



*of Witches
and Warlocks*

*The
Trouble
with
Spells*

Bestselling Author

LACEY WEATHERFORD

Praise for *The Trouble With Spells*

5 out of 5 Stars

"Wow! I am so impressed! I was IN from the very start. The characters are beautifully written and the story is fantastic. I was on the edge of my chair, turning pages as fast as I could read them! Couldn't get enough of this book! It has all the elements of a must read. It has non-stop action, daring deeds, good vs. evil, danger and suspense, as well as being an all-out love story." Beverly Sharp, The Wormhole

5 out of 5 Stars

"The Trouble with Spells has everything needed for the making of an amazing series and has quickly become my new favorite. Vance and Portia will be giving other YA couples a run for their money!!" Lyndsey Rushby, Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory

5 out of 5 Stars

"Of Witches And Warlocks: The Trouble With Spells is a definite must read and will have you hooked from the beginning. Lacey Weatherford writes an amazing love story that will leave you addicted and craving for another hit of action, romance and an extra dose of the local bad boy, Vance Mangum." Naomi McKay, Supernatural Bookworm

5 out of 5 Stars

"I fell completely, head over heels in love with The Trouble With Spells. The charged relationship between Portia and Vance in this electrifying novel leaves a lasting impression." Susan Mann, Susan K Mann Book Reviews.

<http://www.ofwitchesandwarlocks.com>

**Of Witches & Warlocks:
The Trouble with Spells
by
Lacey Weatherford**

Book One of the Of Witches and Warlocks Series

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This book is available in print.

Dedication:

To my darling daughter, Kamery, whose ever-changing hair color first inspired me with the idea. To Connie and Larissa, who loved it enough to encourage me to go for it. To my husband James, who put up with everything else so I could write.

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To my business partner and best friend, Belinda—thanks for all your continued encouragement!

Prologue

Vance Mangum - Two Years Earlier

I was sitting under a tree at my new school during lunch, trying to avoid the silly giggles and laughter from the endless parade of idiotic girls who were trying to catch my attention. Pretending to be oblivious seemed to work best for me, so I focused on pulling random blades of grass out of the ground while I bit into the apple in my hand.

It's not like I wasn't interested in the girls—I definitely was. I was just tired of not being able to really get to know the ones I liked before I had to move to a new place again. I already missed the girls I'd been hanging around with at the school I'd just left. Amber was amazing, and she could kiss like a pro. Well, there just wasn't any point in thinking about her kisses because I wouldn't be experiencing them again.

I hated running. I despised constantly looking over my shoulder for him, always getting so close to being found. It was totally messing up my life. While I was already sixteen, I was only a sophomore. I should've been a junior, but being on the run and having to go into hiding put me a year behind at school. Hopefully, this time would be different. I didn't know if I had the same faith in this new cover-up that my Aunt Marsha did. She seemed to think they might be able to help protect us better than we had been able to protect ourselves. I guess, deep down, I really hoped they could—I was so tired of running.

I took another bite of my apple, while focusing on the doors to the school, successfully redirecting my gaze away from the group of girls who were twittering together off to my left.

That's when I saw her.

She stepped out of the door, walking next to some other girl, but my attention was instantly riveted on her. Every emotion she was feeling at that moment washed over me. I sucked in my breath, having never experienced anything quite like it.

This girl was different. She was magical. Literally.

The warlock inside me lifted his head in curious admiration. She was young, probably only a freshman, but she was beautiful in a totally understated way. I was instantly drawn to her, and I glanced over her small, petite form as she moved toward the cafeteria.

A light breeze caught her black hair, stirring it slightly away from her face, and she smiled at her friend. The music of her laughter carried to me through the air, with the high and low notes blending in my mind in perfect harmony. She was... content, happy, secure, and amused about whatever her friend was telling her. She was everything I was not, and I knew I had to know who she was.

"Excuse me," I said, turning to one of the girls hovering nearby. She looked down at me with a hopeful expression. "Do you know who that girl is?"

I glanced back toward the beautiful girl, but not in time to miss the crestfallen look on this one's face before she lifted her head to follow my line of sight.

"Who? The blonde?" she asked icily.

"No. The one with the black hair," I replied, not taking my eyes off her while she walked.

"Her?" she replied with an incredulous tone in her voice. I turned back to look at her, narrowing my eyes cynically. She shrank back for a second before squaring her shoulders and flipping her hair with one of her hands. "That's Portia Mullins," she replied, looking away from me to whisper with her friends again.

Portia Mullins. Oh, the irony.

I knew exactly who she was. She was the underage daughter of my new benefactor who had sworn to help protect me. She was the girl I'd been instructed not to interact with because she had no idea she

was a witch, or that her family was part of a magical coven. I wasn't to have any contact with her until she turned sixteen and found out her true heritage. That was when she would be inducted into her coven. My coven. The coven I willingly bound myself to and could not betray.

She lifted her head and looked right at me. I had to fight for control while I turned my eyes away from her, with what I hoped was a bored, uninterested glance. But my heart raced slightly when I felt her emotions—her pulse picking up at the sight of me. She felt... intrigued, perhaps even attracted... but that was immediately replaced by deflation. She didn't feel worthy of my notice. If only she knew.

Portia and her friend entered the cafeteria. Even though she was gone from my sight, I could still feel her.

Unexpectedly, I became very angry. I'd found a person I connected with on a level I had never experienced with another living being, and I couldn't even get to know her. I felt the need to punish something.

I stood up and strode across the parking lot to where I left my motorcycle, knowing fully well I was going to get in trouble for ditching on my second day of school, but I didn't care. One thing was for certain, I was going to stay in this place and get to know Portia Mullins... even if it got me killed.

Chapter 1

Portia Mullins - Present Day

I thought I was the typical teenager—a normal fifteen year old, eagerly awaiting my sixteen birthday, which was in just three days. I was mostly excited because I could finally get my driver license and, of course, the dating thing.

My family had a strict no dating policy until I turned sixteen. It didn't bother me too much since I'd seen some sad results from other girls who were allowed to date before then—not that those stories were always their fault. It just seemed like guys who didn't respect girls had an easier time taking advantage of them when they were younger.

