

# Chapter One

Bailey's boots sank slightly into the damp earth with each step, crunching through a carpet of dead leaves and brittle twigs. The trail, once clearly marked, had narrowed to little more than a suggestion, just a faint line where the undergrowth hadn't yet reclaimed the path. The pines closed in on either side, their needles slick with morning frost, branches skeletal and clawing. Moss crept up tree trunks in thick green veins, and the cold bit sharper the deeper she went.

She adjusted the strap of her pack, shifting the weight on her shoulder. Her breath curled out in tight white clouds, fading fast in the stillness.

Too still.

No birds. No distant rustle of squirrels or leaves brushing together. Not even the soft moan of wind that usually moved through the forest like breath. Just the steady rhythm of her footsteps, loud, intrusive, like she was walking through a space that didn't want her there.

The silence pressed in, unnatural and complete. It wasn't quiet, it was vacant.

Bailey slowed to a stop, heart thumping harder than it should've been. Her hand dipped into her coat pocket, pulling out her phone. She didn't expect bars out here, but she checked anyway. Still nothing. No signal. No new

messages. Just the same line of blue bubbles on her screen, unanswered.

Weeks of silence. Not even a read receipt.

Bailey slid the phone away with a clenched jaw. Rochelle didn't ghost people. She wasn't the kind of person to disappear without a reason, without at least one cryptic, vaguely threatening voicemail. Bailey knew her better than anyone. Something was wrong.

The forest broke suddenly into a clearing, and there it was.

The cabin.

Tucked beneath the looming shadow of an ancient pine, its needles draping over the roof like a shroud. The wood siding had darkened from years of weather, and the front steps sagged toward the ground. Frost clung to the windows in uneven smears, and the small chimney was cold, no smoke, no warmth, no sign of life.

But it was still exactly how Bailey remembered it.

And yet, something was off.

Her stomach dropped.

The front door hung open.

Not wide, not kicked in, just gently ajar, swinging back and forth with the breeze. The kind of careless open that meant someone left in a hurry. Or never came back to close it.

The lantern on the porch swayed slightly, its flame flickering but still alive, casting warped shadows against the cabin's front wall.

Bailey stopped just shy of the porch, her breath catching.

The air shifted.

It wasn't just cold, it buzzed. There was a charge beneath the surface, a hum she could feel in her molars and in the base of her spine. Her fingers twitched involuntarily, reacting before her brain caught up. The pull of magic, hers, reaching out, brushing against something left behind.

She narrowed her eyes, reaching with her senses.

Residual energy hung thick in the air, clinging to the doorway like smoke. It had the sharp tang of something burned too fast, too hot. Metallic. Wrong. This wasn't just lingering magic, it was stained magic. Something had happened here.

Her hand drifted to the charm in her jacket pocket. A piece of obsidian strung on worn cord, charged by Rochelle herself. It pulsed faintly now, like a warning, or maybe a welcome. Bailey couldn't tell which.

"Rochelle?" she called, voice slicing through the stillness.

No response.

She waited. Heart beating in time with the slow swing of the door. A gust of wind picked up, sharp and sudden, raking across the clearing and sending the lantern into a short spin.

Still nothing.

No footsteps inside. No sarcastic retort. No dry, tired voice telling her she was late, again.

Just the sound of wood groaning under the door and the soft crackle of flame.

Bailey's throat tightened. Every instinct told her to leave. To turn around. That whatever had happened here wasn't finished.

But turning back wasn't an option. Not when it was Rochelle.

She stepped onto the porch. The old boards creaked beneath her weight, announcing her presence like a scream. Her hand touched the doorframe, cool to the touch, tingling with leftover energy. She could feel the edge of the threshold magic brushing against her fingers. Weak, scattered. Like someone had broken through without permission.

"Rochelle," she said again, softer now.

No answer.

She took a breath. Steeled herself.

And stepped inside.

Bailey stepped over the threshold, and the weight of the silence hit her like a wall.

Inside, the cabin looked... untouched. Intact. But something was wrong.

It wasn't a mess, no overturned furniture, no shattered windows, no blood smeared across the walls like in the nightmares she hadn't dared to admit out loud. Everything was where it should be. Familiar. And yet her gut twisted.

The fireplace sat against the far wall, embers still faintly glowing beneath a pile of half-burned logs. A low, steady pulse of orange heat lit the surrounding stones. Not enough to warm the room, but enough to say: someone had been here. Not long ago.

Rochelle.

Bailey's boots thudded softly against the worn wooden floor as she moved further inside. A tea mug rested on the counter, ceramic, pale blue, Rochelle's favorite. Half-full. Still faintly steaming.

The couch had a blanket draped over one end, and an open book face-down on the cushion like someone had just stepped away for a second. A faint indentation marked where Rochelle might've been sitting. The pages fluttered as Bailey passed, stirred by her movement.

She turned in a slow circle, eyes scanning everything.

Candles had burned low on the mantle, wax dripped down the sides and pooled onto the stone. Not decorative ones, either, these were working candles. Ritual-grade. The kind Rochelle only used when she was casting something that mattered.

