

DEBORAH HARKNESS



VIKING

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*For Lexie and Jake, and their bright futures*

*It begins with absence and desire.  
It begins with blood and fear.  
It begins with a discovery of witches.*

## Chapter 1

The leather-bound volume was nothing remarkable. To an ordinary historian, it would have looked no different from hundreds of other manuscripts in Oxford's Bodleian Library, ancient and worn. But I knew there was something odd about it from the moment I collected it.

Duke Humfrey's Reading Room was deserted on this late-September afternoon, and requests for library materials were filled quickly now that the summer crush of visiting scholars was over and the madness of the fall term had not yet begun. Even so, I was surprised when Sean stopped me at the call desk.

"Dr. Bishop, your manuscripts are up," he whispered, voice tinged with a touch of mischief. The front of his argyle sweater was streaked with the rusty traces of old leather bindings, and he brushed at it self-consciously. A lock of sandy hair tumbled over his forehead when he did.

"Thanks," I said, flashing him a grateful smile. I was flagrantly disregarding the rules limiting the number of books a scholar could call in a single day. Sean, who'd shared many a drink with me in the pink-stuccoed pub across the street in our graduate-student days, had been filling my requests without complaint for more than a week. "And stop calling me Dr. Bishop. I always think you're talking to someone else."

He grinned back and slid the manuscripts—all containing fine examples of alchemical illustrations from the Bodleian's collections—over his battered oak desk, each one tucked into a protective gray cardboard box. "Oh, there's one more." Sean disappeared into the cage for a moment and returned with a thick, quarto-size manuscript bound simply in mottled calfskin. He laid it on top of the pile and stooped to inspect it. The thin gold rims of his glasses sparked in the dim light provided by the old bronze reading lamp that was attached to a shelf. "This one's not been called up for a while. I'll make a note that it needs to be boxed after you return it."

"Do you want me to remind you?"

"No. Already made a note here." Sean tapped his head with his fingertips.

"Your mind must be better organized than mine." My smile widened.

Sean looked at me shyly and tugged on the call slip, but it remained where it was, lodged between the cover and the first pages. "This one doesn't want to let go," he commented.

Muffled voices chattered in my ear, intruding on the familiar hush of the room.

"Did you hear that?" I looked around, puzzled by the strange sounds.

"What?" Sean replied, looking up from the manuscript.

Traces of gilt shone along its edges and caught my eye. But those faded touches of gold could not account for a faint, iridescent shimmer that seemed to be escaping from between the pages. I blinked.

"Nothing." I hastily drew the manuscript toward me, my skin prickling when it made contact with the leather. Sean's fingers were still holding the call slip, and now it slid easily out of the binding's grasp. I hoisted the volumes into my arms and tucked

them under my chin, assailed by a whiff of the uncanny that drove away the library's familiar smell of pencil shavings and floor wax.

"Diana? Are you okay?" Sean asked with a concerned frown.

"Fine. Just a bit tired," I replied, lowering the books away from my nose.

I walked quickly through the original, fifteenth-century part of the library, past the rows of Elizabethan reading desks with their three ascending bookshelves and scarred writing surfaces. Between them, Gothic windows directed the reader's attention up to the coffered ceilings, where bright paint and gilding picked out the details of the university's crest of three crowns and open book and where its motto, "God is my illumination," was proclaimed repeatedly from on high.

Another American academic, Gillian Chamberlain, was my sole companion in the library on this Friday night. A classicist who taught at Bryn Mawr, Gillian spent her time poring over scraps of papyrus sandwiched between sheets of glass. I sped past her, trying to avoid eye contact, but the creaking of the old floor gave me away.

My skin tingled as it always did when another witch looked at me.

"Diana?" she called from the gloom. I smothered a sigh and stopped.

"Hi, Gillian." Unaccountably possessive of my hoard of manuscripts, I remained as far from the witch as possible and angled my body so they weren't in her line of sight.

"What are you doing for Mabon?" Gillian was always stopping by my desk to ask me to spend time with my "sisters" while I was in town. With the Wiccan celebrations of the autumn equinox just days away, she was redoubling her efforts to bring me into the Oxford coven.