Even though I hadn't hit the official dating scene, it wasn't like I didn't have guy friends. I've always been a happy-go-lucky girl, and cute too, in a sort of Goth girl way. The funny thing about that is I wasn't Goth at all. I just happened to have naturally straight black hair that flowed down past my shoulder blades. My sweet, little upturned nose matched perfectly with my bow-shaped lips, but it was my big, nearly black eyes, with thick dark lashes, against my almost translucently pale skin that set off the entire look.

I tried tanning, but somehow only seemed to be able to turn a beautiful shade of lobster red before my skin puckered, peeled off, and revealed a lovely, new white skin beneath.

My best friend, Shelly, whom I happen to call Barbie behind her back, tried to make me over many times without success. My hair wouldn't hold a curl, and the extra makeup made me look a bit like a hooker. Since I'm so style challenged, I religiously tried to avoid wearing too much black, sticking to jewel tones and that shabby chic kind of look I adore. That, perhaps, makes me come off as a gypsy sort of thing, which is a taste in fashion I've picked up from my grandma, of all people.

Grandma Mullins was my most favorite relative in the world. She's an eccentric, sixty-something free-spirited individual—the kind of lady who's always smiling, but you feel like you might be missing the big secret behind it.

Grandma's tall, slim, and graceful. Her hair is straight like mine, but it's a beautiful chestnut brown, and it looks like it was purposely streaked with gray highlights. She always dresses in light flowing clothes with way too many layers and styles of jewelry on at the same time, but somehow it works. She was going to be throwing my birthday party for me this week.

“Portia!” my mom called from downstairs. “It's time for breakfast!”

I groaned, hearing my name. I didn't hate it exactly, but my dad goes on and on about it. He's the one who chose it. It was sort of a joke he did, using a play on words.

My dad and his buddies were really big into cars in high school, and according to the many stories I've been told, they used to have some heated verbal disputes over whether their favorite car was called a “Porsche” or a “Porscha” in their pronunciation. My dad promised his buddies someday he would “own a Porscha.” After college, though, he had a hard time finding work in his field of expertise. He ended up becoming an encyclopedia salesman and working his way up through the company, but he quickly began to see his car dream fade. Then I was born, and he suddenly found a way he could own a “Porscha” once again. He wanted to even spell my name like the car but, thankfully, my mom put her foot down.

“Hey, Mom,” I said, dropping my backpack at the foot of the stairs.

I gave her a quick peck on the cheek before grabbing a piece of toast from the stack and slathering it with jelly.

“I have to work the swing shift again, so I won't be here when you get home from school,” she said.

My mom was a nurse at the Verde Valley Medical Center. I figured she was most likely the reason our family stayed afloat financially, since I didn't think there were really many people out there buying encyclopedias in mass quantities.

"That's okay," I said, looking at the cartoon-covered scrubs she often wore to work with her pediatric patients. "I'll go hang out at Grandma's after I get my jobs done."

"That's fine. Just remember to take out the trash this time before you go."

I sighed heavily. I'd only ever forgotten to take out the trash once, and that was over a year ago. She'd never forgotten it.

I quickly finished the scrambled eggs she gave me, while she rattled on about some of her patients before carrying my dishes to the sink.

"I need to go, Mom. Shelly will be here any second."

"Okay, sweetheart. Have a nice day," she replied while I grabbed up my backpack.

"You too." I sent her a quick smile before I turned to leave.

I ran out the door to see Shelly pulling up in her pink Mustang convertible. I shook my head at her color choice every time I saw it. Her parents bought it for her sixteenth birthday. It totally set off her Barbie doll persona—big blond hair, bright blue eyes, perfect figure dressed in the latest fashions. Not to mention she's dating Brad, the captain of the football team. The two of us were complete opposites but we'd been friends since kindergarten.

"Hey, girl!" she called out to me, while leaning over to pop open the passenger door. "Hop in!"

"Morning," I said absently, climbing into the car as I licked some jelly off one of my fingers.

Shelly immediately launched into her fabulous date Brad had taken her on over the weekend. "ooh-ed" and "aah-ed" in all the appropriate places, while I watched the scenery rush by.

I enjoyed the air, which had almost turned fall-like. It wasn't cold yet in Sedona, but the weather had started getting a little of that nice crisp feel to it. That was one of the things I loved about the Arizona climate, the warm seasons hung around for a lot longer than most places. Of course, a nice snow in the winter was always fun too, just to break things up a bit. It could get very hot in the summer, but that was usually when a group of us would take the short drive up into Oak Creek Canyon to go for a swim at Slide Rock State Park.

This year's excursion had been especially fun, since the water was high from a good snow run off. When the water is low, you tend to get a lot more bumps and bruises on the rocks. There is always the occasional swimsuit blowout from those tourists who don't know they should wear cut offs or board shorts to keep that from happening. That's always a good laugh.

My attention drifted back to the present, when the car turned into the campus parking lot. Sedona Red Rock High School isn't a large school by any means. It only has about five hundred students. Its red brick buildings were designed to blend in with the giant red rock cliffs that surround the area.

The whole town has a strict color code ordinance. Everything has to blend in. Even the lampposts are brown instead of silver or green like anywhere else. The color thing can sometimes be a source of controversy. People either love it, or hate it, but it does lend the town a nice sense of ambience, I guess.

Shelly parked her car in the closest space she could find and put the top up. We grabbed our books and walked into school.

There were posters plastered everywhere in the halls with giant scorpions on them, which is our school mascot. The first football game of the season was coming up this weekend. It was a non-conference game against the Snowflake Lobos. Their team had creamed us last year, and everyone was determined to get hyped up so it didn't happen again.

The game also happened to coincide with my sixteenth birthday. Since everyone on this mountain is freakishly insane about football, my party was being held after the game at my grandma's, so mo

of my friends could come.

I coasted through the school day. The only exciting thing that happened was when Mrs. Skipp lost her glasses and couldn't read our English lesson to us. The glasses were actually on top of her head, which I thought she should've figured out immediately since the whole class was snickering at her under their breath.

Shelly met me in the hallway after last hour, and we headed out to her car. She rambled on about all the unfortunate kids who had to ride the bus home. I wanted to remind her that most kids around here don't have parents who own a multi-million-dollar spa resort like hers.

