

The
WHITE RAVEN

A Novel

Carrie D. Miller



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*To Weeda,
who relit my dormant creativity so many years ago.
I'll never forget that.*



*This book is also dedicated to friendship.
Those that have ended, those that are now, and those that are to come.*

Prologue

CALICO, CALIFORNIA

1886

They are close. I sense their hatred. Though I am prepared, I must force myself to be calm. I do not fear what comes although I know I will be dead soon. Running from this place now is not something I wish to do, nor do I care to fight anymore. I'm ready to seek out a new land, a new time, and to continue on to the next life I am cursed to begin.

My Pyrenees is at attention by my side, hackles raised. "It is time to go, my girl." She whines and lowers her head, her big brown eyes pools of concern. "You go ahead," I say with a smile. "I'll be along soon."

I hear the gallop of fast-moving horses and the shouts of agitated men as they approach my home. The sound of heavy boots bounding onto the porch makes my skin prickle. Torchlight fills the windows and I steel myself. The front door splinters when one of those heavy boots comes through it.

"I knew there was somethin' not right about you." The man in the lead is Morris Stiles, the town's bully. I'm sure he took quick ownership of the lynching party so he could exercise his insatiable need to inflict pain and suffering without the threat of retribution. Not to mention the chance to snare himself a witch.

His face seethes with hostility. The men who crowd into the room behind him wear the same expression. The grin forming on his face as he looks me over is filled with decaying stubs that once passed for teeth. Many months ago, I offered to ease his pain, but was met with the back of his hand followed by a brown, revolting gob of spit aimed at my face.

Life in Calico has been filled with hardships. Each time I felt a modicum of acceptance, someone like Morris Stiles would speak against me. My goats and chickens were taken one by one, and the sheriff was not the least bit sympathetic or helpful in retrieving them. I am not one to back down so I held on, hoping for the relief of simply being ignored.

Now, yet another angry mob is at my doorstep. I know my lover has not had a direct hand in this. I am certain that due to the effects of much drink, his lips recounted events he should have kept hidden. I confessed to him this very morning that I am, in fact, a witch, and his reaction was what I had expected. I am unable to hide my true self for very long, and I am either revealed by my actions or by my simple confession. I will not deceive my lover with lies and trickery. I have told myself time and time again to stay away from love but the pangs and yearnings cannot be ignored, not even by one such as myself.

There is no fear on my face as I glare at the five men who have invaded my little home. Each one averts his eyes. As I inhale, my lungs fill with the thick, heavy air the men brought with them—full of sweat, dirt, whiskey, and anger.

I glower at the still grinning man. “Morris Stiles, you are a fool.” My voice resonates throughout the room. The sound makes the men jump and look around, wide-eyed.

Morris grunts and spits a brown mass onto the floor. “Them’s funny words coming from a whore a’ Satan!”

I scoff. “Tell me one thing, just *one* thing—any of you—that I have done to remotely reflect the work of the devil?” No one meets my eyes and nothing intelligible passes from their lips. Feeling the mood of his men shift, Morris lurches forward.

“Don’t matter! You do things no livin’ person should be doin’. Ain’t but God himself that can mend a broke back, or make Jenny’s fever break even after Doc said nuthin’ could be done. You got wrong in you, woman, and we gon’ fix that!” He lunges for me. Emboldened by Morris, three other men follow. I do not cry out as they grip my arms and shoulders with rough, dirty hands. Morris binds my hands in front of me. The smell of their breath and body odor stings my nose. I am ushered from my home with shouts and laughter. The night is fresh and crisp after the all-day rain. I welcome the clean air into my lungs.

“Why don’t she fight?” someone mutters behind me. “Why don’t she scream? Ain’t never known a woman not to go screamin’.”

“Nother thing that ain’t natural ’bout her. Like them purple eyes!”

I am shoved up onto an old, work-worn mare. A timid voice comes from behind the rest.

“But she made Pa’s leg stop hurtin’. He’s able to get out in the fields again. Ma said it was a miracle and that God was workin’ through her.”

“Shut yer mouth, boy!” Morris slaps the young man hard on the back of the head. He grips the boy by his collar. “Yer Pa’s lucky she didn’t turn that leg into a cloven hoof!” He pushes the boy backward and turns to face me.

“We gonna show you what we do to *witches!*” He throws his head back and hoots maniacally. Several men follow suit; some punctuate their exuberance with gunshots into the air.