"Working," I said promptly.

"There are some very nice witches here, you know," Gillian said with prim disapproval. "You really should join us on Monday."

"Thanks. I'll think about it," I said, already moving in the direction of the Selden End, the airy seventeenth-century addition that ran perpendicular to the main axis of Duke Humfrey's. "I'm working on a conference paper, though, so don't count on it." My aunt Sarah had always warned me it wasn't possible for one witch to lie to another, but that hadn't stopped me from trying.

Gillian made a sympathetic noise, but her eyes followed me.

Back at my familiar seat facing the arched, leaded windows, I resisted the temptation to dump the manuscripts on the table and wipe my hands. Instead, mindful of their age, I lowered the stack carefully.

The manuscript that had appeared to tug on its call slip lay on top of the pile. Stamped in gilt on the spine was a coat of arms belonging to Elias Ashmole, a seventeenth-century book collector and alchemist whose books and papers had come to the Bodleian from the Ashmolean Museum in the nineteenth century, along with the number 782. I reached out, touching the brown leather.

A mild shock made me withdraw my fingers quickly, but not quickly enough. The tingling traveled up my arms, lifting my skin into tiny goose pimples, then spread across my shoulders, tensing the muscles in my back and neck. These sensations quickly receded, but they left behind a hollow feeling of unmet desire. Shaken by my response, I stepped away from the library table.

Even at a safe distance, this manuscript was challenging me—threatening the walls I'd erected to separate my career as a scholar from my birthright as the last of the

Bishop witches. Here, with my hard-earned doctorate, tenure, and promotions in hand and my career beginning to blossom, I'd renounced my family's heritage and created a life that depended on reason and scholarly abilities, not inexplicable hunches and spells. I was in Oxford to complete a research project. Upon its conclusion, my findings would be published, substantiated with extensive analysis and footnotes, and presented to human colleagues, leaving no room for mysteries and no place in my work for what could be known only through a witch's sixth sense.

But—albeit unwittingly—I had called up an alchemical manuscript that I needed for my research and that also seemed to possess an otherworldly power that was impossible to ignore. My fingers itched to open it and learn more. Yet an even stronger impulse held me back: Was my curiosity intellectual, related to my scholarship? Or did it have to do with my family's connection to witchcraft?

I drew the library's familiar air into my lungs and shut my eyes, hoping that would bring clarity. The Bodleian had always been a sanctuary to me, a place unassociated with the Bishops. Tucking my shaking hands under my elbows, I stared at Ashmole 782 in the growing twilight and wondered what to do.

My mother would instinctively have known the answer, had she been standing in my place. Most members of the Bishop family were talented witches, but my mother, Rebecca, was special. Everyone said so. Her supernatural abilities had manifested early, and by the time she was in grade school, she could outmagic most of the senior witches in the local coven with her intuitive understanding of spells, startling foresight, and uncanny knack for seeing beneath the surface of people and events. My mother's younger sister, my Aunt Sarah, was a skilled witch, too, but her talents were more mainstream: a deft hand with potions and a perfect command of witchcraft's traditional lore of spells and charms.

My fellow historians didn't know about the family, of course, but everyone in Madison, the remote town in upstate New York where I'd lived with Sarah since the age of seven, knew all about the Bishops. My ancestors had moved from Massachusetts after the Revolutionary War. By then more than a century had passed since Bridget Bishop was executed at Salem. Even so, rumors and gossip followed them to their new home. After pulling up stakes and resettling in Madison, the Bishops worked hard to demonstrate how useful it could be to have witchy neighbors for healing the sick and predicting the weather. In time the family set down roots in the community deep enough to withstand the inevitable outbreaks of superstition and human fear.

But my mother had a curiosity about the world that led her beyond the safety of Madison. She went first to Harvard, where she met a young wizard named Stephen Proctor. He also had a long magical lineage and a desire to experience life outside the scope of his family's New England history and influence. Rebecca Bishop and Stephen Proctor were a charming couple, my mother's all-American frankness a counterpoint to my father's more formal, old-fashioned ways. They became anthropologists, immersing themselves in foreign cultures and beliefs, sharing their intellectual passions along with their deep devotion to each other. After securing positions on the faculty in area schools—my mother at her alma mater, my father at Wellesley—they made research trips abroad and made a home for their new family in Cambridge.