Her family's resort, which was named after them, was located on top of one of the town's big, red rock cliffs. It was called The Fountains at Fontane, and it was a really nice place. I'd dubbed it my third "home away from home," Grandma Mullins's being the second.

Shelly pulled up in front of my house, which was situated at the bottom of the red rock cliff in this Spanish-styled neighborhood. It was a small but pretty adobe-looking home, complete with wooden beams and an interior courtyard, graced with a bubbling fountain. It wasn't anywhere near as fancy as Shelly's, but I loved it.

"You want to come over later?" Shelly asked as I exited the car.

"Thanks, but I'm going over to my grandma's this afternoon," I said, shaking my head.

"Oh. Well, tell Grandma Milly I said hi."

"I will. She'll be sad you didn't come with me." I smiled at her.

"I would, but I have a ton of homework." She gave an exaggerated eye roll. "Apparently, most teachers feel I have way too much free time on my hands."

"Yeah, I have some I need to do too. I'll call you later." I stepped away from the vehicle.

"Okay. Talk to you then!" She drove off, waving her hand in the air behind her as she sped up the hill.

I turned and went inside, dumping my books on the kitchen table before I began doing my list of after-school chores. I was done quickly, and a short time later polished off the minimal amount of homework I had to do.

Grabbing an apple out of the fruit bowl on the counter, I headed out the door and walked up the street toward the highway, where my grandma's shop was located.

Grandma owns one of those metaphysical shops that are popular in this area. It's called Milly's Lotions, Potions, and Notions. It's a fun place to hang out, with books on all sorts of subjects, as well as an assortment of crystals and candles for purchase.

Grandma was very good with herbs too, so she made her own lotions, soaps, shampoos, and other ointments. She packages them up for sale in trendy brown bottles with green labels. She also likes to read auras for people with this cool camera she has. It takes pictures of people and shows the colors surrounding them. Then she reads the image and tells her customers what the colors in their auras mean.

She held meditation classes once a week, where she taught people how to achieve a deep state of relaxation. These classes were conducted in a very calming room in the back of the store. I used to go to them with her, but she started paying me to run the register on those nights instead.

She had another small room added on to the rear of the store after she met Babs, a local massage therapist, and they decided to partner up together. Babs is a wonderful person, and she and Grandma fast became best friends.

I arrived at the store, stepping inside. The soft lighting and mellow music, along with the pleasant herbal smells, always felt serene to me.

"Hey, Lollipop!" Grandma called out from behind the counter where she was rearranging merchandise.

Lollipop had been her nickname for me as long as I could remember. I asked her how she came up with the name, and she told me sometimes kids are sweet, and sometimes they just need a good lickin'. I thought that was funny.

"You want to help me stack these new lotions I made today? I've cleared a spot for them over on the shelf in the corner." She nodded in the general direction of a large box filled with bottles.

"Sure," I said. I hefted the heavy box onto my hip and hobbled over to the shelves.

"I also got a new batch of antique jewelry I thought you'd be interested in looking at."

Grandma often purchased antique crystal jewelry, which caught her fancy, and sold it in her store. She also collected several beautiful pieces for herself. For as long as I could remember I'd always been fascinated by them.

"That sounds great!" I replied enthusiastically, excited to see what she had acquired.

"I thought maybe you'd like to pick a piece out for your sixteenth birthday."

"I'd love to!" I replied with a grin.

I hurried to continue my shelving until all the bottles were neatly arranged in perfect rows. When it was done, I gathered up the box and headed toward the storeroom.

"I'll meet you back there as soon as this customer is finished," she whispered as I passed by, tipping her head toward a woman who had entered the shop.

I nodded and stepped through the funky beaded curtain separating the backroom from the rest of the store.

I broke the box down and stacked it in the corner, where we kept the others waiting for recycling. I then went over to sit at the table in the middle of the room. It was large and had bowls and bottles of different sizes scattered across it, which were used for grinding and mixing herbs. I studied some of the containers for a few moments before Grandma breezed in.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," she said, moving over to a counter against one wall. She picked up a large, flat wooden case.

"No problem."

She brought the case to the table, popped open the latch, and lifted the lid.

"Wow!" I exclaimed, as the beautiful pieces came into sight. There were pendants, rings, and bracelets of all sizes and colors. I greedily took it all in, my eyes flitting over the beautiful craftsmanship of an era gone by.

"See anything in particular you like?" Grandma asked, the same light of excitement in her eyes.

"There are so many choices." I ran my fingers over piece after piece, taking in each design.

The chime on the door in the front of the store jingled, alerting us to the arrival of another customer.

"Keep looking. I'll be right back," Grandma said, heading out of the room.

I continued my perusal of the gems until my eyes rested on a lovely violet pendant. Gently, I lifted it out of the box, letting the heavily tarnished chain fall through my fingers as I held the scrolling silver filigree surrounding the purple crystal. I slowly ran one finger over the smooth and rounded oval stone. It sparkled in the light so beautifully it was almost hypnotic.

I turned the piece over to examine the back and noticed a small symbol etched into the bottom. It was the letter P, in the middle of a tiny heart.

Well, that's convenient, I thought. It was as if it was engraved just for me.

Grandma broke the silence when she entered the room again.

"Did you find something that speaks to you?" She smiled, her eyes flashing.

I held up the purple pendant, and Grandma laughed.

"You have good taste. This is the most expensive one in the bunch."

"Oh," I replied, a little downhearted. "I can pick another one."

“Nonsense,” Grandma said, patting my shoulder gently. “I’ll let you in on a little secret. You don’t choose the jewelry. The jewelry chooses you.” She reached out and took the pendant from me. “You may have it on your birthday,” she added with a smile.

I stood up and gave her a big hug.

“Thanks, Grandma. This is more than I would’ve imagined.”

Grandma laughed again. “It’s only part of your present.” Her eyes twinkling in secret delight, and she looked at her with anticipation. “No more hints!” she said, shaking her finger at me. “I’ve said too much already.”

Chapter 2

It was Friday and my birthday.

Shelly and I pulled into the parking lot, grabbed our bags, and headed toward the school, chatting between our selves about my party, which was to take place that evening. I smiled at the few birthday greetings called my way by friends and students heading in the same direction we were.

