

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Enchanted to Meet You

A
WITCHES of
WEST HARBOR
NOVEL



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FIRST EDITION

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for.

ISBN 978-0-06-326837-1 (paperback)
ISBN 978-0-06-332019-2 (library hardcover)

ScoutAutomatedPrintCode


For Benjamin, who is magic

Content Warning

Some unethical use of magic. Sexual references and scenes. Mild stalking and magical violence. Mentions of the execution of persons accused of witchcraft four hundred years ago. Magic spells (of Northern European origin).

Disclaimer

The author cannot and does not guarantee any specific results from the use of spells in this book. Never use magic in the place of competent professional help.



Jessica

To honor the Mother Goddess, the giver of life and creator of all things, celebrate her bounty in the Fall, when her fruits are most plentiful.

Goody Fletcher,
Book of Useful Household Tips

“Your mother is magic.”

That’s what my father told me one day when I was nine, and had been sent to my room for being disrespectful.

I don’t remember now exactly what I’d said. Nine is the age when trouble can start for so many girls—but it’s not necessarily our fault. We’re best friends with someone one minute, then by recess we’ve been replaced. Usually we have no idea why. Meanwhile, our baby teeth are being pushed out of our head by our adult teeth, yet we’re still young enough to believe in unicorns. It’s a dizzying, disquieting time.

But 9 is also one of the most powerful numbers in the world of witchcraft. It represents selflessness, humanitarianism, compassion, and generosity—all the qualities a good witch aspires to possess.

Of course I didn’t know any of this when I was nine. All I knew

then was that I was miserable, and I was taking it out on the person who meant more to me than anyone else in the world—my mother.

“What do you mean, Mom is magic?” I’d asked my father suspiciously.

“I mean that if you’re respectful and do what your mother says,” my geeky bookkeeper father explained, sitting so awkwardly on the edge of my pink canopy bed, “she can make life really easy for you. But if you treat her badly, like you did today—well, things aren’t going to go so great.”

It’s the rare nine-year-old who would realize that her dad was only trying to express his own feelings for his wife—a woman he was so deeply in love with, he did, in some ways, think she was magical. My dad, who knew that I loved fairy tales and princesses, was simply trying to explain to me in words he thought I’d understand that if I stopped taking my growing pains out on my poor mother, life would improve.

He could have no way of knowing that I’d take him literally—that in my nine-year-old brain, hyped up on Narnia and Disney, all I heard was that my mother was magic, which made her a witch . . . and that made *me* a witch, too.

Our family, I deduced, must be descended from a long line of witches—powerful ones, probably, who could read minds, cast curses, and fly. Soon, because of my magic mother, I’d be learning to fly, too.

Of course nothing was further from the truth. My mother’s people were hardworking Italian immigrants who’d arrived in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century—same as my father’s, only his family had come from Minsk. The closest any of them ever got to anything remotely witchy was when my parents moved from New York City to the small town of West Harbor, Connecticut, to open an antique shop. West Harbor was only a

hundred and fifty miles south of Salem, Massachusetts—though my family never traveled there.

By the time I was old enough to figure out that my father hadn't meant his words literally, it was too late: I'd read everything I could about "the Craft" in the library and on the Internet (which, in those days of dial-up, was quite an accomplishment for a kid), and was well on my way to full-blown *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*—hood, though I never did learn to fly.

But by then I didn't care. Although I know some people—especially those belonging to the World Council of Witches—would disagree, you don't have to be descended from a witch to practice magic. Anyone can effect change by using the energy within and around them. It's all about their will and awareness . . . and intentions, of course.

And since that day in my bedroom, my intentions have been nothing but pure. I've never wanted anything except to be the best good witch that I can be.

So the summer before my senior year of high school, when Mom brought home an ancient—but amazing—book from an estate sale, I begged her to let me keep it, rather than sell it in her shop. So old the binding had come loose and the edges of its handwritten pages were close to crumbling, the book smelled of vanilla and lavender and secrets. As I carefully turned the pages and spotted words like "lover," "waxing," and "threefold," my heart began to pound.


Mom and I were getting along much better by then because I'd realized my father had been right: my mother *was* magic . . . just not the kind of magic I thought he'd meant. My mother was magic like all mothers are magic: she loved me unconditionally.

And I loved her right back . . . enough not to worry her by telling her the truth.

"Of course you can have it, sweetie," she'd said, kissing me

airily on the top of my head. “Though why you want it, I can’t imagine. It’s just an old Puritan recipe book. Are you going to start making pottage stew for us now?”