I have few memories of my childhood, but each one is vivid and surprisingly clear. All feature my parents: the feel of corduroy on my father's elbows, the lily of the valley that scented my mother's perfume, the clink of their wineglasses on Friday nights when they'd put me to bed and dine together by candlelight. My mother told me bedtime stories, and my father's brown briefcase clattered when he dropped it by the front door. These memories would strike a familiar chord with most people.

Other recollections of my parents would not. My mother never seemed to do laundry, but my clothes were always clean and neatly folded. Forgotten permission slips for field trips to the zoo appeared in my desk when the teacher came to collect them. And no matter what condition my father's study was in when I went in for a good-night kiss (and it usually looked as if something had exploded), it was always perfectly orderly the next morning. In kindergarten I'd asked my friend Amanda's mother why she bothered washing the dishes with soap and water when all you needed to do was stack them in the sink, snap your fingers, and whisper a few words. Mrs. Schmidt laughed at my strange idea of housework, but confusion had clouded her eyes.

That night my parents told me we had to be careful about how we spoke about magic and with whom we discussed it. Humans outnumbered us and found our power frightening, my mother explained, and fear was the strongest force on earth. I hadn't confessed at the time that magic—my mother's especially—frightened me, too.

By day my mother looked like every other kid's mother in Cambridge: slightly unkempt, a bit disorganized, and perpetually harassed by the pressures of home and office. Her blond hair was fashionably tousled even though the clothes she wore remained stuck in 1977—long billowy skirts, oversize pants and shirts, and men's vests and blazers she picked up in thrift stores the length and breadth of Boston in imitation of Annie Hall. Nothing would have made you look twice if you passed her in the street or stood behind her in the supermarket.

In the privacy of our home, with the curtains drawn and the door locked, my mother became someone else. Her movements were confident and sure, not rushed and hectic. Sometimes she even seemed to float. As she went around the house, singing and picking up stuffed animals and books, her face slowly transformed into something otherworldly and beautiful. When my mother was lit up with magic, you couldn't tear your eyes away from her.

"Mommy's got a firecracker inside her," was the way my father explained it with his wide, indulgent grin. But firecrackers, I learned, were not simply bright and lively. They were unpredictable, and they could startle and frighten you, too.

My father was at a lecture one night when my mother decided to clean the silver and became mesmerized by a bowl of water she'd set on the dining-room table. As she stared at the glassy surface, it became covered with a fog that twisted itself into tiny, ghostly shapes. I gasped with delight as they grew, filling the room with fantastic beings. Soon they were crawling up the drapes and clinging to the ceiling. I cried out for my mother's help, but she remained intent on the water. Her concentration didn't waver until something half human and half animal crept near and pinched my arm. That brought her out of her reveries, and she exploded into a shower of angry red light that beat back the wraiths and left an odor of singed feathers in the house. My father noticed the strange smell the moment he returned, his alarm evident. He found us

huddled in bed together. At the sight of him, my mother burst into apologetic tears. I never felt entirely safe in the dining room again.

Any remaining sense of security evaporated after I turned seven, when my mother and father went to Africa and didn't come back alive.

I shook myself and focused again on the dilemma that faced me. The manuscript sat on the library table in a pool of lamplight. Its magic pulled on something dark and knotted inside me. My fingers returned to the smooth leather. This time the prickling sensation felt familiar. I vaguely remembered experiencing something like it once before, looking through some papers on the desk in my father's study.

Turning resolutely away from the leather-bound volume, I occupied myself with something more rational: searching for the list of alchemical texts I'd generated before leaving New Haven. It was on my desk, hidden among the loose papers, book call slips, receipts, pencils, pens, and library maps, neatly arranged by collection and then by the number assigned to each text by a library clerk when it had entered into the Bodleian. Since arriving a few weeks ago, I had been working through the list methodically. The copied-out catalog description for Ashmole 782 read, "*Anthropologia, or a treatise containing a short description of Man in two parts: the first Anatomical, the second Psychological.*" As with most of the works I studied, there was no telling what the contents were from the title.