“Well, that’s interesting,” Shelly said with a little smirk.

“What is?” I said absently, not following her.

“Vance Mangum is staring at you.” She gave an almost inconspicuous nod over her shoulder.

I couldn’t help myself, turning my head to look.

She was right. My heart skipped a beat.

Vance Mangum was leaning up against his jet-black motorcycle looking straight at me. For a moment our eyes locked, we just stared at each other. I couldn’t seem to break my gaze away from him, until I tripped over the curb. Thankfully, Shelly caught me before I fell all the way down.

I couldn’t resist a quick peek again to see if he was still watching. He was, of course, and I was mortified. I turned and hurried into the school.

All day long, I found my thoughts drifting back to the incident.

Vance Mangum was in a class by himself. He was a senior, who had the reputation of a resident bad boy yet, despite that, every boy in school aspired to be like him in one way or another.

They were always trying to copy his cool messed up hair or getting their holey Levis to look just as good. Some even attempted doing extra workouts to build their muscles so their t-shirts would stretch across their chests like his. But no matter how hard they tried, none of them managed to pull it off quite the way he did.

Of course, the girls adored him. He was totally gorgeous, sporting the looks that went with that physique—luscious, dark brown hair and chiseled features, set off by bright blue eyes lined in thick lashes. The parking lot would come to a virtual standstill whenever he would ride up on his motorcycle, decked out in a black leather jacket and helmet. All the girls would cease whatever they were doing and begin chattering about him together.

I definitely hadn’t been immune to him either—often catching myself joining with the masses to watch. In fact, if I were being truthful, I’d have to admit to the secret crush I had on him since I first noticed him.

Vance never had a girlfriend that I could remember. He’d only lived here the past couple of years and plenty of girls had paraded themselves in front of him hoping to catch his attention, but he just seemed oblivious to them.

His aloofness spawned many wild tales. Stories were told of how he was a drug dealer, or how he had been in juvie because he had beat up a guy in a bar fight. Another one said he’d gotten some girl pregnant and been forced to leave home to come here to live with his aunt. But the truth was no one really knew anything about him because he stayed to himself.

Shelly had a couple of classes with him. She said he always sat in the very back of the room, and he never said anything unless the teacher called on him specifically, but he always turned his work in on time and never harassed the teachers in any way.

“Do you agree with that, Miss Mullins?” Mr. Harkins’s voice popped into my head, breaking me out of my reverie.

“Huh?” I said absently, before realizing I had no idea what the question was.

“You better start paying attention in math, instead of doodling in your notebook.” Mr. Harkins frowned.

“Yes, sir.” I sat up a little straighter, staring ahead at the problem he was going over with the class.

~~When Mr. Harkins turned back to the chalkboard, I glanced down at my notebook and saw I~~ written the name Vance Mangum all over it. I spent the rest of the class furiously scribbling it out before anyone else saw.

Later in the day, Shelly and I were sitting in the lunchroom. She was talking away about her frustration with an assignment her honors English teacher had given her, while I glanced inconspicuously around at the other students. I mentally kicked myself over looking for Vance here since I knew he never ate lunch in the cafeteria. I just couldn’t figure out why he’d been staring at me so intently this morning. Frankly, I wanted to see if it would happen again.

I tuned Shelly out, but my attention was immediately averted back to her when she suddenly winced and grabbed her mouth.

“What’s the matter?” I asked, concerned at her look of pain.

“I think I just broke a tooth,” she replied, throwing a half-eaten cookie with nuts back on her tray then reaching for her cell phone. She leaned over to show me, and sure enough there was a chip out of one of her molars.

She called her mom and told her what had happened. Her mom said she would call her right back and when she did she told Shelly to leave school and go directly to the dentist.

Shelly asked if I’d be able to get home okay, and I told her not to worry I’d catch the bus, and sent her grumbling out the door.

The last two hours of the school day passed quickly. I had my art class, which I loved. We were working on creating clay sculptures. Mine was turning out to look something like a pencil holder made by a kindergarten kid, but it was still fun to do. I enjoyed the creative outlet it gave me.

The bell rang, signaling school was out for the weekend. I quickly put away my supplies and washed my hands before venturing out into the hallway. I made the trip to my locker, organized my bag, and then headed toward the girl’s restroom.

It was then I remembered Shelly was gone already, and I was supposed to catch the bus. I let out a groan of dismay, quickly turning to run out the door and down the long hallway, which led to the boarding gates.

I was almost to the exit when someone rounded the corner and we collided. I dropped my book bag, scattering the contents everywhere. I scrambled about in a rush trying to gather up my things.

“Why don’t you watch where you’re going?” I said, mostly under my breath. I didn’t even look up but I was completely irritated.

“Hey now. You ran into me,” a soft, sultry, male voice returned. I froze. I moved my gaze slowly to the feet in front of me. My eyes continued to travel up—over the black laced-up boots covered by tattered Levis and past the black belt with the silver buckle to the ever-present, tightly stretched t-shirt with a leather jacket slung casually over the shoulder. I noticed the pulsating veins in his neck, and paused at the soft wide-set lips before looking straight into the piercing blue-eyed stare of Vance Mangum.

I swallowed hard, and my entire vocabulary was suddenly reduced to only one word. “Sorry.” came out like a whisper, and I wondered if he even heard it.

Vance slowly squatted down to my level with a slight smirk on his lips.

“Where were you going in such a hurry?” he asked, picking up one of my books and handing it to me.

I threw a glance out the glass door just in time to see the last of the buses leave the lot.

“I was trying to catch the bus,” I explained, feeling more than a bit dumb. “I forgot my friend Shelly, had to leave early today.”

“Ah,” was all he said. I was surprised when he continued to help me pick up my things.

He handed me my last book and stood up, reaching a hand out.

~~I was shocked by the gesture, but I took it, feeling sparks shoot up my arm at the contact when he pulled me to my feet.~~

“I can give you a ride,” he offered, letting go of my hand, and I felt a little sad at the loss of it.

I couldn't speak. Vance Mangum had just offered me a ride home. What should I say? I must have stood there looking bewildered because he spoke again.

