Chapter One

Some witches claim they can sense the different qualities of magic. That black magic has a sickening, gut-twisting odor. That good magic smells like roses. I have no reason to disbelieve them.

But I *thought* magic smelled like a nose-full of freshly ground black pepper. The twitch in my nose could have been allergies though. I was new to this witchcraft business. And despite assurances that I was magic, I had my doubts.

Because wasn't everyone capable of magic? Magic was only a metaphor for transformation, after all.

Maybe some people could move energy more effectively than others or had more finely tuned psychic abilities or instincts, like me. The pepper I smelled now was only my subconscious kicking in, alerting me to... something.

I tugged on my seatbelt and sneezed.

"Bless you," my ride share driver said, his southern drawl thick as molasses. "My last ride spilled a box of pepper on the carpet. It was a whole thing getting it out."

I smiled. *So much for witchcraft.*

Georgia marshland flashed past my window. A billboard for a local seafood joint in cheerful reds and blues grew large then vanished as we sped past.

The driver flipped down the visor, blocking the afternoon sun. He was about

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my son's age, a slender, blondish twenty-something who hadn't had his confidence knocked down yet by the world.

A part of me hoped he never would. Another part thought, *give him time*.

When you're young, being at the beginning of your career is normal and right and good. When you're pushing fifty, starting over is a sweaty-palmed terror. I curled my own sweaty palms in my lap so tightly the nails bit into the skin.

Metal rumbled beneath the SUV's wheels as we drove over the ramp and onto the small, red and black ferry. It was built like a barge, with an elevated cabin for the driver to one side and not much else. We were the only car, but the ferry was crowded with big men in baggy jeans and stained tees.

"Told ya there wouldn't be a problem," my driver said. "Not in November. Tourist season's over."

"Then who are they?" I motioned toward half a dozen burly men, clustered at the far end of the ferry near the cabin.

"There's some construction on the island. That must be today's shift."

Ah. Everyday life for them, this ferry to Travis Island. The trip was everything for me. I rubbed my damp palms on my shorts.

The SUV stopped at the front of the ferry's empty parking area. We'd have pole position when the front ramp descended onto Travis Island.

I studied the door, the unlock spell I'd received last week in mind. The spell was a metaphor too—probably for unlocking one's personal potential. The online mystery school I'd joined hadn't bothered to explain. The mystery must be part of

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the lesson.

My mouth twisted. *Why not?* At this point, I was ready to try anything to get out of the hole I'd dug myself into.

Focusing my intention, I imagined the door unlocking. As instructed, I tied the visualization to a word.

Nothing happened.

Of *course* nothing happened. But I'd hoped... Maybe something would unlock inside me?

"You can get out of the car now if you want," the driver hinted.

Why had I even bothered? Lowering my head, I sighed and flipped the unlock switch. The lock clicked open, and I stepped from the forest-green SUV.

I glanced at my paddleboard. It was still strapped to the roof, and a knot between my shoulders loosened. I moved toward the black metal railing. It looked greasy. I didn't touch it.

The ferry's engine hummed, a faint vibration through my tennis shoes. The Atlantic slapped gently against the ferry's side, and a warm breeze ruffled my hair. I inhaled the salt-tinged air.

Absently, I pulled an elastic band from the pocket of my shorts and tied back my (mostly) brown hair. Travis Island, my target, was a low mass of trees on the horizon.

I tugged at the hem of my t-shirt with its pool-cleaning logo on the back. Should I have canceled the retreat? I'd gotten only half the students I'd hoped for. True, it

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was enough to make a small profit, but I'd be earning less than minimum wage.

Way less.

Still, it was my first retreat, and it was a start. I swallowed. If I got good reviews, if I posted enticing videos, I might get more takers next time.

And no, I wasn't sure if that was hope or desperation. But I needed *something* to keep me moving forward, even if I didn't know where I was going. *Like an online mystery school.*

The noise of the engine increased. I glanced over my shoulder.

There was a clatter of metal, the ramp folding back. A louder roar, and the ferry jolted forward. I staggered and grabbed the greasy rail for balance.