The horse underneath me snorts and pulls back from the man holding the reins, jerking her head from side to side. He yells obscenities at her and yanks her bridle. I run my hands along her taut neck and make her listen to my words in her mind. She calms to the song I sing to her.

I am paraded down the main street through town towards the cemetery where the gallows stands. Many outlaws have met their end in this manner, and it appears so will I.

The cemetery is unusually bright this evening with torches on every fence post. They cast a harsh yellow glow onto the weathered wood of the gallows. I am aware of the shouts, calls, and other verbal assaults around me, but I hear nothing except the steady beating of my heart. I focus on controlling my movements and breathing. I will not give them the satisfaction of seeing my fear. While I am not afraid of death itself as I have done it eleven times before, it is the act of dying I fear. But I am pleased by the method they have chosen, for it is a fast end if done properly.

I am shoved up the steps and I will my legs to keep up. I am jerked around into position in front of the freshly tied noose of new rope. Morris presents it and me to the crowd—the ringmaster to this circus.

“Lookie what we got here!” He shoves me forward as if they couldn’t already see me. “By her own confession to Roy Shackelford, she’s a gawd damn *witch!*” The crowd becomes deafening.

I catch the eye of the town preacher at the far end of the massive throng. His face is smug and his eyes dance with spiteful glee. Under my glare, his grin falters and he moves behind a large elderly woman who’s covered herself in a quilt and grasps a wooden cross tightly in her meaty fists.

Morris continues to speak random sentences describing my unnatural and ungodly ways, inciting the crowd further. I look upon their hateful faces, devoid of any resemblance to the humans they were earlier in the day. I pity them all for their small, feeble minds. I become aware that Morris is attempting to put the noose around my neck.

“I wish to speak!” I yank myself away from Morris’s grip. Much to his dismay, I am stronger than I have led him to believe.

I am booed and hissed at, and the crowd calls for my immediate death. I clench my teeth and hiss back at them. “*Silence!*” The force in my voice, the unearthly sound I make, strikes them dumb. “*You will listen.*”

“Almost half of you have benefited from my healing skill.” My gaze seeks those I readily find who have been under my care. Their eyes do not meet mine.

“I have caused no harm to any of you, nor your land, nor your property. I have done only good deeds. Refute that, anyone!” People shift their feet and hide their faces behind those in front of them. The people in the front look at the ground. In the silence, I hear the flapping of large wings and see the heavy flames of the torches dance in the air currents. I cannot see the creature but I know it. I have always known it. A sharp, angry cry from the bird peals out above the crowd. There are gasps and cries of fear; some crouch down as they stare into the black sky. I feel strangely calmed by the bird’s presence.

Morris steps forward to speak, and my thoughts close his windpipe. He grips his throat, his eyes widening. My eyes warn him not to proceed. *I will be allowed to speak, Morris, but you no longer will.*

“As I look at each of your faces, I know none of my words will make the slightest difference. Your minds are small and petty. The only danger here is you. You believe you are ridding the world of some great evil tonight. But all you are doing is worsening your own lives. Ponder that as you lay your heads on your pillows. The evil here is you, for there is none in me.”

I release Morris from where he stands still gasping for air. As he tries to recover himself, he waves several men forward to put me back into place. Coughing is all he can manage as he puts the noose over my head and jerks it tight. When he is close to my face, he spits at me. The smell of it would be nauseating if I could feel anything other than rage.

He shoves each man out of the way so he is the one to pull the lever that controls the trap door upon which I stand. He stumbles and is still sputtering to get words out, but he can only cough and spit. As my last act of defiance, I make those the only sounds that will ever come out of his mouth. My petty revenge makes me smile.

The movement of the well-worn mechanism opening the trap door is loud in my ears. It is all I hear though I’m certain the crowd has reached a frenzied state. For the length of a breath, I am suspended in midair. I look above the crowd as I plummet downward, seeing a flash of white wings in my periphery.

The White Raven

I relax my neck and let the noose perform its job without resistance. I want this over quickly, to have my neck snap immediately. The noose tightens as my weight pulls my body down. The pain is but a quick jolt and then the world is black and silent to me.