“Of course, if you're afraid of motorcycles....” He let the sentence trail off, almost like he was accusing me of being scared.

“No. Not at all,” I replied with a bravado I didn't really feel. I raised my chin a notch, determined not to let him see how nervous he made me. “I'd be happy to accept a ride.”

“Great.” He smiled widely, and I almost choked.

I suddenly realized I'd never seen him smile before, and it was devastating to my girlish heart. I'd never seen anything so beautiful—all perfectly straight, white teeth, framed in by those great lips, and those masculine dimples that suddenly appeared in his cheeks.

The guy should be a model, I thought to myself. He'd make millions.

Vance took off down the hall, and I slung my backpack on, trotting after him like a willing little puppy.

When we reached his massive motorcycle, he took his helmet off the seat and handed it to me.

“Safety first.”

“What about you?” I objected, reaching to take it from him.

“I'll be fine,” he replied, swinging his leg up and over the seat while knocking the kickstand up in one fluid motion. “Just hop on behind me and hang on around my waist.”

I stood there for a moment, struggling to adjust the strap on the helmet after I put it on. Vance reached over to help me with it, tightening it nicely around my chin.

“There you go. Perfect,” he said, and he jump-started the engine.

Yeah right, I thought. I probably looked like an idiot with my hair sticking out of this thing and my backpack hanging down over my geeky backpack. Thank goodness I'd worn pants today!

I threw my leg over the seat, settling on it comfortably, and wrapped my arms around Vance's waist. I didn't know what to do with my feet though. Vance patted my leg and gestured to me over the roaring engine to put my feet on the pegs next to his.

As soon as I was situated, he took off, catching me by surprise, and I found myself grasping his waist tightly with both arms. I couldn't help but notice the stares of many onlookers as we passed by them on our way out of the parking lot. I didn't blame them. I was in shock too.

The next surprise I got was when Vance dropped me safely off at my front door without me telling him how to get to my house. I hopped quickly off the bike, even though I was sad to let go of him.

Vance helped me again when I struggled with the chinstrap. When he was done, I took the helmet off, handing it back to him.

“Thanks for the lift,” I said, trying to casually straighten my wayward hair while hoping he didn't notice how horrible I must look.

“No problem,” he said, not breaking eye contact with me.

We waited there awkwardly for a couple of seconds, not knowing what else to say.

“Well, I guess I'll catch you later then,” I said, feeling dumb because I knew that wasn't a likely thing to happen.

He nodded, and I turned away, tempted to run up the sidewalk to escape further humiliation.

“Hey!” Vance yelled after me when I'd gone only a few steps.

I turned around.

“Happy birthday!” He gave me another devastating smile, and then the engine roared to life and I

was gone.

~~I stood there, staring down the street after him, until I couldn't even hear the engine anymore.~~ With a silly girlish giggle, I turned and ran into my house hoping Shelly would call me soon.

The football game was in full swing by the time Shelly and I finally showed up. She had been the dentist for a long while, so when she came to pick me up we were running late.

We quickly made our way around the field and squeezed into the standing student section near the pep band. Everyone was intensely following the game as the score was now tied at fourteen early in the second quarter.

I shook my head in amazement at what some of the kids were wearing, or not wearing to be more accurate.

We had the typical row of guys with their shirts off, showing their purple-and-black painted chests. Next to them were the girls in their sports bras with their stomachs painted too. What were they thinking? Hadn't someone in the faculty noticed this yet? I was fairly certain this went way beyond the realm of the school's dress code. That was something I'd always found crazy about sports. People think they need to be half naked to show their enthusiasm. I just didn't get it.

The crowd suddenly roared its approval when one of Sedona's players intercepted a pass from the Snowflake team and ran it in for a touchdown.

"It's Brad! It's Brad!" Shelly screamed into my ear over the deafening sound of the pep band.

The announcer's voice came over the loudspeaker a few moments later, making the crowd roar again. "And the extra point is good!"

The score was now twenty-one to fourteen, in favor of the Scorpions. The rest of the quarter was a tough struggle between both teams without either one scoring. When the buzzer finally sounded announcing it was halftime, each of the teams ran to opposite ends of the field to huddle and talk things over with their coaches.

Shelly and I walked out of the bleachers and headed up the hill toward the concession stands.

"Brad's doing so great tonight!" Shelly said with a big smile, linking arms with me.

"He always does well." I laughed at her. "That's why he's one of the captains."

"Oh, I know," she sighed. "It's just ... he's always much more fun after winning a game than the losing one."

"I'm sure most athletes are the same way," I reminded her, moving to take a place at the end of the line.

We waited our turn and ordered sodas, but when we turned to walk back someone called Shelly by name and motioned for her to come over.

"Hang on a sec," she said to me and turned to throng her way through the thick crowd.

I walked over toward the fence to wait for her, but stopped short when I saw Vance was leaning up against it casually watching me, his arms folded across his chest.

I stood still for a brief moment before having a second of bravery, and I walked up to him.

"Hey. Thanks for the ride again," I said, feeling extremely stupid. What was I doing talking to him like I knew him?

"Any time," he replied, his gaze flickering over me.

"Really?" I blurted out before thinking. I felt the crimson color of my blood flooding my face as the heat crept into it.

"Why not?" He gave a half grin. "I kind of enjoyed running in to you."

I met his piercing eyes—stare for stare—trying to see if he was just messing with me, before breaking contact with him and becoming suddenly interested in the ground beneath my shoes. I toed a crack in the sidewalk.

“Do you like football?” I asked, not knowing what to say and glancing at him out of the corner of my eye. I’d never noticed him at a game before.

He looked over toward the field and shrugged slightly. “It’s okay, I guess.” His eyes moved back to capture mine once again.

I laughed loudly. “Don’t let the fans hear you talk like that. You might get mauled. People around here love high school football,” I said, wondering why I couldn’t stop babbling on like an idiot when he was around him.

He laughed a little at my response but didn’t reply, instead just quirking an eyebrow at me as if he was puzzled by something.

I stood there awkwardly for a few more moments before I heard Shelly call my name.

“I need to go,” I said, still feeling stupid. Why did I need to explain myself to him?