Staring at his cell phone, the captain gave an absent apology wave through the window of his cabin.

I peeled my hand off the rail. A splotch of black oil shaped like a hissing cat darkened my palm.

Moving toward the SUV for something to clean up with, I paused. Would a shot of my greasy cat hand humanize me as an online influencer? Or just break the carefully crafted facade I was trying to rebuild?

I shook my head, disgusted. *Humanize me?* How phony could I get? That thought itself was a sign of desperation.

My ex-husband had already broken that facade of my perfect middle-aged marriage, perfect middle-aged life. The kicker was, I hadn't known it wasn't perfect until too late. I hadn't seen the cracks, hadn't noticed the lies.

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It wasn't the divorce, the cheating, that had brought down my career. It wasn't even learning that he'd gambled away our entire retirement. It was my followers' belief I was a hypocrite, a fraud.

My hands dropped to my sides. I couldn't defend myself from either charge. First, they were impossible to disprove. Second, they weren't entirely wrong.

I'd never been a very successful influencer. "Mid-tier" was the official term for someone like me.

I studied my hand. The oil really *did* look like an arching cat.

I pulled my phone from my pocket with my clean hand. Holding my oil-splotched hand beside my face, I snapped a selfie. It was a surprisingly good shot—the black cat, the ferry's cabin blurred intriguingly in the background.

I posted it, *#TravisIsland #BlackCat #SpookySeasonContinues,* and returned to the SUV. "I don't suppose you have a rag?" I held up my hand.

The driver looked up from his cell phone. "Huh. Looks like an angry cat. But yeah. I do." He rummaged around the front seat and tossed me a red cloth.

I swiped it across my palm. "Thanks."

He eyed me.

I handed him the rag. "What?" My voice was hard, and I cleared my throat, embarrassed. *Not everyone knows who you are. No one cares about your pathetic story*.

He shook his head. "I was just wondering... what you thought. About my girlfriend situation."

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Ears hot, I focused on him. “You asked me if I thought your girlfriend was using you. The more important question is, what do *you* think?”

He looked down at his boots. The laces were loose. He looked up. “I think she’s using me,” he said in a low voice.

I patted his shoulder, half in sympathy, half in regret. People seemed to always confide in me—even strangers.

I made it a point to listen. I’d spent thirty minutes with the driver, and already knew he was rethinking his chem major, his girlfriend had wrecked his car, and the SUV was his dad’s.

And suddenly my selfie seemed ridiculous. Self-conscious, I deleted the post.

An ad for anti-aging cream popped up before I could close the app, and I frowned. Had the app just pushed the ad because it thought I was self-conscious after deleting a selfie? True, I *had* been feeling insecure, but...

I shook my head. *Ridiculous*. Walking to the opposite side of the SUV, I rummaged through my rucksack on the backseat.

I pulled out my leatherbound journal to make some notes on the scene. My most recent card from the mystery school fell from its pages. Swiftly, I bent to retrieve the UnTarot card before the wind could blow it off the ferry.

I studied the image of the armored woman a bit longer than I needed to. It was the Protection card. I told myself the card wasn’t a warning, but I didn’t quite believe it.

The ferry swayed. I braced my feet wider.

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On a whim, or as a Hail Mary, I'd joined an online mystery school. My only excuse was it had been free. The emails, at least, had been thought-provoking, and the cards I'd received beautiful.

So far, though, the only thing I'd gotten out of the school was the determination to stay single until I got my head on straight. That, and a metaphorical unlock spell I couldn't decipher.

I sagged against the side of the SUV, warm in the autumn sun. The mystery school's "magic" seemed a fanciful way to approach personal development, and I needed to make changes.

But a part of me wanted magic to be real.

A breeze fluttered the pages of my journal. I closed the Protection card inside it. In a way, my whole life had been about protection. About hiding behind a front. Hiding my feelings. Hiding my thoughts.

None of it had done me a damn bit of good. The enemy had already breached the walls.

Now, I'd need to keep up that front even harder if I wanted my career back. I didn't have a college degree. Until a few years ago, I'd spent my marriage as a stay-at-home mom. All I had now was online influence.