“Maybe, Mom,” I’d said, carefully turning the pages of Goody Fletcher’s *Book of Useful Household Tips*. “Maybe I will.”



Jessica

Journal Entry from 2005

Captivate thy love by preparing a pottage stew, and then
consuming it before him.

Goody Fletcher,
Book of Useful Household Tips

Today is the day. It has to be. Dina said she overheard Rosalie Hopkins last night at Dairy Queen say she's going to ask Billy Walker to the Homecoming dance.

If that happens, Billy will say yes, and I'll never have a chance with him. I can't compete with Rosalie. Her dad owns the biggest luxury car dealership in the tristate area (as she never misses an opportunity to remind everyone). Plus she gives blow jobs on the first date.

Not that I'm judging her for it. I'm not, at *all*.

It's just that since I spent last semester doing study abroad in Europe, I found out a few things—and I don't mean how much better the bread is in France. I mean how intimate relations are actually *supposed* to work.

So now when I go down on someone, I expect to be gone

down upon in return.

I strongly suspect, however, that Billy Walker has no idea how to orally pleasure a woman.

This isn't his fault, of course. Sexual education in this country is a disgrace.

But that's okay. I don't actually mind that I might have to spend many hours teaching Billy—slowly and carefully—how to properly satisfy a woman.

Which reminds me: another reason it has to be today is that tonight is the full moon. According to Goody Fletcher's book, love spells are the most powerful when conducted under a moon that's growing fuller (so that "his love for thee will grow apace").

So I've only got about twelve hours to get this done, or I'll have to wait a whole month, by which time Rosalie will definitely have already gotten her lips all over Billy.

Fortunately we had all the ingredients—or the most important ones, anyway, according to the book—in the fridge. So last night, while Mom and Dad were at Ethan's soccer game, I visualized my own attractiveness and lovability while chopping them up and cooking them together.

The only problem is that the ink Goody Fletcher used is so faded (and, to be honest, her cursive so spidery and hard to decipher in places), I couldn't always read the words.

I'm pretty sure this doesn't matter, however, since magic isn't about your tools, but your intentions. Which is good since I have only the best intentions toward Billy and, according to Goody Fletcher, I'm supposed to "rub garlic round a wooden bowl, then eat the pottage from it" in front of the person I'm hoping to attract.

But I'm not about to stand in front of Billy Walker in the cafeteria and eat pottage stew out of a wooden bowl rubbed in garlic. As Dina rightfully pointed out, in all the years we've gone to

school together, Billy and I have never eaten at the same lunch table. He's always sat with the jocks, and I've always sat with Dina and the rest of the emos and goths. It's going to look weird enough when I casually stroll over to his table, eating stew out of a wooden bowl from home instead of pizza off a paper plate from the hot food line.

Also, I have Chem class with him right after lunch. I want to entice him, not disgust him with my garlic breath.

So it's a no-garlic pottage stew out of Tupperware for me.

I really hope my intentions prove strong and pure enough for this spell to work. I don't know how much longer I can go on being Billy's lab partner and nothing more, when all these years I've loved him. And he and Rosalie would be so wrong for each other, it's actually gross.



Keep out unwelcome guests (from evil spirits to garden slugs) by sprinkling a little salt across thy threshold.

Goody Fletcher,
Book of Useful Household Tips

I should have known. I should have put it together right away, what with all the signs the universe was practically hurling at me: Floods. Fire. The return of neon.

But as usual, I was clueless. So clueless that when the tall guy dressed all in black wandered in off the sidewalk during my annual “Fall into Fall Apparel” sale, I didn’t think twice.

Why would I? I mean, yes, the sign outside my shop has the words *Enchantments: A Women’s Clothing Boutique* carved into it in broad hand calligraphy (then painted in gold leaf for maximum impact).

But I get male customers all the time. So I didn’t even catch on when, instead of glancing around at all the extremely tasteful (if I do say so myself) racks of dresses, blouses, leggings, jackets, scarves, and jewelry, this guy simply stood there in the doorway and stared.

At *me*.

We get all kinds during leaf peeping season, so this didn't strike me as odd. It was kind of flattering, in fact, because this guy was sexy looking, and apparently alone. There wasn't a ring on his wedding finger, either. *Nice*, I thought.

"Well, Mrs. Dunleavy," I said, turning to the mayor's wife—and my best customer. We were standing in front of the full-length mirror beside the dressing room doors. I wasn't trying to hurry her, but sexy single guys don't walk into my shop and stare at me every day. "How do you feel in this one?"