Chapter 1

SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS

PRESENT DAY

I wake with a start, gasping. I'm shivering but that's not what woke me. I stay in my cocoon of blankets, eyes wide, searching the room with my Sight. There is nothing abnormal about. The morning sun is trying to fill the room, but the heavy gray clouds are making it challenging. There is a tightness all over my body and pain at my neck.

It is another few breaths before the realization comes that I've had a nightmare. It was one that I've not had in quite some time. The memory of my death in my last life, of being hanged in front of a massive throng of fear and ignorance. Heat surges through me. I am no longer cold; I am livid and I want to scream out the largest clap of thunder ever heard in Salem. For a split second, the stench of Morris Stiles's breath fills my nostrils. My stomach rolls and I fight the urge to vomit.

I close my eyes and visualize a soft, white light enveloping me. It is warm and soothing. It absorbs the negativity that grips my body. It pulls out the anger and pain and holds them fast. The soft light begins to dissolve and then fades away completely. I take a deep breath now without fear of that stench. I imagine warm sunlight on my face, the sound of waves lapping against the shore, the smell of pine trees. After a moment, I am back to myself.

I sense eyes upon me and there is pressure on the blanket behind me. It's a slow movement, creeping quietly towards me. Whatever it is doesn't want to be detected. It moves stealthily, pausing for a few seconds in between movements. I grin at the thought of her assuming she could ever sneak up on me. A warm, soft paw is placed on my cheek, followed by another, then a chin.

Arial gives me a quiet mew. Having sensed the disturbance, she wants to soothe me. She's snuggled her body against the back of my head, purring. She sniffs around my face with her cold nose; it tickles and makes me giggle. The upset has also brought my Great Pyrenees, Maggie, to attention at the side of the bed. She stares down at me with large brown eyes.

"It's all right, baby bear." Seeing my smile, she tilts her head. "Just a nightmare."

I reach to scratch Arial on the cheek. "Thank you both. Your comfort makes all the difference." She meows softly again and moves away as I motion that I want to get up. Maggie moves with me and both follow me to the bathroom.

Closing the bathroom door is pointless. In this old house not many things are plumb anymore. While I've had a good bit restored, the catch on the bathroom door wasn't high on my list. Besides, if I closed it, they would just sit there and snort, woof, meow, and paw at the door. Might as well let them in.

Arial hops onto the pedestal sink for her morning drink. I turn the faucet on out of habit as I walk by. Sitting down on the toilet prompts the Pyrenees to pad over and lie at my feet.

Arial still sits on the sink; she's turned the water off herself. Good cat. I grab her face and kiss her forehead. She disapproves. A stretch comes over me and Arial joins in. While I think she will fall off the sink during her enormous stretch, the graceful cat does not falter.

The aroma of coffee hits my nostrils. I love that smell. "Coffee time," I sing aloud to no one in particular and head down the hall. The coffee is waiting for me. No magick needed—a programmable coffee pot works just as well.

Steaming mug in hand, I sit at the kitchen table and gaze out at the gray morning. Having come to this time seventeen years ago, I couldn't be happier with it. An age that is accepting of witches! Well, more tolerant anyway, more so than I have ever experienced. At least I don't go to sleep each night in fear of an angry mob breaking down my door. Not only does this town accept witches, it celebrates them and makes millions every year in tourist revenue. This was an astounding revelation, to say the least, especially given the town's history.

I traveled a great deal before hearing of a place with the nickname 'Witch City.' Salem turned out to be perfect for me. I searched the tourist shopping areas looking for something that could be both my home and a shop. Despite its dilapidated state, I fell in love with this house the moment I saw it. Built in 1870, the Queen Anne-style home is three stories, dominated on one side by a conical tower complete with a large bay window on the first floor, and a covered porch spanning the rest of the front. It is set back from the street enough to have a decent-sized front yard, which I enclosed with a picket fence.

It had been renovated heavily over the years until it was abandoned a decade ago. My renovations were extensive—not only to accommodate my vision, but also to undo the many poor modifications made by the previous occupants. While the city has strict rules on the matter, I received the necessary permits and approvals very quickly and without incident, thanks to a little magickal persuasion.

It took a great deal of planning, designing, and construction to return this neglected building to something resembling the regal and picturesque home it was originally. The neighbors were not happy with the many months-long mess and construction. I did, however, make it up to them by visiting each one with a basket of homemade treats and coupons for free merchandise as soon as the shop was ready.

