advance. He was practically pressed against her.

She shifted to move away but he blocked her, wrapping his hand around the branch by her head. "Don't cast any more spells," he said ominously.

The smell of smoke clung to him, just like his soot-stained linen shirt. His cravat had been lost somewhere in the mud. She could see a tarnished silver chain around his neck, the pendant tucked under the folds of ruined fabric. She was suddenly viciously curious as to what it might be. She frowned at him. He didn't deserve her curiosity. She had to remind herself of that. Sternly. And repeatedly. "What on earth are you talking about?" she asked finally.

He leaned closer, so close she could see the amber in his dark brown eyes and the faint whisper of stubble on his cheeks. So close she couldn't help but remember the long, dark kiss they'd shared, not so long ago.

As if she could ever forget it.

And if he had, she'd smack him.

She might smack him anyway if he didn't stop looming. "Have you been practicing?" she asked with false sweetness. "You've improved."

"Practicing what?" he asked, momentarily distracted. His brow furrowed in confusion.

"Looming."

He muttered something under his breath. "That spell was powerful," he added tightly. The moonlight made his cheekbones sharp as knives. "You ought to show more care. Considering." There was a wealth of implication in that one single word.

Trouble was, she had no idea what he was implying.

"Considering what, exactly?" she asked.

He tossed his wet black hair off his forehead. A drop of rain ran slowly down his aristocratic nose. "Don't play me for a fool, madam."

"Then pray don't act like one," she shot back, thoroughly nettled.

"Remember what I said." He leaned closer still until she felt the brush of his arm on her shoulder. His shirt clung to muscles she tried very hard not to notice. "If you do not wish to be exposed to the Order, you'll take very great care, Lady Emma."

"Cormac?" she asked with exaggerated patience. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Do you think this is a game?"

"No, I—" She had no idea what she'd been about to say. All thoughts were snatched away by a sudden gust of wind. It slapped at them with enough force to wrench them apart. Emma stumbled backward onto the path, trying not to slide across the slick flag-stones. Her dancing slippers may as well have been spun out of sugar for all the protection to the elements they offered. The wind was wrapping itself around her, and pushing at her like an invisible hand. She stumbled, trying to find purchase. Her right foot slipped and she flailed.

“What the hell?” Cormac had her by the elbow. The wind buffeted them both, forcing them away from the crowds. It was colder than any March wind had the right to be. The force of the gust pushed them through the grass and back to Margaret’s side.

Frost clung to Margaret’s hair and eyelashes and dripped off her fingertips in slender, delicate icicles.

“Why is she covered in frost?” Emma asked. Margaret twitched. Emma dashed forward, nauseatingly roiling in the cauldron of her belly. “Lord, don’t—”

She died before Emma finished her plea.

Stranger still, a small white creature made of mist and frost snuffled out of her chest. It was a star-nosed mole. It lifted its head before hopping down to the ground. Then it paused, flashed red, and darted into the shadows. The ice on the girl’s body cracked.

Emma’s brain felt like the honeybee trapped in amber that sat in her father’s library. She eventually opened her mouth to shout for help, remembering how to breathe, and what one was supposed to do when faced with a dead body. Besides be ill all over one’s shoes.

“You saw that, didn’t you?” Cormac asked, his voice dark as the smoke billowing through the broken glass all around them. She could actually feel it, scraping lightly over the back of her neck like teeth. Something deep inside her shivered.

She swallowed. “I think I must be ill.” She hadn’t just seen a star-nosed mole. She was in shock.

His gaze fastened on to hers, as if he’d read her thoughts. “You can tell me.”

She’d forgotten just how persuasive he could be, his eyes fixed on her as if she was the only girl in the world. As if she mattered. He’d looked at her like that once before.

But she knew better now.

Let him think her mad. It was no doubt why he’d refused to renew his attentions. Someone must have found out about her mother and told him. She’d have suspected Daphne, knowing the other girl had chased after him for years now, but if Daphne had found out she’d have told everyone, including the Prince Regent. “A star-nosed mole climbed out of her chest.”