A seagull screeched overhead, and I flinched at the sound. I'd trusted my cop husband. I'd trusted our marriage. I'd trusted in the facade.

And I'd been wrong. The knowings I'd had since childhood hadn't alerted me to my husband's gambling addiction or to his affair. My knowings had never been

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magic—just my own flawed subconscious.

My subconscious had failed.

Five years ago, I'd become a fairly successful, middle-aged paddleboarding mama. I'd posted photos online and got paid to include products in my photos. Two years ago, I'd even had a staff.

Not anymore. My toes curled in their sneakers, and I fought a sudden swell of nausea. I was back to my selfie-stick roots.

And that would be fine. My jaw hardened. I could start over. I could do this.

Blinking rapidly, I hugged my journal to my chest.

The driver leaned beside me against the SUV. "Is the life of an influencer as glamorous as it sounds?"

I laughed. "Last week I traded my dignity for a fifty-dollar collaboration with a smoothie shop. I spent three hours posing with an avocado."

"No partying with celebrities?" He grinned.

"My best friend is my ring light, and lately, it's been taking a dim view of me."

"Hey," he said. "You're here for work. That's a win. And you must get tons of free stuff."

"Ah... The clothes are nice," I admitted. Though lately I'd been getting more "mid-life" products like fiber supplements, liniment, and hemorrhoid cream.

The liniment hadn't bruised me ego—I was athletic and aches came with the territory. The fiber supplements and cream I'd been too embarrassed to even give away. I'd been using the latter for my undereye circles until I'd learned it wasn't a

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good idea.

Twenty minutes later, the ferry bumped against land. Its metal ramp lowered. The construction workers trooped off the ferry, then we drove slowly onto the island.

Motion at the side of the wooded road caught my eye. A tall, muscular, dark-haired man in a black t-shirt struggled with a duck by the trunk of a live oak. The duck pecked at his head, its wings flapping.

A massive white dog with what looked like dreadlocks barked enthusiastically. The dog lunged at the bird.

"Dammit," the man shouted, pushing the dog away with one hand. "Down, Snowball."

The duck quacked, brown feathers flying like something out of a Saturday morning cartoon. The man reached forward with a knife.

What the hell? Was he going to kill that bird*?* I sucked in a breath and moved to roll down the window to shout.

The knife flicked against the tree trunk. A cord that had been invisible against the bark snapped loose.

The bird flapped frantically, and the man released it. Quacking indignantly, the duck flew free. The white dog bolted after it, and the man jogged after the dog, cursing.

Bemused, I sat back in my seat. *Welcome to Travis Island*.

The SUV passed beneath oaks draped in Spanish moss. After a minute, we

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stopped in front of a massive white Victorian with red gingerbread trim.

"Here we are," the driver said cheerfully.

I eyed him. "I could have walked from the ferry."

He grinned. "Then I wouldn't have had a chance to carry your paddleboard."

I rolled my eyes.

"Besides, I love a good ferry ride," my driver continued, stepping from the car.

The driver loaded himself up with my rucksack and paddleboard. Whistling, he carried them into the resort. Hammers banged and electric saws whirred above the high, beamed ceiling.

I followed him to an abandoned front desk bracketed by potted palms. Ceiling fans of woven bamboo rotated lazily. The red-tiled floor looked old, and a little dusty. More narrow versions of the red tiles lined the hotel archways.

My driver dinged the desk bell, set my paddleboard against a vanilla-colored wall, and returned to studying his phone. I picked up a couple brochures from a rack against one wall. *Travis Island, an Ecological Jewel. The History of Travis Island.*

I turned, nose buried in a brochure, and smacked into a broad chest. The stack of brochures in the man's arms cascaded to the tile floor.

"Sorry." I grimaced, slipping my own brochures into the rear pocket of my shorts.

The man was roughly my age, his skin smooth aside from deep lines at the corners of his eyes and between his dark brows. His shocking, pale blue eyes were

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framed by thick rectangular plastic glasses. Judging by his pallor, the wrinkles had likely come from squinting at a screen.