Margo Dunleavy, as always, sighed uncertainly at her reflection. "I just don't know, Jess. Do you think it's a little . . ." She lowered her voice so that the hot guy in the doorway, clearly eavesdropping on us in a low-key kind of way, wouldn't overhear. ". . . *risqué*?"

"Absolutely not." I straightened the hem of the close-fitting—and slightly revealing—burgundy silk gown. "It's the West Harbor Tricentennial Ball. When will there ever be another occasion like this? Not for three hundred more years."

I tried to ignore the fact that my reflection in the mirror wasn't nearly as flattering at the moment as that of the mayor's wife. For one thing, I wasn't wearing a practically bespoke evening gown. And for another, I'd been working hard since early morning getting things ready for the blow-out sale, so my dark curls were secured to the top of my head with a plastic claw clip, my cheeks were pink and damp with sweat, and I was wearing a jumpsuit—in *neon yellow*.

That's because jumpsuits for women my size—five foot nine and two hundred pounds—sell out in minutes in all the good colors. I have to save all the best colors (black, obviously) for my customers.

At least I'd remembered to tie one of the cute silk scarves from our new floral print line around my neck. But still, I looked

like what I felt: a sleep-deprived, slightly cranky, full-figured thirtysomething witch in a neon yellow jumpsuit.

But maybe those were all the things Hot Doorway Guy looked for in a girl? It had been so long since anyone at all had been interested in me, I'd take a guy who liked neon, so long as he was gainfully employed and chewed with his mouth closed.

"And this dress fits you like a glove," I pointed out to Mrs. Dunleavy. "It's like it was *made* for you."

Because, although the mayor's wife didn't know it, the dress *had* been made for her—well, tailored, anyway. Because as soon as it arrived, I'd set it aside, knowing it would be perfect for her—with a few little adjustments of my own.

"Oh." The older woman fingered the delicate cloth longingly as she gazed at her reflection. "I have to say, I do love it. And the price is just right, as always. But Rosalie Hopkins and some of those other women from the Yacht Club—"

My voice was sharper than I intended it to be. "What about them?"

"Well, I just wouldn't want them to think I was"—her voice dipped even lower—"putting on airs."

"Who cares what anyone else thinks?" The mere allusion to Rosalie Hopkins—not to mention the Yacht Club—was enough to cause me to momentarily forget my fatigue, as well as Hot Doorway Guy. Margo Dunleavy was one of the sweetest women in West Harbor, but, like so many caretakers, she always put others before herself. The upcoming ball was the perfect time for her to shine, if only she'd let me do my job and make it happen. "If you feel good in it, that's all that counts."

"Well." Mrs. Dunleavy chewed worriedly at her lower lip. "I suppose that's true. Rosalie says she's going into the city to buy her gown." Margo's gaze met mine in the mirror. "Which I told her is a mistake!" she added quickly. "Support local businesses.

You know that's always been one of our campaign slogans."

"Thank you for that. I wonder if this will help." I draped a navy crepe de chine shawl around Mrs. Dunleavy's bare shoulders. Dotted with crystals that shimmered when they caught the light, the shawl brought out the silver in the older woman's hair, as well as the sparkle in her dark eyes. "Now what do you think?"

Margo Dunleavy caught her breath and, right there in the mirror, a transformation seemed to take place. Suddenly, she was standing taller, her shoulders thrown back, her cheeks aglow with a color that hadn't been there before . . .

. . . and I knew I'd worked the magic I'd been hoping for.

"Oh, Jess!" she cried. "I love it!"

"Do you?" I beamed. This was the part I loved best about my job—what made all the late nights and hard work worth it. "I'm so glad. And again, not that it matters what anyone thinks but you, but I'm sure Mrs. Mayor will love it, too."

"Oh, I think you're right. I'll take it. I'll take them both, the dress and the . . . the . . . whatever this blue thing is."

"Great. We'll wrap them up for you." I was grinning—until my gaze returned to the doorway of my shop, and I caught sight of my afternoon visitor once again. He was still looking my way—but unlike me, definitely not smiling.

And that's when, for the first time, I noticed that Hot Doorway Guy had a bright silver amulet hanging from a black leather cord around his neck—an amulet I recognized immediately once he stepped out of the doorway and some of the bright afternoon sunlight spilled in from behind him.

No. That was my first thought. Just *no*.

What did the World Council of Witches want with me? Their bylaws made it very clear that I didn't qualify for membership—not that I cared to join their ultra-exclusionary club.