Bailey crossed the room, her gaze drawn to the small round table tucked near the kitchen corner. One of the chairs had a broken leg, splintered at the base. Not worn down, snapped.

She crouched to examine it, fingertips brushing over the jagged wood. The break was fresh.

A struggle?

No signs of a fight otherwise. But that chair didn't collapse on its own. Rochelle wouldn't have left it like that.

Bailey straightened, hand drifting across the surface of the table. It was cool under her touch, but tingling, almost like static. Her fingers paused.

There it was again.

A hum beneath the wood. Not physical. *Magical*.

She flattened her palm, closed her eyes.

The residue left behind from a working spell was faint, like smoke that had already thinned out. But this wasn't normal fallout. This was cut off, abrupt, jagged around the edges like a spell yanked apart mid-channel.

Too much magic. Too fast. No closure.

Her skin prickled.

Bailey pulled her hand back slowly. Whatever Rochelle had been doing, it hadn't gone the way it was supposed to.

She walked quietly through the space, every step echoing too loud in her ears. Her breathing sounded unnatural in the stillness, like she was disrupting something that didn't want to be disturbed.

The hairs on the back of her neck lifted.

Outside, a faint rustling noise. Not wind. Something softer, like leaves shifting or weight settling just beyond the wall.

She turned sharply toward the window. The curtain twitched slightly from the draft, but there was nothing beyond the glass. Just trees. Just dark.

Probably.

Bailey moved carefully through the open space toward the hallway. Her eyes flicked to the small bookshelf by the door, books arranged in typical Rochelle chaos: thick grimoires stacked sideways next to cheap paperbacks, handwritten journals tucked between crystal jars and dried herbs.

A small sigil was etched into the wall beside the shelf. Bailey hadn't noticed it before. Recent, too. The lines weren't clean. Done in haste.

Protection. But unfinished.

She swallowed hard and reached the end of the hall.

The bedroom door was cracked open.

The light from the fireplace behind her barely reached this far, but she didn't need to see to feel it. The air around the door was wrong. Heavy. Thick, like walking through water.

Bailey raised a hand and nudged the door with her knuckles.

It creaked open an inch more, revealing a sliver of the room, bed sheets rumpled, more candles burnt down on the dresser, shadows stretched across the walls like claw marks.

She hesitated.

Whatever had happened here hadn't left completely. Its presence still hung in the air, watching, waiting.

Bailey tightened her grip on the charm in her pocket, the obsidian stone warm now against her fingertips.

Then she pushed the door fully open.

Bailey moved back to the wooden table, her boots barely making a sound against the worn floorboards. Her fingers still tingled from the residual energy embedded in the wood, too raw to ignore, too loud to walk away from.

She slid her pack off her shoulder and dropped it onto the chair with the unbroken leg. No more hesitating. No more hoping this was something less than what it felt like.

She needed answers.

Bailey pressed both palms flat against the tabletop. The surface was cold, but the magic waiting underneath warmed instantly to her touch, like something recognizing its own. She closed her eyes, exhaled slow, and whispered the incantation under her breath.

“Ostende mihi quae fuerunt. Memento. Revela.”

The words carried on her breath like smoke. A golden light bloomed beneath her hands, soft at first, then spreading outward in a smooth wave across the table. It spilled over the floor, curling up the walls, coating the cabin in a glow that shimmered and pulsed like a heartbeat.

The air rippled, bending like heat above asphalt. The silence fractured.

And then the past returned.

It unfolded in pieces at first, soft shadows becoming shape, color bleeding into form. Ghostlight spilled across the room, reconstructing what had happened only hours ago.

Rochelle sat at the table, exactly where Bailey stood now. Her dark hair was pulled into a messy bun, sleeves rolled to the elbows, a spellbook open in front of her. She flipped



through the pages lazily, sipping from her favorite mug. Her fingers drummed on the table, distracted but calm. The fire behind her burned brighter, alive with warmth.

Then, three sharp knocks at the door.

Rochelle froze.

She didn't call out. Just stared.

Bailey held her breath, watching.

Rochelle stood slowly, her hand brushing over the obsidian charm still sitting on the table. She moved to the door. Opened it.

The vision blurred, movement too fast to follow. A shape rushed inside, a streak of black and motion.

Bailey's stomach dropped.

Cassius.

Tall. Inhumanly still. His pale skin caught the flicker of candlelight. He looked exactly as Bailey remembered, refined, cold, and cruelly beautiful. The moment he stepped into the cabin, the air itself seemed to tense.

Rochelle stumbled back, eyes wide, one hand raising instinctively. Energy crackled at her fingertips.

Too late.

Cassius was already in front of her. He moved like a shadow made flesh, impossible speed, unnatural grace. His hand closed around her throat.

Bailey's fists clenched at her sides. Her body screamed to move, to interfere, but this was a vision. She was a spectator. Nothing more.

Rochelle choked, fingers clawing at his wrist, struggling to form a counterspell. Her lips parted, and a flicker of gold sparked in the air.