But the nerd look ended there. He was well-built beneath his light-blue golf shirt.

My pulse sped, followed immediately by a hot flush of shame. When had I started looking at every 40-something male as a potential mate? It was ridiculous. Shameful. I could be alone. After the disaster of my marriage, I *needed* to be alone.

I bent to help him scoop up the fallen brochures. He looked up, and his forehead connected with mine.

"Ooof." I sat hard on the ground.

He winced and rubbed his head, his blue eyes crackling with annoyance. "Can I help you?"

In a southern drawl, the question might not have sounded so irritated. But the man spoke in network standard English, devoid of any regional accent. The lack of accent was a little disappointing.

"That's Paul," my ride share driver said helpfully, pocketing his phone. "Paul, here's your workshop lady."

"I'm Mitzi LaFountain, here for the women's workshop?" I shouted over the whine of a circular saw.

Paul rose, brochures cradled in an uneven fan against his broad chest. "Right, the paddleboard influencer. I'm Paul, Eco-Hospitality Guest-Experience Manager." He adjusted his thick glasses.

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I didn't even try to memorize that mouthful of a title. "Guests?" I glanced around the empty, high-ceilinged lobby.

"We're got a few, despite the construction." As if on cue, a hammer banged upstairs. "We're running on a shoestring."

"Looks like you're good to go," my driver said cheerfully. He adjusted my paddleboard against the wall. "Good luck," he said to me. "Shoot me a text when you're ready to leave."

"Here." I dug my wallet from my purse. "Let me give you a tip."

He jammed his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. "Nope. I don't accept them."

"Come on," I said. "I'll feel terrible if I don't."

"I'll feel terrible if I do." He turned and strode from the Victorian.

I slid my wallet back into my purse. I'd pay him when I left the island.

"Your water photography class doesn't start until Friday." Paul crossed his arms, his lips pressing flat. He smiled. "It's only Tuesday. You've got a good long time to explore Travis Island, because it's not that big."

I forced a smile. If my building manager back in Miami hadn't been such a creep, I would have arrived at the island only a day before my class.

Fortunately, the resort had offered me a deal. Travis Island would be a convenient escape until I could figure out where I'd move next.

"I'll need time to choose our lesson locations," I said. "And Travis—" I stumbled a bit. It was confusing when the resort owner shared the name of the island. *Had* I

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confused the name? “The owner was kind enough to give me a deal. Plus, I could use a little vacation.”

Paul winked. “Feel free to post pictures of the resort on social media. We could use the publicity.”

I snorted. “Try stopping me.” I might be mid-tier, my career might be in shambles, but I was still an influencer.

“I hope it’s okay we’re putting you in one of our glamping tents,” he continued. “It’s a little noisy in the main hotel.” Paul’s gaze flicked to the white-beamed ceiling.

“Sure,” I said.

“The tents are popular. And you won’t be alone. You’ll have a young couple as neighbors. They’re our only other guests right now, at least until your class arrives. It looks like you’ve got a nice little group.”

I bit the inside of my cheek. Right now, I was just glad I’d wrangled a half dozen women for my three-day Paddle and Pose workshop. I’d designed it for women with small businesses who wanted to learn to take their own online pics.

The yoga was just for fun—a free add-on provided by the hotel. The paddleboard angle was for fun too. But if you can snap a picture of yourself on a paddleboard, you can do it anywhere.

“Where do you stay?” I asked Paul.

“In one of the worker’s cottages behind the hotel. Our CFO, Arthur, and his wife have one too. Travis, the owner, stays in the master bedroom inside the hotel. This

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used to be his family home, before it became a resort. Let me grab your stuff."

I didn't object when he easily lifted my bag and board. Paul led me through a tropical garden. We wound beneath live oaks, our footsteps crunching lightly on the dirt path.

I pointed at a black plastic device tied to a tree with pale wires. "What's that?"

"Acoustic wildlife monitoring." Behind his angular glasses, his pale eyes gleamed. "My idea. It records the calls and other animal noises for research purposes. We've got them all over the island, even on top of the lighthouse. Birds like to perch there. I give guided tours of the local flora and fauna, if you're interested."