He didn’t reply, so I turned to walk away. I stopped after a few steps and looked back. “Hey, I’m having a birthday party tonight. You’re welcome to come.” I found myself holding my breath while I waited for his reply.

He seemed to ponder this for a few seconds before he answered.

“Maybe,” was all he said, continuing to stare at me with that unreadable expression of his.

I returned his look for a couple of moments, wondering what he was thinking of my invitation before turning to walk off to join Shelly.

“Were you talking to Vance Mangum?” Shelly asked with a disbelieving look on her face.

“Yeah,” I replied, my head still swimming over the interaction with him.

“Wow! Twice in one day!” she exclaimed. “I think he likes you. He never talks to anyone.”

“Whatever!” I laughed, nudging her with my elbow. “Let’s go sit down before the second half starts again.”

She linked her arm with mine, hurrying me toward the stands. I couldn’t resist one more glance over my shoulder, toward Vance. But when my eyes rested on the fence, I discovered he’d already gone.

Chapter 3

My party was going dismally and it was all the fault of those stupid Snowflake Lobos. I don't know what their coach said to them at halftime, but they came roaring out onto the field for the second half and proceeded to slaughter our team like a well-oiled machine. The final score of the game ended up being forty-two to twenty-one.

Several of the Sedona football players were here now, drowning their sorrows in my pitcher of lemonade, while girlfriends hung on their shoulders trying to cheer them up.

Shelly was sitting on Brad's lap over at the picnic table, her arms draped around him as she tried to give him a pep talk.

The group of girls clustered around the stereo kept playing melancholy songs one right after another, serving to only enhance the gloomy mood.

I sighed and jumped off the small half wall surrounding Grandma's well-groomed backyard. I walked under all the hanging Chinese lanterns into the kitchen, letting the screen door bang shut behind me.

"Having fun?" Grandma asked, pulling a pan of her steaming enchiladas out of the oven, filling the air with wonderful aromas.

I let out a pitiful harrumph. Grandma cast a quick glance at me.

"Don't worry, Lollipop. It'll get better I'm sure."

"We should've planned this party for tomorrow." I descended with a sigh into a chair at her small dining table, laying my forehead on it.

I heard Grandma place the enchiladas on the stovetop. She came to sit next to me, sliding her hair over to cover mine.

"Everything will be all right. Let's get the food served and open presents. That always makes everyone feel more festive." When I didn't move she told me to go outside and put on some lively music.

I pushed away from the table and meandered back out the door to go across the porch to where the stereo was. I picked through the selections before pulling the slow playing mood music out and putting on my favorite pop artist.

As the strong beat poured through the air, Grandma began bringing the food to the table. Shelly hopped up to help, and I snagged a classmate named Wes, recruiting him to keep the fast music playing, and followed after her.

We quickly had the table loaded with the most delicious looking meal of red and green enchiladas with Spanish rice. The chips and salsa, along with a mouthwatering seven-layer dip, soon had everyone looking a little bit peppier.

Grandma had several folding tables she'd placed end to end, to make one giant table decorated with bright fiesta colors. In the middle of each of the tables were sombrero hats that had the brims filled with chips, with a bowl of salsa or dip sitting in the top of the hat. Just as she predicted, my guests were soon sitting around the array, talking and laughing while the late night meal was going on.

We had a good time visiting and joking with one another, and when everyone looked like they were finished eating, Grandma surprised me by bringing out a giant piñata in the shape of a donkey. A couple of the guys helped her string it up from the large tree in the middle of her yard.

Since I was the birthday girl, I got nominated to go first. After I was blindfolded, I made a few feeble attempts to hit the swinging cardboard animal, but only managed to connect with it once, and that was just a slight brush. I eagerly pulled off the blindfold and passed it on to someone else before I made myself look any more foolish.

As it turned out, the piñata was just what the guys from the football team needed to get the going. They started to eagerly take turns, each one trying to outdo the next while their girlfriends laughed and cheered them on.

I suddenly realized we were all having a great time, and my eyes sought out my grandma who was watching the whole game play out with a large smile on her face. She snuck a quick wink at me, smiled back at her, then moved back toward the rear of the group since some of the guys were getting pretty aggressive with the baseball bat.

Finally, the piñata gave a great crack when Brad whacked it with a super hard hit. Candy flew everywhere. Shelly ran over with a squeal to pull Brad's blindfold off and gave him a little kiss on the lips, while all the other kids scrambled at their feet gathering up candy. I laughed to myself at the funny picture they all made and wished I had a camera to capture the moment.

"Time for presents!" Grandma called over the din. She grabbed my arm, shuttling me over to a seat near a table where several gift bags were piled.

She placed a funny looking bow on my head and handed me a gift bag to open.

"This one is from Maggie Pratt," she said, reading the tag.

I shot Maggie a smile and began removing the tissue paper from the bag. Maggie and I had chemistry together, and she was a really sweet girl.

I opened presents for about ten minutes while Grandma wrote everything down on a list so I could send out thank you notes later. When we were all done, I was sitting next to a nice stack of gifts and feeling a little overwhelmed at everyone's generosity toward me. Grandma went back into the house and proceeded to bring out my birthday cake.

I had to admit the cake was pretty impressive. It was in the shape of a star with three tiered layers. There was one candle in the points of each of the stars and one in the very center of the cake on the top layer, making a total of sixteen. It was decorated in pink frosting with little white beaded accents around the sides.

My friends broke into singing the happy birthday song while Grandma lit the candles.

"Make a wish!" someone yelled, as I leaned over to blow the candles out. I was amazed to find an unbidden picture of Vance Mangum raced into my mind. I closed my eyes and savored the image for a moment before taking a large breath and blowing out all the candles.

The group cheered at my success and began lining up for a piece of cake. When Grandma was done cutting it for everyone, I went over and wrapped my arms around her in a giant hug.

"Thank you, Grandma. For everything you've done."

She laughed and hugged me back. "It was the least I could do. I'm just sorry your mom couldn't get off work so she could join us."

I nodded. "I do have another surprise for you, though." She smiled slyly.

"Really?" I looked at her expectantly, wondering what it could possibly be.

"Come with me," she added, stepping away and gesturing with her index finger for me to follow. She led me back into the house, through the kitchen and out into the family room.