I opened the doors to Dovenelle's at the beginning of August. I'm very pleased with the modest but steady traffic the shop has gotten in just these few weeks, even before the official grand opening that I have planned for Samhain, better known nowadays as Halloween. This age and this country celebrate it so differently, so *commercially*, which makes it the perfect day to have the grand opening of a witch shop even though it's over two months away. I'm not concerned with making money at this point; I need to learn the business better as I've never had anything of this scale before. This shop is a far cry from the little stalls at village markets and fairs that I am used to. The customers right now consist mostly of curious locals and the friends of other shop owners who are sent to check out the place.

Since the rumors first snaked along the grapevine that a new witch store was opening, I have been scorned by many of the shop owners in the area. Competition is not welcomed by the various charlatans and tricksters who call themselves witches or mediums or psychics.

All but one turned their backs. Jo Riddle opened her arms to me the instant we met. She is a strong woman with true gifts—one of the very few genuine witches I've discovered in this town. I am fortunate and honored to call her friend.

The shop was the first thing to get set up. I am being lazy with everything else. I had few possessions when I moved in, so I have been buying items piecemeal. My living area has only the bare essentials of furniture at the moment. I shop when I force myself to make the time for it, but my evenings are full of spell work. All the candles, potions, charms, and some of the jewelry I make myself. Each item is imbued with true magic. Some of the personal hygiene products, like lotions and bath salts, I make also. The rest come from trusted suppliers around the world. I have traveled to each one to ensure the people making them are genuine and have good intentions.

My reminiscing has moved me through several cups of coffee. Heading back to the bedroom, I coax my unruly hair into a ponytail. The only change to my appearance I've made in this life was to cut my waist-long hair. How freeing it felt! I've discovered that this age has colored contacts I could use to hide the natural amethyst of my eyes but no, I will not hide myself to be accepted by others.

As I get ready for the day, all of my movements supervised by the animals, I can't help but smile. This is the happiest I've ever been. I have been through so much pain and suffering in my previous lives, but here I feel like I've finally found a place where I belong and can thrive. When the recurring dread and despair that this life will end too soon creep into my mind, I pack them back down tightly. I've set aside all thoughts of my curse for now. I will make this a good life.

Chapter 2

From my bedroom, I hear the front door chimes announce the arrival of customers. After less than a minute, a wave of negativity pulses through me. There is something about them that has made my skin prickle. It has nothing to do with intentions of stealing; it's something darker.

Looking over the balcony from the living room, with Maggie on full alert at my side, I see four teenage girls, laughing and talking loudly. Greeting them cheerfully is Sylvia, Jo's daughter, whom I hired to help in the shop. My eyes are drawn to the brunette of the bunch. I know immediately that she is a descendant of Morris Stiles. My nails dig into the railing to quell the sudden desire to scream. Hot anger flares across my body. While her nose and chin are slightly similar to Morris's, almost nothing else about her appearance is—but there is Stiles blood in her veins, I have no doubt. So it seems the dream last night was prophetic. To what degree it will ultimately be, I cannot imagine. The thought makes me shiver.

I watch her walk through the shop. Sylvia is eyeing the group carefully while still being hospitable. Experience has taught her that teenagers love to shoplift.

The girl is picking through the incense cabinet, smelling every stick and cone, making faces at items she deems smell 'gross' or 'like shit.' At that comment, I clear my throat loudly. All heads snap up in my direction. I raise an eyebrow at the girl, and she sheepishly looks away, quickly putting back the offending incense.

She knows I am watching her so she's politely meandering, not touching or smelling anything now. Out of curiosity, and a certain level of self-preservation, I look deeper into the girl. I sense nothing preternatural about her; she is a typical teenager for the most part. Her home life isn't the best. She has had a hard, masculine-dominated road since her mother died when she was very young. She is thinking seriously of joining the military. She likes to shoot—hunt actually—and she wants to prove to her father that she's tough. Military life will not serve her well. It will turn her into an apathetic person, and she will become hard and cruel—very much like Morris. She already has great prejudices but mostly towards those of a different color, thanks to her father. This girl is smart, though. She does well in school, which is not something her father cares much about. Yet another reason she would choose the military life: a smart girl wouldn't make daddy proud. A girl who is killing people, now that is something daddy could brag about. Despite myself, I pity her.