My fingers might be able to tell me about the book without even cracking open the covers. Aunt Sarah always used her fingers to figure out what was in the mail before she opened it, in case the envelope contained a bill she didn't want to pay. That way she could plead ignorance when it turned out she owed the electric company money.

The gilt numbers on the spine winked.

I sat down and considered the options.

Ignore the magic, open the manuscript, and try to read it like a human scholar?

Push the bewitched volume aside and walk away?

Sarah would chortle with delight if she knew my predicament. She had always maintained that my efforts to keep magic at arm's length were futile. But I'd been doing so ever since my parents' funeral. There the witches among the guests had scrutinized me for signs that the Bishop and Proctor blood was in my veins, all the while patting me encouragingly and predicting it was only a matter of time before I took my mother's place in the local coven. Some had whispered their doubts about the wisdom of my parents' decision to marry.

"Too much power," they muttered when they thought I wasn't listening. "They were bound to attract attention—even without studying ancient ceremonial religion."

This was enough to make me blame my parents' death on the supernatural power they wielded and to search for a different way of life. Turning my back on anything to do with magic, I buried myself in the stuff of human adolescence—horses and boys and romantic novels—and tried to disappear among the town's ordinary residents. At puberty I had problems with depression and anxiety. It was all very normal, the kindly human doctor assured my aunt.

Sarah didn't tell him about the voices, about my habit of picking up the phone a good minute before it rang, or that she had to enchant the doors and windows when there was a full moon to keep me from wandering into the woods in my sleep. Nor did

she mention that when I was angry the chairs in the house rearranged themselves into a precarious pyramid before crashing to the floor once my mood lifted.

When I turned thirteen, my aunt decided it was time for me to channel some of my power into learning the basics of witchcraft. Lighting candles with a few whispered words or hiding pimples with a time-tested potion—these were a teenage witch’s habitual first steps. But I was unable to master even the simplest spell, burned every potion my aunt taught me, and stubbornly refused to submit to her tests to see if I’d inherited my mother’s uncannily accurate second sight.

The voices, the fires, and other unexpected eruptions lessened as my hormones quieted, but my unwillingness to learn the family business remained. It made my aunt anxious to have an untrained witch in the house, and it was with some relief that Sarah sent me off to a college in Maine. Except for the magic, it was a typical coming-of-age story.

What got me away from Madison was my intellect. It had always been precocious, leading me to talk and read before other children my age. Aided by a prodigious, photographic memory—which made it easy for me to recall the layouts of textbooks and spit out the required information on tests—my schoolwork was soon established as a place where my family’s magical legacy was irrelevant. I’d skipped my final years of high school and started college at sixteen.

There I’d first tried to carve out a place for myself in the theater department, my imagination drawn to the spectacle and the costumes—and my mind fascinated by how completely a playwright’s words could conjure up other places and times. My first few performances were heralded by my professors as extraordinary examples of the way good acting could transform an ordinary college student into someone else. The first indication that these metamorphoses might not have been the result of theatrical talent came while I was playing Ophelia in *Hamlet*. As soon as I was cast in the role, my hair started growing at an unnatural rate, tumbling down from shoulders to waist. I sat for hours beside the college’s lake, irresistibly drawn to its shining surface, with my new hair streaming all around me. The boy playing Hamlet became caught up in the illusion, and we had a passionate though dangerously volatile affair. Slowly I was dissolving into Ophelia’s madness, taking the rest of the cast with me.

The result might have been a riveting performance, but each new role brought fresh challenges. In my sophomore year, the situation became impossible when I was cast as Annabella in John Ford’s *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*. Like the character, I attracted a string of devoted suitors—not all of them human—who followed me around campus. When they refused to leave me alone after the final curtain fell, it was clear that whatever had been unleashed couldn’t be controlled. I wasn’t sure how magic had crept into my acting, and I didn’t want to find out. I cut my hair short. I stopped wearing flowing skirts and layered tops in favor of the black turtlenecks, khaki trousers, and loafers that the solid, ambitious prelaw students were wearing. My excess energy went into athletics.