"Dad!" I cried out when I saw the debonair looking man sitting in the armchair, reading the newspaper.

"Hey, Pumpkin!" He dropped the paper to the floor, jumping up to greet me.

We enveloped each other in a deep embrace.

"I thought you were in Denver!" I nuzzled my head against his shoulder, realizing how much I missed him.

"It's my little girl's sixteenth birthday! I couldn't miss it!" He tightened his bear hug hold on me. "I'm sorry I couldn't get here sooner, but I came on the earliest flight I could get."

"I'm just glad you're here." I hugged him even tighter. "Mom will be so happy to see you. Did she

know you were coming?"

"Yes, she did."

"And she didn't tell me?" I asked, wondering why she would keep such a secret from me.

"It was a surprise!" He laughed and wrapped an arm around my shoulders while we walked back toward the kitchen. "Plus, I didn't want her to get your hopes up in case my flight was delayed for some reason."

"It's midnight now, Lollipop," Grandma broke into our conversation. "It's probably time for your guests to be getting home. Why don't you go say goodbye to everyone and get them moving in the right direction? Then you can visit some more with your dad."

"All right. Be back in a minute!" I bounded out the backdoor with a happy spring in my step.

I said goodnight to all my friends and thanked them for coming, opening the side gate to the yard so they could get out easier. I walked them out to the street and waved to them while they loudly piled into their different vehicles and drove away.

I went back into the yard, through the gate so I could close it and secure it tightly. Then I proceeded to go about picking up plates and cups that hadn't made it into the garbage can.

Soon Grandma was at my side helping me clean up. We visited while we made quick work of restoring the place to its normal order. We left the Chinese lanterns hanging though, because Grandma said she wanted to enjoy them for a little longer.

After we were done carrying the last of the dishes into the kitchen, I turned to start loading the dishwasher, but Grandma stopped me.

"I can do those later. Come sit at the table for a minute. I want to talk to you about something."

"Okay." I walked over to the table and sat down. "Where did Dad go?" I added, looking around and not seeing him anywhere.

"He's doing something for me," Grandma said, picking up a flat rectangular black box off the counter. It was tied with a purple ribbon. She came and sat down at the table and pushed the box across the surface toward me.

Even though I knew what was in the box, it still took my breath away when I opened it. My beautiful purple pendant on its silver chain lay stretched out across the black velvet lining. I gently lifted it.

"Thank you, Grandma," I said, and she helped me to fasten it around my neck. I fingered the smooth purple stone once again. "I can't stop looking at it. I don't know why," I whispered. "It feels special already, almost ... magical." I laughed at my stupid statement.

Grandma sat back down next to me and reached to take my hand.

"I told you there was more, remember?"

I nodded, wondering what else she could possibly have in store.

"I'm going to tell you something you'll probably find a bit unbelievable. All I ask is that you listen to me openly, without judgment, and try to understand."

"Okay," I said, feeling a little bit apprehensive at her sudden seriousness.

Grandma squeezed my hand. "I am a witch," she said with a sudden twinkle in her eye.

I looked at her, scrutinizing carefully, before I burst out laughing.

"Yeah right." I rolled my eyes, looking round the room. "So is this some kind of candid camera joke you and Dad are trying to pull on me? Nice try. I know you two have a wonderful sense of humor but sorry, I'm not buying it."

Grandma patted my hand, stood up, and went over to pick up a candle off the counter. She brought it back to the table and set it squarely between us. She cupped her hand around the unlit wick and blew on it slightly. It immediately burst into flame.

I jumped up, knocking my chair over in the process, and stood for a moment just staring at the

flame. After a minute Grandma reached over and pinched it out.

“Oh, I get it,” I said, the pieces of the joke clicking into place for me. “It’s a trick candle! Anyone can do it.”

I leaned over the candle and cupped my hand the same way she did and blew gently on the wick. Though it was slow, the candle sputtered to life once again.

“See!” I gestured proudly. “A trick candle!”

“Well, actually Portia, you’re a witch too.” She smiled gently.

“What?” I stammered, wondering what she was hoping to accomplish with this line of play. Had she lost her ever-loving mind? What was going on?

“You’re a descendant from a long line of witches and warlocks,” Grandma said, fixing me with her gaze.

“I thought warlocks are supposed to be evil.” I blurted out the first thing that popped into my head.

“Some are. Just like some witches too. As with all things, it’s a matter of choice,” she replied, watching me carefully. “I happen to be the High Priestess for a very good coven, though.”

“A coven?” My mind was spinning like it was on a roller coaster. I took a step away. “You’re the leader of a coven.”

She nodded, maintaining eye contact with me. I could see no hint of teasing on her face.

“No offense, Grandma, but I’m having a bit of trouble believing any of this. I still think you’re trying to pull some big joke over on me, though I don’t know what you’d hope to accomplish by that.” I stared at her. “I really hope you’re trying to pull a joke on me.” I added the last part slightly under my breath.

“That’s to be expected. Will you allow me to show you something?”

“Be my guest,” I said, waving my hand through the air, wondering what she could possibly be up to.

“Follow me then.”

We left the room and walked down the hall, stopping at her linen closet, which she opened.

“Sheets? That’s what you wanted to show me?” I said sardonically, beginning to feel a little irritated at this continued charade.

Grandma reached into the closet and pressed on something. To my surprise, the whole set of shelves slid to the left, revealing a slim door behind them, the same color as the walls. She opened the door, and I could see a small set of stairs leading down into the earth.

“Now you’re starting to scare me,” I mumbled, suddenly aware there was definitely something serious going on here—much more than a practical joke.

Grandma stepped ahead of me and began to make her way down. As we neared the bottom of the steps, we entered an earthen room that had many shelves covered with bags and jars of different mixtures.

“This is my supply room where I keep most of my herbs and things I need for rituals,” she explained.

I looked around, still not too convinced, because I knew she used herbs for her shop. This could just be a storage area, couldn’t it? My mind was grasping at straws.

“Come along.” She waved her hand for me to follow, and I did so, curious to see what else was down here in this place I’d never known existed. We turned the corner into a narrow hallway and followed it to where a dark cloaked figure was standing near a closed door.