I will myself calm and start quietly down the stairs. Maggie is in front of me, surveying everything around her. Her heavy paws make no sound on the polished wood steps. I am sure the girl will bolt if she sees me coming, so I wait to approach when her back is turned. She's bent over looking at the charms inside a glass case.

“Good morning, Melissa.”

“Oh!” She snaps up and turns quickly, stumbling on her own feet. “Shit, you scared me!”

She glares hard at me for an instant then looks away. She swallows and adjusts her shoulder bag across her body, clutching the strap tightly. All eyes are upon us now; her friends are huddled together, whispering that she must be in trouble. Sylvia stifles a grin.

Smiling, I extend my hand. "Welcome to Dovenelle's. I'm Aven Dovenelle."

She takes my hand warily. As my fingers wrap around her hand, I invoke a sense of calm in her. She relaxes and her squared shoulders soften. I release her hand.

"I'd like to do a reading for you, Melissa. On the house, of course, no catch."

She's not noticed that I've closed the distance between us. I am beside her now with a hand on her shoulder. She looks up at me and blinks away her confusion.

"How do you know my name?"

"Because I'm a witch," I say with a wink.

Her eyes widen as though she's just deemed me a crazy person, and she starts to pull away. I laugh lightly and take her hand.

I turn back to her friends. "Girls, while you wait, Sylvia can make you some lovely apple cinnamon tea if you'd like." They decline my offer with giggles. I look down at the apprehensive girl who has stiffened under the laughing eyes of her friends. "Ready?"

"Um, I guess," she says. "This isn't going to cost me, right?"

"Not a penny. You remind me of someone." I look at her kindly. "You don't have to if you don't want to."

"Nah, it's cool," she says, lifting her chin. She looks back at her friends before turning the corner, thinking that I don't see the eye roll she gives them.

The short hallway to my reading room is lined with tapestries and lit by a single Tiffany-style sconce lamp. The door at the end is painted a glossy poppy red with a hand-painted wooden sign within a large wreath made of dried herbs and flowers that reads "Dare to enter?" I flip the sign over to the side reading "Silence! Witch at work." I give Melissa another wink. Her answering smile is more mollifying than genuine.

The door opens without my touch.

"Nice trick," she says. I extend my hand to invite her forward.

She stops momentarily to survey the room. A lengthy 'wow' passes from her lips, which makes me smile. That is exactly the reaction I want from visitors to this room. I have it adorned with everything that makes me feel warm and comforted. The colors of autumn—dark red, amber gold, and lush green—dominate the color scheme. The bronze chandelier above holds an array of large, cream-colored candles that light with a flick of my hand. It perfectly illuminates my reading area, comprised of a settee covered in jacquard fabric for the guest and a high-back chair for me. These two are separated by a small, round table made from dark mahogany and hand-hewn with a variety of animal figures.

The left side of the small room has the original fireplace, restored to its former grandeur. The mantel is home to an oil reproduction of Waterhouse's "The Magic Circle." I loved that painting the moment I saw it. The woman reminds me so much of myself in my early lives. The painting is flanked by two gargoyle candlesticks, carved from black walnut and polished to a shine, topped with fat pillar candles the color of ripe pumpkin. Amidst the silken greenery draped across the mantel is a large raven statue made of iron and

stippled with white paint. The right side of the room is dominated by a massive object on the wall, taller than it is wide, that is draped with thick black velvet.

“What’s behind that?” Melissa reaches out to touch the cloth.

“Don’t!”

“Okay, okay. Geez!”

I motion for her to take a seat on the settee. She ignores my gesture and continues to tour the room. I purse my lips and clasp my hands in front of me. With flared nostrils, I take in a calming breath.

She eyes each item on the fireplace mantel. I think she is stalling more than interested in the decor. She barely glances at the painting. Her hand reaches for the raven. I clear my throat and her hand drops.

“This is cool,” she says, cocking her head to the side. “Looks a lot like the bird I saw out front before we came in.”

My mouth falls open, but I snap it closed. The white raven shows himself to everyone but me. I only know that my elusive stalker is, in fact, a white raven from the comments of others. Although I sense the presence of something, some sort of tug at the edge of my mind, I cannot see the source of it. When I look in its direction, I see only the movement of what it disturbed as it flew away and hear the beating of wings or what I perceive as a cry of grievance. On a few rare occasions, only when I am near death it seems, I have seen a glimpse of wing.

I pull myself from this old irritation to deal with the current one.