After leaving the theater department, I attempted several more majors, looking for a field so rational that it would never yield a square inch to magic. I lacked the precision and patience for mathematics, and my efforts at biology were a disaster of failed quizzes and unfinished laboratory experiments.

At the end of my sophomore year, the registrar demanded I choose a major or face a

fifth year in college. A summer study program in England offered me the opportunity to get even farther from all things Bishop. I fell in love with Oxford, the quiet glow of its morning streets. My history courses covered the exploits of kings and queens, and the only voices in my head were those that whispered from books penned in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This was entirely attributable to great literature. Best of all, no one in this university town knew me, and if there were witches in the city that summer, they stayed well away. I returned home, declared a major in history, took all the required courses in record time, and graduated with honors before I turned twenty.

When I decided to pursue my doctorate, Oxford was my first choice among the possible programs. My specialty was the history of science, and my research focused on the period when science supplanted magic—the age when astrology and witch-hunts yielded to Newton and universal laws. The search for a rational order in nature, rather than a supernatural one, mirrored my own efforts to stay away from what was hidden. The lines I’d already drawn between what went on in my mind and what I carried in my blood grew more distinct.

My Aunt Sarah had snorted when she heard of my decision to specialize in seventeenth-century chemistry. Her bright red hair was an outward sign of her quick temper and sharp tongue. She was a plain-speaking, no-nonsense witch who commanded a room as soon as she entered it. A pillar of the Madison community, Sarah was often called in to manage things when there was a crisis, large or small, in town. We were on much better terms now that I wasn’t subjected to a daily dose of her keen observations on human frailty and inconsistency.

Though we were separated by hundreds of miles, Sarah thought my latest attempts to avoid magic were laughable—and told me so. “We used to call that alchemy,” she said. “There’s a lot of magic in it.”

“No, there’s not,” I protested hotly. The whole point of my work was to show how scientific this pursuit really was. “Alchemy tells us about the growth of experimentation, not the search for a magical elixir that turns lead into gold and makes people immortal.”

“If you say so,” Sarah said doubtfully. “But it’s a pretty strange subject to choose if you’re trying to pass as human.”

After earning my degree, I fought fiercely for a spot on the faculty at Yale, the only place that was more English than England. Colleagues warned that I had little chance of being granted tenure. I churned out two books, won a handful of prizes, and collected some research grants. Then I received tenure and proved everyone wrong.

More important, my life was now my own. No one in my department, not even the historians of early America, connected my last name with that of the first Salem woman executed for witchcraft in 1692. To preserve my hard-won autonomy, I continued to keep any hint of magic or witchcraft out of my life. Of course there were exceptions, like the time I’d drawn on one of Sarah’s spells when the washing machine wouldn’t stop filling with water and threatened to flood my small apartment on Wooster Square. Nobody’s perfect.

Now, taking note of this current lapse, I held my breath, grasped the manuscript with both hands, and placed it in one of the wedge-shaped cradles the library provided to protect its rare books. I had made my decision: to behave as a serious scholar and

treat Ashmole 782 like an ordinary manuscript. I'd ignore my burning fingertips, the book's strange smell, and simply describe its contents. Then I'd decide—with professional detachment—whether it was promising enough for a longer look. My fingers trembled when I loosened the small brass clasps nevertheless.

The manuscript let out a soft sigh.

A quick glance over my shoulder assured me that the room was still empty. The only other sound was the loud ticking of the reading room's clock.

Deciding not to record "Book sighed," I turned to my laptop and opened up a new file. This familiar task—one that I'd done hundreds if not thousands of times before—was as comforting as my list's neat checkmarks. I typed the manuscript name and number and copied the title from the catalog description. I eyed its size and binding, describing both in detail.

The only thing left to do was open the manuscript.

It was difficult to lift the cover, despite the loosened clasps, as if it were stuck to the pages below. I swore under my breath and rested my hand flat on the leather for a moment, hoping that Ashmole 782 simply needed a chance to know me. It wasn't magic, exactly, to put your hand on top of a book. My palm tingled, much as my skin tingled when a witch looked at me, and the tension left the manuscript. After that, it was easy to lift the cover.