Cassius didn't flinch. He just watched her like she was interesting, but not dangerous. Like she was already his.

He leaned in, close to her ear. Whispered something.

Bailey leaned forward instinctively, trying to hear, but the vision muted the words, a deliberate silence replacing them. Whatever he said wasn't meant for her.

And then, just as suddenly, he was gone.

The room emptied. The flicker of golden light collapsed. The chairs stilled. Rochelle's mug sat untouched, steam long gone. The table was bare beneath Bailey's hands.

She staggered back a step, breath hitched, pulse pounding in her ears. The spell had ended, but the feeling remained, cold, sharp, carved into the room like a scar.

"Shit," she whispered, swallowing against the dryness in her throat.

She pressed her palms against her knees, grounding herself. Heart hammering. Head spinning.

Cassius hadn't killed her. He could have, he should have. But he didn't.

He took her.

Why?

Bailey looked around the cabin, the silence now deafening in the wake of the vision. She stared at the door, the same one he'd stepped through like he belonged here.

And that whisper, whatever he'd said to Rochelle right before vanishing, burned in her memory like static behind her eyes.

He didn't just come for blood.

He came for her.

Alive.

That was worse.

Because it meant he had a plan.

And whatever it was, Bailey was already in it.

Bailey stood in the center of the cabin, her pulse still rushing from the vision spell. The air felt heavier now, like it knew something she didn't. She stared at the spot where Cassius had disappeared with Rochelle, her chest tight, hands curled into fists.

Why take her alive?

Cassius didn't take captives. He didn't whisper. He didn't linger. He killed what got in his way and vanished. That was his signature. Clean. Precise. Final.

But this...this was different.

Bailey's fingers drifted back to the table without thinking. The wood was rough beneath her touch, cool again. She let

her hand glide across the surface, pausing when she felt something. A slight ridge. A shift in the grain.

Something was embedded under the finish.

Not an accident.

A spell.

Bailey closed her eyes, focused. She could feel it pulsing faintly, like a heartbeat hidden in the bones of the wood. A message, maybe. Maybe a warning. Maybe a goodbye.

Her voice came low, quiet. "Reveal."

The table responded instantly.

A golden light sparked beneath her palm and spread out, tendrils of magic weaving through the wood grain like ink pulled from a hidden well. Letter by letter, glowing script seared into view, burning just long enough to read.

Bailey... Twelve witches... Seven Days... The Dark Witch... Lucien

Bailey stared, breath caught halfway between her lungs. The words hovered a second longer, then faded like smoke, leaving behind only the rough grain of the table.

Other witches. Maybe more already gone. Maybe more would follow.

And the dark witch, who the hell was that? Rochelle never mentioned anyone like that. Bailey had never heard of a dark witch working with Cassius. He'd always been solitary. Strategic. But never a puppet.

Her stomach dropped.

The full moon.

She stepped back, glancing at the calendar tacked to the far wall. It was still flipped to last month. Rochelle hadn't even marked the days.

Bailey fumbled for her phone, did the math in her head. One week.

One week until the full moon.

Her mouth went dry.

If Rochelle was still alive, she had seven days. Maybe less.

She moved through the room in a blur, grabbing the spellbook Rochelle had left on the couch, flipping through pages in the dim light. Spells for concealment, sigils for protection, counter-curses, all annotated in Rochelle's sharp handwriting. But nothing about Cassius. Nothing about a dark witch. Nothing about what he wanted.

Bailey swallowed down the panic clawing up her throat.

She was going to have to dig deeper. Call in favors. Find the right trail. Because whatever was happening here wasn't random. Cassius didn't improvise.

She needed to move fast.

A twig snapped outside.

Bailey's body reacted before her brain did, every muscle tensing, breath going razor-sharp. She turned slowly, hand instinctively brushing the obsidian charm in her pocket.

The cabin's windows stared blankly back at her. The trees beyond swayed gently in the breeze, branches creaking like

tired bones. She crept to the door, silent, steps light against the old floorboards.

She pushed the door open.

Nothing.

No figures in the clearing. No tracks on the dirt path. Just the flickering lantern still hanging from the porch and the growing dark pressing in at the edges of the woods.

But she felt it.

That prickling awareness between her shoulder blades. The same one she felt in the city sometimes, when eyes followed her that weren't human. When a spell cracked just wrong in the air. When something watched.

She wasn't alone.

Bailey stepped onto the porch, slow and deliberate, gaze sweeping the tree line.

"Come out," she said quietly. Not a threat. Not a plea. Just a truth.

The forest didn't answer.

But it didn't need to.

She knew whoever, or whatever, had snapped that twig was still out there. Watching. Listening. Maybe Cassius. Maybe something worse.

She stayed frozen for a beat longer, heart pounding, magic humming faintly at her fingertips, waiting to be called.

Nothing moved.

And that was somehow worse than if it had.

Bailey turned and stepped back inside, locking the door behind her. For now, she had the message. A direction. A deadline.

Seven days.

Find Rochelle. Stop whatever was coming.

Or lose everything.