“Have a seat, Melissa.” My tone does not invite any more dawdling.

As I pass by the fireplace, a small fire softly bursts to life. At this time of year, the warmth isn’t necessary, but I like the look of it. This room should always have a fire. Melissa, wide-eyed again, quickly hides her surprise behind a sardonic expression.

“Yes, Melissa, I am a real witch.” I sit down in my chair and lean back, crossing my legs. “Although I don’t match the stereotype you’re used to—pointy black hat, flowing robe, gothic makeup. My cat isn’t even black. And yes, this could just be a bunch of tricks. Someone could be controlling everything by watching us on a web cam. But I am certain that in the next few minutes, you won’t be thinking these are tricks anymore.”

I feel her heart flutter. “There’s absolutely no reason to be afraid. I simply want to talk to you.”

Melissa scoots back in the settee and seems unsure where to put her hands or feet.

“How can I put you at ease, Melissa?”

“Um,” she says, fidgeting with her purse strap again, “how about we just get on with it.” She looks away as she realizes how rudely that came out.

“You are Melissa Jane Stiles, seventeen, born and raised in Bakersfield, California, where the majority of your extended family still lives. Your mother died when you were three. You, your father, and two brothers moved to Salem five years ago because your dad met a woman online, but that didn’t last. You are smart but you want your friends to think you are a hard-ass who doesn’t take shit from anyone. You are a favorite with many of your teachers, but you pass it off to your friends that you are playing them for good grades. We both know that is a lie; you like school and you want to learn. You put a hard exterior up because you feel you have to. Your father doesn’t want a smart girl—he wants a tough girl.” Melissa’s expression changes several times during my speech and now it has gone hard. The mouth that had been open in awe snapped shut at the last mention of her father. She glares at me, her lips pursed.

Be calm, I say to her in words that she cannot hear but that her body understands. She shudders at the new experience of her mind being invaded but takes a deep breath and turns to the fire.

“You are a bundle of unmanageable emotions, Melissa. With your home life, that is completely understandable. If you will feel better by crying or lashing out at me, please do so.”

Her eyes gloss over and the flames reflect upon their surface. She slides her hands under her backside.

“Do you want me to continue?” My voice is calm.

Still looking at the fire, she jerks her chin up.

“You think that joining the military is the only way that your father will accept you.” Her head snaps back. I put up a hand to stop her before the cursing begins.

“You need to know that this path will only bring you an unfortunate future. While you may gain the respect of your father, you will lose yourself. You will become someone you end up hating. You will become worse than your father ever was.”

Tears stream down her face as she blinks at me. “How can you possibly know all this?”

“It is in your blood. You are a Stiles and, unfortunately, the legacy of your forefathers has been perpetuated through each generation. But it can stop with you.”

She is looking at her lap now.

“Melissa, look at me.” After a moment, she meets my eyes.

“I knew one of your ancestors—a great-great-grandfather named Morris Stiles. It was 1886 in Calico, California.”

Melissa shakes her head. Her face has regained its hard façade. “Okay, with that, you lost me, lady.”

She gets up but doesn’t go to the door. She moves to the fireplace.

“You had me going,” she says, wagging her finger at me, “you really did!” She’s shaking her head as she grips the mantel, her shoulders quivering.

While my first instinct is to go to her and wrap my arms around her, I’m certain this is the last thing she would want.

“Morris was not a good man, to say the least. There is much about him I could tell you, but I will save you that. What you do need to know is that he murdered a woman for the simple reason that she was different. She used her talents to heal people, to bring about prosperity and fertile crops. Morris saw only the workings of the devil in her. At the first opportunity that presented itself, he formed a lynching party. He strung her up in front of the whole town and pulled the lever himself.” I keep my emotions from my voice.

Both her hands are on the mantel now, and her head is slumped forward. After a few breaths, she straightens herself and turns to me. “So you think I’ll become like this Morris guy if I join the Army?”

“Yes.”

She nods and turns back to the fire. She presses her forehead against the mantel.

“I know I have a dark side,” she says. “It comes out sometimes. A lot, really. I get so angry, I just don’t know what to do with it. I feel sometimes that it will eat me alive.”

I bite my lip to contain words of comfort and wait for her to continue.