The first page was rough paper. On the second sheet, which was parchment, were the words "*Anthropologia, or a treatise containing a short description of Man,*" in Ashmole's handwriting. The neat, round curves were almost as familiar to me as my own cursive script. The second part of the title—"in two parts: the first Anatomical, the second Psychological"—was written in a later hand, in pencil. It was familiar, too, but I couldn't place it. Touching the writing might give me some clue, but it was against the library's rules and it would be impossible to document the information that my fingers might gather. Instead I made notes in the computer file regarding the use of ink and pencil, the two different hands, and the possible dates of the inscriptions.

As I turned the first page, the parchment felt abnormally heavy and revealed itself as the source of the manuscript's strange smell. It wasn't simply ancient. It was something more—a combination of must and musk that had no name. And I noticed immediately that three leaves had been cut neatly out of the binding.

Here, at last, was something easy to describe. My fingers flew over the keys: "*At least three folios removed, by straightedge or razor.*" I peered into the valley of the manuscript's spine but couldn't tell whether any other pages were missing. The closer the parchment to my nose, the more the manuscript's power and odd smell distracted me.

I turned my attention to the illustration that faced the gap where the missing pages should be. It showed a tiny baby girl floating in a clear glass vessel. The baby held a silver rose in one hand, a golden rose in the other. On its feet were tiny wings, and drops of red liquid showered down on the baby's long black hair. Underneath the image was a label written in thick black ink indicating that it was a depiction of the philosophical child—an allegorical representation of a crucial step in creating the philosopher's stone, the chemical substance that promised to make its owner healthy, wealthy, and wise.

The colors were luminous and strikingly well preserved. Artists had once mixed

crushed stone and gems into their paints to produce such powerful colors. And the image itself had been drawn by someone with real artistic skill. I had to sit on my hands to keep them from trying to learn more from a touch here and there.

But the illuminator, for all his obvious talent, had the details all wrong. The glass vessel was supposed to point up, not down. The baby was supposed to be half black and half white, to show that it was a hermaphrodite. It should have had male genitalia and female breasts—or two heads, at the very least.

Alchemical imagery was allegorical, and notoriously tricky. That's why I was studying it, searching for patterns that would reveal a systematic, logical approach to chemical transformation in the days before the periodic table of the elements. Images of the moon were almost always representations of silver, for example, while images of the sun referred to gold. When the two were combined chemically, the process was represented as a wedding. In time the pictures had been replaced by words. Those words, in turn, became the grammar of chemistry.

But this manuscript put my belief in the alchemists' logic to the test. Each illustration had at least one fundamental flaw, and there was no accompanying text to help make sense of it.

I searched for something—anything—that would agree with my knowledge of alchemy. In the softening light, faint traces of handwriting appeared on one of the pages. I slanted the desk lamp so that it shone more brightly.

There was nothing there.

Slowly I turned the page as if it were a fragile leaf.

Words shimmered and moved across its surface—hundreds of words—invisible unless the angle of light and the viewer's perspective were just right.

I stifled a cry of surprise.

Ashmole 782 was a palimpsest—a manuscript within a manuscript. When parchment was scarce, scribes carefully washed the ink from old books and then wrote new text on the blank sheets. Over time the former writing often reappeared underneath as a textual ghost, discernible with the help of ultraviolet light, which could see under ink stains and bring faded text back to life.

There was no ultraviolet light strong enough to reveal these traces, though. This was not an ordinary palimpsest. The writing hadn't been washed away—it had been hidden with some sort of spell. But why would anyone go to the trouble of bewitching the text in an alchemical book? Even experts had trouble puzzling out the obscure language and fanciful imagery the authors used.

Dragging my attention from the faint letters that were moving too quickly for me to read, I focused instead on writing a synopsis of the manuscript's contents. "*Puzzling,*" I typed. "*Textual captions from the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, images mainly fifteenth century. Image sources possibly older? Mixture of paper and vellum. Colored and black inks, the former of unusually high quality. Illustrations are well executed, but details are incorrect, missing. Depicts the creation of the philosopher's stone, alchemical birth/creation, death, resurrection, and transformation. A confused copy of an earlier manuscript? A strange book, full of anomalies.*"

My fingers hesitated above the keys.