And choosing clothes for women that made them feel sexy

and confident couldn't *possibly* count as a violation of using magic without—

“Jessica Gold?” Doorway Guy said, in such a deep voice that nearly every customer in the shop spun around curiously to look at him, and then—the ones who knew me, at least—at me.

And though the expression on his face was carefully neutral, my heart started banging in my chest.

Run, I thought. *Run.*

But where? Earlier that morning I'd propped open the shop's front door to welcome in not only the crisp autumn breeze, but the many out-of-towners who'd come from the city to look at the leaves, which had recently peaked in color, setting the forested hillsides around Connecticut's Gold Coast ablaze in brilliant swathes of red, gold, and orange.

But now as tourists strolled down the Post Road past Enchantments' open front door and peeked inside, all they could see was this guy's broad-shouldered back as he stared at me, refusing to budge until I spoke with him—and blocking my only path of escape.

Great. So not only was I being held hostage by a member of the WCW, I was losing potential sales, as well.

It's really no wonder witches have such a bad reputation.

Fine. I wasn't going to run. Even if I had somewhere to go, that would be undignified.

“Uh, Becca,” I said to my trusty sales assistant. “Could you ring up Mrs. Dunleavy's purchases after she's changed? I have to meet with this, er, gentleman here for a few moments.”

Gentleman. Yeah, right.

“Of course.” Becca's dark eyes were wide with curiosity and concern as she watched the tall stranger follow me into my small, cluttered office in the back of the shop—curiosity because she'd never seen this man before, and concern because . . . well, my

office was a well-known disaster area, and I'd never allowed anyone in there before—anyone except Enchantments employees and Pye, my cat and our official shop mascot.

"Sorry," I muttered as I lifted a pile of unpriced bralettes in order to make room for him on the office's only visitor's chair.

Since there was no place to put the lacy bralettes, however, due to the piles of other merchandise, not to mention the bags of candy I'd bought (and already begun snacking on) to give out during the Post Road's Halloween Trick-or-Treating, I could only set them on the desk in front of me . . .

Which meant that I was now going to have to have a meeting with a member of an association that billed itself as "the world's largest professional organization meant to advance the common interests of witches" over a pile of ladies undergarments.

But then I reminded myself that I didn't care. There was nothing for me to be embarrassed about or ashamed of. Women needed stylish, comfortable bras, and there wasn't anything about his organization that advanced *my* interests.

"Look, Mr., er," I began.

"It's Derrick," Hot Doorway Guy said. "Derrick Winters."

That threw me. Whoever heard of a WCW member named *Derrick*? Most of them were proud that they could trace their "magick" lineage back to Colonial times, or even earlier. They all had names like Elizabeth Carrington or John Ayres or, in the case of West Harbor's local rep, Rosalie Hopkins.

Hot Doorway Guy didn't even look like a member of the World Council of Witches, except for the amulet. He looked . . . well, more like someone who *hunted* witches: tall, dressed all in black, lanky as a cowboy, but wearing biker boots—a rarity in this affluent part of Connecticut—with long blond hair tied back into a low messy knot at the nape of his neck, several days' growth of whiskers, and angular features. His slate-gray eyes seemed to be

judging all my sins at once: the disorganized office, open bags of Halloween candy, the yawning window behind me (for Pye to leap in and out of as he conducted his patrols between my house and the shop), and of course, the jumpsuit.

Still, the amulet didn't lie. It was a slim crescent moon attached to a full moon, a design worn by all members of the WCW (which I'd never be), representing Gaia, the Greek goddess of creation.

I decided my best defense was to take the offense.

"Well, look, *Derrick*," I said. "I don't know what they've told you about me. And I don't know what you thought you saw out there, either. But I can assure you, it wasn't magic."

He raised both golden blond eyebrows. "What wasn't?"

"What you saw. First of all, I would never, *ever* cast a spell on someone without their consent. At least, not anymore. Spells cast as a juvenile shouldn't count, in my opinion."

The eyebrows went up even more, but before he had a chance to say anything, I barreled on.

"I ordered that dress with Margo Dunleavy in mind, and the shawl, too." I rubbed my knuckles, remembering how I'd been up sewing on the crystals until well after midnight, knowing Mrs. Dunleavy would be coming in today. My joints were still a little sore. "She's the mayor's wife. This town is having a ball to celebrate its Tricentennial—"

"Yes, I noticed. The banners hanging from every single streetlamp were hard to miss."