“Here’s your robe, Mother,” the figure spoke, holding a dark garment in his arms.

“Dad?” I croaked out. The figure tipped his hood back so I could see his face.

“Well, Pumpkin, what do you think of all this?” He smiled widely at me.

I sputtered and choked before I could speak. “But you’re an encyclopedia salesman!” I blurted.

was all I could say as both he and Grandma laughed.

~~“That’s just a cover for his real work. Right son?”~~ Grandma patted his hand affectionately, taking the garment from him.

“Which is what? Super warlock?” I exclaimed, feeling as if my whole world just tipped upside down.

“I know it’s a lot to take in, Pumpkin. Just try to be patient.” Dad continued smiling. “We’ll explain everything to you.”

“Actually, your dad’s the High Priest of our coven,” Grandma interjected, and I could hear the proud note that rang in her voice.

“This is unbelievable.” I dragged a hand over my face while my brain tried desperately to process all this new information. My whole life suddenly felt like a sham.

Grandma donned her robe. “We’re taking you to meet the rest of them, so please be respectful. I’ll answer your questions later when we’re finished.”

“I’m meeting who? The coven? Now?” I asked incredulously, still wondering if there was some way this could all be some sort of giant prank.

Grandma and Dad both nodded simultaneously. Dad opened the door. Grandma walked in first, and he followed. I took a deep breath and stepped through the entryway wondering what I would find.

This room was also made of earth and lit by candles sitting on large ornate candelabras in each corner. In the center of the space was a round table covered with a red cloth. On it were purple crystals in the shape of a star, with a pillar candle lit in the middle. But what really caught my eye were the cloaked and hooded figures surrounding the table. There were ten other people in the room besides myself, Grandma, and Dad.

Dad spoke first, extending a hand out toward me.

“This is my daughter, Portia.”

“Blessed be, Portia,” came the unified reply of both male and female voices.

I didn’t know what to say, so I didn’t say anything. I was sure the shock was apparent on my face. This did not appear to be a gag.

Grandma came and took my other arm, and the two of them led me together up to the first hooded member of the group.

“This is Portia,” she said to the cloaked individual.

A man’s hands reached out and took both of mine. He brought my knuckles to his lips and kissed them slightly.

“Welcome, Portia. Blessed be,” he said. He dropped my hands and removed the hood of his cloak. “My name is Hal,” he added with a smile.

Grandma led me to the next individual in line, this time a woman.

“This is Portia,” she repeated again.

“Welcome, Portia. Blessed be,” the woman repeated, kissing my knuckles in the same fashion as the man before her and then removing her hood.

I was shocked to see Babs, the massage therapist who worked at Grandma’s store. She smiled softly at me.

Grandma continued to lead me around the circle, introducing me to each individual. Each one extended a welcome before they removed their hoods. I was amazed to find several people I knew.

Bruce was a local restaurant owner I’d seen around town and when our family had eaten dinner at his place on several occasions. Alice was a Pilates instructor at The Fountains at Fontaine, and a good friend of Shelly’s parents. A couple of my neighbors were there also, Sharon and her brother Fred who lived across the street from each other, a couple of houses down from ours. The rest were new to me though, and I noticed then we had reached the last individual in the circle.

“This is Portia,” Grandma said once again.

“Welcome, Portia. Blessed be.”

My heart stopped beating at the sound of his voice, and the light kiss that brushed my knuckle sent static shock through my entire being.

The figure removed his hood, and I stared straight into the bright blue eyes of Vance Mangum.

Chapter 4

It was two o'clock in the morning. The members of the coven had all gone, and I was sitting at Grandma's kitchen table with her and dad.

"Do you have any questions?" she asked me sweetly, as if nothing was even amiss.

"Oh, I have questions," I replied a bit loudly, my irritation getting the better of me. "A lot of them!"

"Well, start asking," Dad said, patiently. "That's what we're here for."

"I thought we were Christians, for one thing," I stated, pulling the first thought that came to me out of my head. Even though our family had never been what people would consider super religious, my whole upbringing and belief system was being challenged. "Or were all the times we went to church just part of this illusion the two of you created?"

"We are Christian, Portia. All of that is true. We've never tried to lead you astray in that regard," Dad stated calmly. "Being a witch is just part of who we are, our genetic makeup, if you will. It doesn't take away our belief system. We've always believed in God and Jesus."

"I thought witches worshipped some goddess or something." I realized I knew absolutely nothing about witchcraft other than what I'd seen in stories, movies, or heard in history class.

"Some covens do," Grandma explained with a nod of her head. "It's the same as any belief system anywhere. The people choose what religion they believe and what they're comfortable with. Ours just happens to be full of Christian people and we choose to believe in God as our higher power. But we also believe that magic can come from many different elements and directions—even some involving other religious beliefs."

"Okay." I let that sink in for a moment. I guess that made sense, sort of.

"What else do you want to know?" my dad asked, and I knew I had to find out about the next thing or my curiosity would kill me.

"Vance Mangum," I said, not a question but a statement.

My dad sighed and sat back in his chair, shaking his head slightly.

"Vance has been a member of the coven for the past two years, since he came here," Grandma said when my dad didn't answer. "His aunt's in our coven also. You met her tonight, the woman named Marsha. Only she isn't exactly his aunt."

"What do you mean?" I was totally curious.

"Vance is under the protection of our coven," Dad spoke up.

"For what reason?"

"We're hiding him." He hesitated for a second before continuing, "From his father."

"What? Why?" I demanded to know.

"It's Vance's story to tell," Grandma interrupted. "But please trust us, Portia. His father is a very bad man."

"Is Vance a ... a," I faltered for the right word, "a warlock then or not?"

"He's one of the most powerful warlocks I've ever seen at his age," Dad answered truthfully. "I've never encountered powers like his in someone so young, or even in most adults."

I grabbed my head between my hands and rubbed my temples, resting my elbows on the table. My mind was throbbing with unanswered questions, but there was just too much to comprehend all at once.

"Why don't we all go to bed?" Grandma suggested, reaching out to squeeze my shoulder. "We can talk more about this tomorrow. Let's get some rest for now. The two of you are welcome to stay here tonight."

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