Scholars do one of two things when they discover information that doesn't fit what they already know. Either they sweep it aside so it doesn't bring their cherished

theories into question or they focus on it with laserlike intensity and try to get to the bottom of the mystery. If this book hadn't been under a spell, I might have been tempted to do the latter. Because it was bewitched, I was strongly inclined toward the former.

And when in doubt, scholars usually postpone a decision.

I typed an ambivalent final line: "*Needs more time? Possibly recall later?*"

Holding my breath, I fastened the cover with a gentle tug. Currents of magic still thrummed through the manuscript, especially fierce around the clasps.

Relieved that it was closed, I stared at Ashmole 782 for a few more moments. My fingers wanted to stray back and touch the brown leather. But this time I resisted, just as I had resisted touching the inscriptions and illustrations to learn more than a human historian could legitimately claim to know.

Aunt Sarah had always told me that magic was a gift. If it was, it had strings attached that bound me to all the Bishop witches who had come before me. There was a price to be paid for using this inherited magical power and for working the spells and charms that made up the witches' carefully guarded craft. By opening Ashmole 782, I'd breached the wall that divided my magic from my scholarship. But back on the right side of it again, I was more determined than ever to remain there.

I packed up my computer and notes and picked up the stack of manuscripts, carefully putting Ashmole 782 on the bottom. Mercifully, Gillian wasn't at her desk, though her papers were still strewn around. She must be planning on working late and was off for a cup of coffee.

"Finished?" Sean asked when I reached the call desk.

"Not quite. I'd like to reserve the top three for Monday."

"And the fourth?"

"I'm done with it," I blurted, pushing the manuscripts toward him. "You can send it back to the stacks."

Sean put it on top of a pile of returns he had already gathered. He walked with me as far as the staircase, said good-bye, and disappeared behind a swinging door. The conveyor belt that would whisk Ashmole 782 back into the bowels of the library clanged into action.

I almost turned and stopped him but let it go.

My hand was raised to push open the door on the ground floor when the air around me constricted, as if the library were squeezing me tight. The air shimmered for a split second, just as the pages of the manuscript had shimmered on Sean's desk, causing me to shiver involuntarily and raising the tiny hairs on my arms.

Something had just happened. Something magical.

My face turned back toward Duke Humfrey's, and my feet threatened to follow.

*It's nothing*, I thought, resolutely walking out of the library.

*Are you sure?* whispered a long-ignored voice.

## Chapter 2

Oxford's bells chimed seven times. Night didn't follow twilight as slowly as it would have a few months ago, but the transformation was still lingering. The library staff had turned on the lamps only thirty minutes before, casting small pools of gold in the gray light.

It was the twenty-first day of September. All over the world, witches were sharing a meal on the eve of the autumn equinox to celebrate Mabon and greet the impending darkness of winter. But the witches of Oxford would have to do without me. I was slated to give the keynote address at an important conference next month. My ideas were still unformed, and I was getting anxious.

At the thought of what my fellow witches might be eating somewhere in Oxford, my stomach rumbled. I'd been in the library since half past nine that morning, with only a short break for lunch.

Sean had taken the day off, and the person working at the call desk was new. She'd given me some trouble when I requested one crumbling item and tried to convince me to use microfilm instead. The reading room's supervisor, Mr. Johnson, overheard and came out of his office to intervene.

"My apologies, Dr. Bishop," he'd said hurriedly, pushing his heavy, dark-rimmed glasses over the bridge of his nose. "If you need to consult this manuscript for your research, we will be happy to oblige." He disappeared to fetch the restricted item and delivered it with more apologies about the inconvenience and the new staff. Gratified that my scholarly credentials had done the trick, I spent the afternoon happily reading.