He nodded, as if she’d confirmed something perfectly sensible.

She stared at him. “Did you hear me? A *mole*, made of *nothing*, climbed out of her *chest*. How is that even possible?” And why wasn’t he more alarmed? Why was he so blasted calm, as if this sort of thing happened to him all the time?

That was not comforting, actually. Not in the least.

The sounds of the agitated guests seemed very far away all of a sudden. “Her parents ... we should ...” She trailed off. “Do something.” Shouldn’t they?

He approached the girl, his jaw clenching when he turned her hand over and saw the symbol. “The mark,” he said softly, stunned. He turned on Emma. “How long did you leave her?”

“I helped with buckets and then went to fetch the doctor.” She rubbed her arms, trying to get warmer. “What does it mean?” she asked. “Do you recognize it?” It looked like a four-petal flower, with the tips unfolding into spirals.

“Yes,” he said darkly. “Emma, this is very important. Forget what you’ve seen here.”

A laugh burst out of her, startled and strange. “As if I could.”

“Hell and damnation,” he snapped when he spotted a footman gaping at the dead girl. It was only a matter of moments before the others came rushing at them out of the damp gardens.

Before she could make a sound, Cormac’s hands clamped around her arms, keeping her still.

“What are you doing?”

“Trying to save you,” he answered sharply. His eyes were intense, searching. “Though you see

determined to thwart my every attempt.”

~~That seemed rather unfair, considering all he'd done so far was snap at her for no discernible reason.~~

“Now hide!” he hissed. “Before someone sees you.”

She stared at him. “What are you talking about? I can't just leave.” Though what she could do for the poor girl now, she had no idea.

“If you won't run for yourself, do it for your cousins. They can't be seen here any more than you can,” he insisted.

She gaped at him.

And then he pushed her right into the bushes.



Emma.

Of course, it *had* to be Emma.

People who didn't believe in luck had the luxury of not having decidedly *rotten* luck.

And it only proved what he'd been telling himself all along. He'd made the right decision. If she was going to hate him, at least it would be on his own terms. And if he craved glimpses of her the way the drunks in St. Giles craved cheap gin, she never had to know. It wasn't safe. Every day he served as a Keeper for the Order of the Iron Nail proved it to him.

The fire was out and smoke drifted in eye-stinging clouds, but it wouldn't be long now before someone else noticed the dead girl on the lawn. He pulled a snuffbox from his pocket. Regular gentlemen carried tobacco in them but his was filled with a fine powder of crushed apple seeds, quartz crystal, and mugwort. It was spelled especially for him, to call in reinforcements. When he threw a pinch up into the air, it hung there in direct opposition to all laws of physics and gravity. A glitter of pale-blue sparks arced up into the sky, like a string of stars. They hovered above them, only visible to those who belonged to the Order.

Luckily his partner and friend Tobias was also at the ball, and the first to find him. He stared at the girl. "Who is she?"

"Margaret York. I thought she was injured in the tremor."

Tobias shook his head. "Earthquakes don't cover girls in ice."

"Exactly." He crouched next to her body. "She's covered in bruises. They weren't there half an hour ago. It doesn't make sense."

"Whatever happened, it packs a powerful punch." Tobias pinched the bridge of his nose, as if his head ached. He wouldn't have shown even that hint of weakness to anyone but Cormac. "The air was practically shivering."

He sounded disapproving. Tobias preferred order in all things, and if he didn't become First Legation if not the head of the entire Order, Cormac would eat his hat. Tobias devoutly believed in rules and regulations and strict guidelines for witches. If he hadn't been born a witch himself, Tobias might have become a Witchhunter instead of a Keeper.

Cormac, meanwhile, had joined the Order mostly to thumb his nose at them all for not believing he could succeed.

"Did you see who did it?" Tobias asked. His usually fastidious clothing was marked with soot.