But he didn't say it in an admiring way. He deadpanned it, the corners of his mouth turned up into a smirk.

I thought I knew what he was thinking—or what a rational person would be thinking, anyway. I forgot for a moment that WCW members aren't rational.

"Yeah," I said. "I know. And, for the record, I, too, am against

celebrating the three hundredth anniversary of the theft of land from its indigenous people.”

When his eyebrows only furrowed at this, I went on, quickly, “But the town council decided that if we threw a Tricentennial Festival the weekend of Halloween, complete with a ball in the village square, people would show up, and we’d make a lot of money. And it turns out they were right—tickets for the ball are two hundred dollars a pop, and they’re selling fast. Mrs. Dunleavy out there is the one who proposed that the sales go to West Harbor schools’ arts and music departments instead of beautifying the beach near the Yacht Club.” I tried to keep the self-satisfaction out of my voice over this turn of events, since Rosalie Hopkins was the one who’d made the Yacht Club beach proposal. “But that’s how Margo Dunleavy is—she goes out of her way to do kind things for people. She doesn’t even have kids! That’s why I thought it would be nice if she had something really spectacular to wear to the ball. But I *don’t* cast glamours on my customers. *Ever*. So you can go back and tell the Council they’re wasting their time. I haven’t broken their rules.”

Satisfied I’d put him in his place, I leaned back in my chair and thought about rewarding myself with a miniature Snickers bar, but decided it wouldn’t be dignified.

“Well,” Derrick replied, slowly. “That’s all good to know. But that’s not why I’m here.”

“Really?” I was shocked. From what I’d read on the various spellworking message boards I belonged to, the WCW was always sticking its nose where it wasn’t needed, much less wanted. “Why are you here, then?” Suddenly realization hit, and I slammed both my hands down on either side of the pile of bras and pushed myself up to my feet. “Wait a minute. You can’t be telling me I’m on the Council’s shit list for something I did more than a decade ago, when I was only a teenager?”

“Ms. Gold,” Derrick said, his eyebrows raised again. “I think you ought to sit down.”

“It’s Jessica. Or Jess. And no, I won’t sit down. Just because you uptight wand-clutchers can trace your magic lineage back to your ancestors on the *Mayflower*, you think you’re so superior to the rest of us. Well, let me tell you something that no one else has probably ever had the guts to: Hereditary witchcraft? That isn’t a thing. There’s no genetic marker for magic. *Everyone* has psychic ability. Some people are simply more in touch with it than others, and that’s because they’ve *worked* at it. They’ve honed and practiced their craft. That’s all there is to it. Having a relative who was hanged for witchcraft in the sixteen hundreds doesn’t make you any more of a—”

“Ms. Gold.” The leather of his motorcycle jacket creaking, Derrick reached across my desk and laid a hand upon my shoulder. “I said, *sit down*, please.”

Instantly, a fizzy sort of . . . lightness came over me. That’s the only way I could describe it. It started where his hand touched my shoulder, then traveled down my arm to the tips of my fingers until it enveloped my entire body, robbing me of the tiredness I’d felt all day. Not only my tiredness, but the soreness I’d been feeling in my knuckles from sewing half the night, and my feet from being on them all day, hand selling dresses for the ball.

Instead, a delicious warmth descended upon me, as if I’d been wrapped in a blanket made of the golden autumn sunlight outside. Even when he drew away his hand—which he did almost immediately—the light, warm feeling stayed with me, and the pain didn’t return. I felt . . . well, *good*.

“What,” I asked incredulously, sinking down into my chair, “was *that*?”

“I don’t know what you mean.” He was all business. “Ms. Gold—Jessica—I’m here to deliver a message to you, and it’s

not about your illicit glamour-casting or whatever else you seem to think.”

“I said I—”

“Don’t cast glamours. I know. I heard you. Again, that’s not why I’m here.”

“Okay.” I felt an endorphin rush as strong as if I’d just eaten a bag of chocolate bars, only without the bloating and regret. “But seriously. You *have* to give me that spell.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. What I do need is for you to listen to me. I’m here because you’ve been chosen.”

“Chosen?” I shook my head, still enjoying the effervescent fizz in my veins. “Chosen for what?”

“Not what,” he said. “Who. Jessica Gold, you’re the Chosen One.”



Jessica

Journal Entry from 2005

For lasting love, carve thine initials into an apple, then thy lover's initials on the other side. Slice the apple in two. Feed thy lover the slice with thine initials, and thyself the other.

Goody Fletcher,
Book of Useful Household Tips

The spell worked.