I pulled two coiled weights from the upper corners of the manuscript and closed it carefully, pleased at the amount of work I'd completed. After encountering the bewitched manuscript on Friday, I'd devoted the weekend to routine tasks rather than alchemy in order to restore a sense of normalcy. I filled out financial-reimbursement forms, paid bills, wrote letters of recommendation, and even finished a book review. These chores were interspersed with more homely rituals like doing laundry, drinking copious amounts of tea, and trying recipes from the BBC's cooking programs.

After an early start this morning, I'd spent the day trying to focus on the work at hand, rather than dwelling on my recollections of Ashmole 782's strange illustrations and mysterious palimpsest. I eyed the short list of todos jotted down over the course of the day. Of the four questions on my follow-up list, the third was easiest to resolve. The answer was in an arcane periodical, *Notes and Queries*, which was shelved on one of the bookcases that stretched up toward the room's high ceilings. I pushed back my chair and decided to tick one item off my list before leaving.

The upper shelves of the section of Duke Humfrey's known as the Selden End were reachable by means of a worn set of stairs to a gallery that looked over the reading desks. I climbed the twisting treads to where the old buckram-covered books sat in neat chronological rows on wooden shelves. No one but me and an ancient literature don from Magdalen College seemed to use them. I located the volume and swore softly under my breath. It was on the top shelf, just out of reach.

A low chuckle startled me. I turned my head to see who was sitting at the desk at the far end of the gallery, but no one was there. I was hearing things again. Oxford was still a ghost town, and anyone who belonged to the university had left over an hour earlier to down a glass of free sherry in their college's senior common room before dinner. Given the Wiccan holiday, even Gillian had left in the late afternoon, after extending one final invitation and glancing at my pile of reading material with narrowed eyes.

I searched for the gallery's stepstool, which was missing. The Bodleian was notoriously short on such items, and it would easily take fifteen minutes to locate one in the library and haul it upstairs so that I could retrieve the volume. I hesitated. Even though I'd held a bewitched book, I'd resisted considerable temptations to work further magic on Friday. Besides, no one would see.

Despite my rationalizations, my skin prickled with anxiety. I didn't break my rules very often, and I kept mental accounts of the situations that had spurred me to turn to my magic for assistance. This was the fifth time this year, including putting the spell on the malfunctioning washing machine and touching Ashmole 782. Not too bad for the end of September, but not a personal best either.

I took a deep breath, held up my hand, and imagined the book in it.

Volume 19 of *Notes and Queries* slid backward four inches, tipped at an angle as if an invisible hand were pulling it down, and fell into my open palm with a soft thwack. Once there, it flopped open to the page I needed.

It had taken all of three seconds. I let out another breath to exhale some of my guilt. Suddenly two icy patches bloomed between my shoulder blades.

I had been seen, and not by an ordinary human observer.

When one witch studies another, the touch of their eyes tingles. Witches aren't the only creatures sharing the world with humans, however. There are also daemons—creative, artistic creatures who walk a tightrope between madness and genius. “Rock stars and serial killers” was how my aunt described these strange, perplexing beings. And there are vampires, ancient and beautiful, who feed on blood and will charm you utterly if they don't kill you first.

When a daemon takes a look, I feel the slight, unnerving pressure of a kiss.

But when a vampire stares, it feels cold, focused, and dangerous.

I mentally shuffled through the readers in Duke Humfrey's. There had been one vampire, a cherubic monk who pored over medieval missals and prayer books like a lover. But vampires aren't often found in rare-book rooms. Occasionally one succumbed to vanity and nostalgia and came in to reminisce, but it wasn't common.

Witches and daemons were far more typical in libraries. Gillian Chamberlain had been in today, studying her papyri with a magnifying glass. And there were definitely two daemons in the music reference room. They'd looked up, dazed, as I walked by on the way to Blackwell's for tea. One told me to bring him back a latte, which was some indication of how immersed he was in whatever madness gripped him at the moment.

No, it was a vampire who watched me now.

I'd happened upon a few vampires, since I worked in a field that put me in touch with scientists, and there were vampires aplenty in laboratories around the world. Science rewards long study and patience. And thanks to their solitary work habits, scientists were unlikely to be recognized by anyone except their closest co-workers. It