Cormac thought of Emma dropping a witch bottle. "No," he replied. He'd been right behind her when she'd been racing back to Margaret's side. The magical traces on her person wouldn't link her to the victim. Small mercies. He doubted the Order would think so, or even Tobias for that matter. They'd been to school together and Cormac considered him a brother, but there was no denying Tobias was a bit more starched than he was. He didn't have five sisters to plague him, to begin with.

He shook his head over Margaret's broken body. This might have been her very first ball. She certainly wasn't trained enough to use magic to protect herself. The Greymalkin family preferred to drain witches before they learned how to fight back. His fists clenched. "I thought the Greymalkin had gone into hiding," he said, glaring at the unfurled knot on the girl's palm. It was a scornful imitation

of a regular witch knot, which could be drawn with a single unbroken line. The Greymalkin severed the pattern, deliberately unfurling the petal-like points into spirals. “Or were wiped out altogether.”

“Greymalkin? Really?” Tobias took a closer look at her palm. There were few families who rivaled the bloodthirst of the Greymalkin. Stories were told about exploits hundreds of years old that still held the power to terrify. “They haven’t done this sort of thing since my mother was a deb,” he added. Cormac recalled his history correctly, Tobias’s mother also used to hunt them. Tobias swore briefly, tones clipped and icy.

“What do you see?” Cormac asked him. Cormac had charms that allowed him to discern hidden marks but his own magical lineage had skipped him entirely, choosing instead to concentrate in considerable power on each of his five younger sisters. That bad-luck problem again.

Still, clearly he had better luck than Margaret York.

Tobias’s blue eyes narrowed to focus on magical residue Cormac couldn’t see, even with his True Sight charm. “Blood curse, I think. It’s hazy.” Tobias was a brilliant tracker. If he couldn’t pick out the magical traces with any certainty, there were few others in London who could.

Sweat curled Tobias’s hair as he struggled to harness the dark magic swirling around them. Even ungifted as he was, Cormac felt it too. Anyone could. Murder left its own mark, even beyond blood and brutality.

“It was definitely someone at the ball,” Tobias confirmed, leaning against the tree and panting as if he’d been chased down by rabid dogs. His voice was hoarse as he tugged at his cravat.

“That narrows it down to nearly three hundred guests,” Cormac said. “Not to mention several dozen servants.” He rose to his feet. “Some of which are coming this way, even now.”

He jerked his head in the direction of three footmen heading back toward the kitchen with empty buckets. The smoke was no longer thick enough to hide Margaret’s body, or either of them, for that matter. They couldn’t afford to be caught in the web of questions that would inevitably result. They couldn’t even wait for other Keepers to arrive. Once the girl’s family descended, they wouldn’t have the chance to do what needed doing. Magical trails went cold fast. Screaming mothers seemed to make them go even colder, faster.

“I can track it awhile yet,” Tobias said grimly as they stepped back into the concealing shrubbery. By the time they made their way around several statues, a fountain, and clipped hedges, the first cry of alarm rang through the wet and smoky night. They slipped around the guests crowding together, and pressed against a row of harried footmen who were trying to keep them from disturbing the bodies. Whispers of murder caught faster than the fire in the brocade drapes.

The chatter faded in a wave, retreating like the tide, when the rumor of a dead girl was proven to be fact. Someone screamed. A decorated captain who had fought in the Battle of Trafalgar fainted. Cormac stayed near Tobias, all the while searching for anyone who might look guilty, and for Emma’s distinctive red-brown hair.

“There’s magic leading that way.” Tobias nodded to the hydrangeas Cormac had tossed Emma into. “It’s connected to the murder.”

He went cold. “Are you sure?”

“It’s not a clear read,” he admitted, frustrated. “But it’s there. It’s connected magically somehow. Before Cormac could suggest it was a simple matter of magic attracting magic, Tobias turned his head sharply. “Ow, bloody hell.” He massaged his temple. “It’s over there as well. And there.” He sighed. “It’s bleeding into the general panic of the guests.”

“Let’s try past the gates,” Cormac suggested. “If we’re lucky, the murderer has already left the party.”

“He has,” Tobias confirmed. “He’s just gorged on himself on someone else’s power. He wouldn’t

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