“You are freakishly right on, though,” she says after a snort. “While this is all *totally* ridiculous, my gut says different.” She looks back at me. “And I believe you about that Morris guy. Don’t ask me why, though. It all sounds fucking crazy.” She winces at me after cursing, apologizing with her eyes. I give her a smile.

She comes back to the settee and sits down heavily. “What else?”

The smart Melissa has won against the angry Melissa. I weigh what information she absolutely needs to know.

“What I’ve told you is enough. You feel all this in your gut, as you said, but it goes deeper than that. You have been struggling inside yourself for quite some time. Personally, I feel that you should exploit your intelligence and get a degree in some sort of biology. You like that icky stuff.” She giggles.

“You don’t need to prove yourself to anyone. *Anyone*. You are the one who leads this life. Make it your own.”

I stand up and she follows. Moving around the small table, I extend my arms in offer of a hug. Without hesitation, she steps forward. I sense that this move surprises her, but she hugs me back firmly. I wonder when she was last hugged.

After almost a full minute, I release her and put my hands on her shoulders. “I have a couple of books I’d like to give you.” Her face lights up but falls as her eyes dart to the door.

“Stop worrying so much about what your friends think of you. Be who *you* want to be. If after seeing the real person they are still your friends, then they are keepers.” She smiles and hugs me again.

I pull several books from the library shelves, and she quickly stuffs them into her bag. As she and her friends leave the shop, Sylvia leans over the counter and stares at me as I watch them walk away through the bay window. The wide-eyed girls surround Melissa once they reach the sidewalk and seem to be peppering her with questions. Melissa’s chin is high as she responds to her friends, and pulls the books from her bag.

“Why are you staring at me, Sylvia?”

“Ugh.” She snorts and comes to join me at the window. “I am always dying to know what goes on in that room, but I know you’ll never tell. That kills me!” She throws her head back in mock desperation. I snort at her.

“But I totally felt a major difference in her energy when she came down the hallway. Good work, witch lady.” She bumps me with her hip. Maggie comes to my side, curious as to what we are looking at.

“When’s your mom back?”

“End of the week,” she says, reaching down to ruffle Maggie’s great mane. The dog jukes away with a light woof, landing in a play stance, tail wagging. Sylvia giggles at the goofy dog.

“You know,” she says, scrutinizing Maggie now, hands on hips, “I don’t think she’s ever let me pet her.”

“She’s more of a romper than a lover.” I give the big dog a wink.

Chapter 3

The UPS delivery man is bringing in the last of the inventory. The smells coming from the stacks piled in the shop's kitchen are heavenly. A mixture of lemongrass, cinnamon, clove, sweet orange, and so many others. The boxes are filled with soaps, hair care products, and perfumes—all handmade by a small family company in the Northwest.

From across the street, I sense my good friend coming. *My good friend.* My smile is no longer for this delivery but for the fact that I finally have a friend—a true, real friend.

I hear the greeting between the delivery man and Jo as they meet on the porch. Jo offers to help the skinny man with the boxes, implying that there's no way he could possibly lug all of them since his wife is obviously not feeding him. He rolls the loaded hand truck into the kitchen, extolling the merits of his wife's cooking. Jo and I lock eyes, and she pretends to grab his butt when he passes her. I tut at her and shake my head. He's quick to make his escape.

Jo inhales deeply. "Oh, my Goddess, this room smells fantastic!" She picks through the boxes, inspecting each label and sniffing.

"How's your mom? What did the doctor say?" I ask, handing her a box cutter.

Jo's chipper mood vanishes. She sets the box cutter down and falls into the nearest chair with a despondent sigh.

Feeling the depression rolling off her, I sit beside her and take her hand. "Jo, what is it?"

"It's not good." She doesn't meet my eyes. "The doctor said it's a brain tumor. And too late to really do anything about." Tears well in her eyes and she blinks, wiping her cheeks.

"Oh, Jo, I'm so sorry." I take her other hand and hold them both. She inhales deeply, squeezing my hands, her shoulders quivering.

"Well, it is what it is, as they say. Stupid saying." She seems to search for words, and I don't prod her. She and Matilda are so close; I know how much this must hurt Jo.

"Anyway," she exhales, straightening her shoulders and gently pulling her hands from mine, "she's as ornery as ever."

"That's a good thing."

"Tell me. She's not going to go without a fight. Speaking of which, Claudia made a real ass of herself over all this. Goddess, I can't believe they're sisters. She's already made herself high priestess of the coven, saying that Mom is in no condition for such a responsibility anymore." Jo's hands are fists in her lap. My eyes widen.