"If I have time, I'd love to. What exactly is being renovated at the main building?"

"We needed a new water system. Travis thought this would be a good time for some other updates as well." Paul strode into a clearing. "Here's your tent."

The tent was as big as a fair-sized hotel room and cozy with earth-toned carpets to match its canvas sides. Lights had been strung along the tent's awning, beneath which sat two Adirondack chairs on a faded oriental rug.

A firepit loaded with neatly stacked wood sat on one side of the carpet, away from the live oaks crowding two sides of the tent.

I forced myself not to clap. Now *this* was luxury—a far cry from my awful apartment with its broken stove and hidden cameras.

Paranoia was the gift from my husband that kept on giving. I'd scanned for

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bugs after I'd moved into the apartment. No one had been more surprised than me when I'd found video cameras in the walls.

The cops had been amazing, the arrest lightning fast. But it hadn't taken long for the building manager to make bail.

Paul set my paddleboard on the rug and pulled a folded map from the pocket of his khakis. "We're here." He marked an X where my tent was. "The ladies' bathrooms are here." He pointed. "There are showers in them. Feel free to explore the island. The resort owns it all, except for the lighthouse. That's government property. And those are your neighbors." He pointed between the oaks to another canvas tent.

"Thanks." I watched him walk off, then I unpacked my things and organized them in the small bureau inside the tent.

Sisal carpet. A low queen bed with a smooth white coverlet. Safari chairs. A luggage stand and a pale-wood dresser for my things. I loved it, and I was relieved to see a wi-fi booster on that dresser. I'd need good connection for my work.

A creeping sensation trailed down my spine. I stilled, a pair of shorts in my hand. Someone was watching.

Paranoid. I shook myself and slipped on my water shoes. There was nothing wrong with the tent, and I wasn't being watched. The problem was me. I hadn't shaken off the *ick* from my last apartment yet.

I walked outside and squinted at the other tent, hidden by the trees. Then I grabbed my paddleboard.

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Travis Island had a marsh area with a winding river. Its still waters should make a good route for beginner paddleboarders. But I wanted to check it out first to make sure.

I perused the map and found the marsh trail. Paddleboard on my shoulder, I made my way to the marsh. Eventually, I found a small beach, and I slid my board into the clear water.

I climbed onto it and stood, paddling toward the marsh. A heron picked its way through the water along the shore.

My anxiety ebbed as I glided beneath canopies of cypresses, moss swaying in the light breeze. Water had always been able to erase the world for me. My reflection rippled, framed by the thick branches above.

Soon, I stopped plotting selfie spots. I simply enjoyed the gentle lapping of the water, the scent of the marsh, the long-beaked birds searching for fish.

“Dammit.” The curse was softened by the man’s southern drawl. Cypress trees and tall grasses blocked my view of the speaker. “I told you, Arthur, we do not have the money. You know what’s going on.”

I lifted my paddle from the water. Embarrassed to have intruded on what was obviously a private conversation, I let the board glide silently forward.

“That’s always been your excuse,” another man said.

“We cannot afford raises for everyone right now.”

“I didn’t ask for raises for everyone. I asked for a raise for me.”

“Well, it’s off the table.”

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"Was it off the table for my *wife?*"

"I have no idea what you are talking about," the first man snapped.

The wall of cypresses along the bank opened into a clearing. A slender man with graying hair stormed away. Another man, broad shouldered and wearing a loose, white-linen shirt, fisted his hands at his sides. He turned his head toward me, the sun reflecting in his mirrored glasses, and my heart jumped.

I raised my hand in an awkward wave. He didn't return it, and I paddled forward, the lowering sun in my eyes.

Shame prickled my face, and I cursed beneath my breath. Of *course* he'd seen me. I should have just kept paddling. Now I looked like a snoop.

I dug my paddle deeper into the water, putting distance between us. Eventually, the man vanished in the trees.

I exhaled slowly. Clouds streaked pink and gold hovered above the treetops. But now, the water did not bring me peace.

And then I found her body.

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