Jo proceeds to paint a picture of the jealous older sister, always in the shadow of her younger, better-at-everything, and prettier sister. The honor of high priestess was given to Matilda because of her power and knowledge of the Craft. She was loved by most and respected by all. The family did not hold that the eldest receive such a position automatically: it had to be earned, and no one thought Claudia a leader. She was petty and a know-it-all. But in the wake of Matilda's announcement, Claudia preyed on their shock and grief and had the power in her hands before anyone realized what happened.

"I argued with that cow, but since I'm not a member of the coven, I had no say, blood or not." Jo unclenches her fists and rubs her hands on her lap. "The shouting took a real toll on Mom; she couldn't handle it and gave in. It was hard to watch actually." She pinches the bridge of her nose. "Needless to say, Mom insists on staying in her house until it's absolutely necessary she go into some sort of managed care facility. She hates the idea. Goddess, we all do."

She waves a hand in front of her as if to push away the awful thoughts.

Her face suddenly brightens. "So! Anything exciting happen while I was away?"

I search her face, gauging whether I should try to comfort her or go with her change of topic. Her eyes plead with me to move on.

"Well, let's see. The great-great-granddaughter of the man who murdered me in my last life came by a few days ago," I say matter-of-factly.

"Ha!" She slaps her leg and gets up, heading to the cabinet for her favorite mug—the one with the caption 'You think I'm wicked now? You should see me without my coffee'—and pours herself a cup. She blows across the top and takes a sip.

I mentally kick myself. I have never glossed over anything about myself to Jo, or to anyone for that matter, which more often than not has led to disaster. But there is something about the older woman that makes me want to tell her everything. The fact remains that we are completely different witches, and what I can do no other witch can. Some of the things I've shown her and told her defy her experiences and understanding of magick. She's been open and accepting, although it's overwhelmed her at times. Having such a friend is new to me, and I need to remember to temper what I tell her—ease her into my unusual life slowly. It's difficult, though.

"What did the little bitch want?" she asks blithely, retaking her seat.

She can always make me laugh. I tell her a little of how my last life ended and then of my encounter with Melissa. She sits patiently and makes concerned faces and nods at the appropriate times. I suspect she's humoring me.

"You should write a book! You've got some great stories, that's for sure. Oh! Speaking of books, I brought you one." She pulls out a small, tattered book from her voluminous folds of fabric.

Holding the book, a tingle moves across my skin when I read the author's name, Patricia Jones. The book itself is nothing magickal—a collection of poems about ravens.

I manage a quiet 'thanks' as I rub my fingers across the name.

"What? Something wrong with the book?"

"Nothing's wrong. The author's name, Patricia Jones." I look up at her. "What made you buy this book?"

“I’m not sure, really. I passed a stack of books at a flea market the other day and that one spoke to me. You don’t strike me as a reader of poetry, though. Why? Know the author?”

“No.” I wave the conversation to an end. “It’s nothing, never mind.”

“No, no. You know I hate when you do that. What is it?”

“You’ll just think I’m back to storytelling again.” I wink at her.

“Well, your stories are good.” She settles back in the chair, mug in hand. “Spill.”

I sigh deeply. It’s time to tell her.

“Patricia Jones is the name of the eighteen-year-old whose body I took over when she died.”

Jo lets out a snort and almost spills her coffee. “Look, I believe in reincarnation just as much as the next witch, but hearing that you took over a person’s body is kinda hard to swallow.” She raises her brows at me and purses her lips.

Hurt by her words, I look down at my hands in my lap.

“I’m sorry, that was mean. I could have said that better.”

“It’s all right. It’s just that you are the first *real* friend that I’ve had, so I burst to tell you everything. It’s been so nice not to have to hold back what I say. I sometimes forget how ridiculous it all must sound—even to a fellow witch.”

She frowns and apologizes again.

I lean forward. “Jo, I can prove what I say is true. If you’ll let me.”

She is eyeballing me now, leaning away. “And just how would you prove it?”

“Give me your hand.”

She hesitates, her eyes narrow at me. “What are you gonna do?”

“Trust me,” I say in my most convincing tone.

Warily, she sets her mug on the table and puts her hands in mine. I have to do this gently or she will cease to be my friend.