Last night I heard the strangest noise as I was lying in bed, wondering why Billy had shown no sign at all during Chem of having been affected by the sight of me eating pottage stew in front of him in the caf.

At first I couldn't figure out what the noise was. It sounded kind of like when Dina and I go out cruising with Mark in his Mustang along the country roads outside of East Harbor, and gravel flies up and hits his fenders.

Only I was in my bedroom. On the second floor of my house. Then I heard it again. And again.

I realized it was coming from my bedroom window, and it *was*

gravel: someone was throwing bits of gravel at my window from the street.

Of course I figured it was Mark and Dina. It's the kind of thing they would do, sneak out on a school night and throw rocks at my window to get me to come join them on another one of their lunatic adventures.

But when I went to my window to look down into the yard, it wasn't Mark or Dina standing there in the light of the full moon.

It was Billy Walker.

I didn't know what to do, especially when he saw me looking down at him and started waving his arms and whisper-yelling, "Jess! Jess, it's me, Billy!" Loud enough for the entire neighborhood to hear.

Naturally I had no choice but to open my window and whisper-yell back down to him, "Oh my God, Billy, would you please shut up? Do you want to wake up my parents?"

"Shit," he said, ducking and looking around like my dad was going to come out of the house swinging an axe or something. "I'm sorry. I just—I really need to talk to you."

Don't get me wrong. I was delighted to see him. He looked so cute, standing down there in his red-and-gold letter jacket, with his dark hair all messed up like he'd just rolled out of bed or had been working out or something.

But I'd already wiped off all my makeup and washed my face and put on my goofiest flannel pajamas and done my wet hair up in braids so it would be nice and wavy in the morning instead of riotously curly. I didn't exactly want to go bouncing down there and have a big heart-to-heart with the boy of my dreams in my current state of what the French call *dishabille*.

But it didn't look as if I had much choice.

"Can it wait until morning?" I whispered down at him.

"No," he said. "There's something really important I need to

ask you.”

Oh my God, I realized in that moment. The spell worked. He’s going to ask me to Homecoming. Me, and not Rosalie Hopkins.

Who cares if he sees me without makeup on and my hair done up in braids? That’s not going to change his mind. Not now.

Goody Fletcher’s spell had worked.

“I’ll be right down,” I said, and closed my window against the chilly night air, jammed my feet into a pair of UGGs, and flew silently past my parents’ and little brother’s bedrooms, down the stairs, into the kitchen, to the mudroom where I threw my winter coat on over my pajamas and, unlocking the back door, crept outside . . .

. . . directly into Billy Walker’s strong, warm embrace. Because he was standing right there, waiting for me.

“How did you know where I live?” I asked.

“I came here for your birthday party when we were six. You showed us all your room, don’t you remember?”

“Oh, yeah,” I said, and I did dimly remember it, though it was hard to remember anything at that moment because suddenly Billy’s lips were on my cheeks, my hair, my lips, kissing me as if he could never kiss me enough, which was exactly what I’d always dreamed of, though I’d never dreamed of it happening here, in my backyard, in the middle of the night with me in my winter coat and pajamas and Billy’s skin feeling so hot against mine, like he was running some kind of fever. And that wasn’t all of his I felt against me, either.

“Are you”—I managed to gasp, coming up for air after a particularly intense kiss, with tongue—“all right, Billy?”

“Yeah,” he murmured, sliding his lips down my neck. His big football player fingers were fumbling at the buttons of my flannel pajama top. “Are you? Is this . . . is this all right?”

“Yes. More than all right. It’s just a bit . . . sudden.”

"I know. But you've been so nice to me all year, helping me in Chem the way you have. I'd have flunked by now if it weren't for you, and Coach would've kicked me off the team for sure. It's so sweet of you, and . . . well, I've wanted to kiss you like this for so long, Jess. I just never worked up the courage until tonight. I can't believe you like me back. You do, don't you?"

"I do." Understatement of the year.

"Oh, man. That is so great. *You're* so great. . . ."

This was very gratifying to hear—almost as gratifying as his cold, strong fingers felt a second later around my boobs when he finally got my top open and, with a strangled cry, buried his face against my throat.

But it still wasn't exactly what I'd been hoping for.

"Didn't you say you had something you wanted to ask me?" I said as I very delicately pushed his head lower.

"Oh, yeah." He mumbled something that I couldn't understand because his mouth was full of my boobs.

"Billy." It was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do, because the sensation of his hot tongue on my nipple had set off a veritable geyser of lust in my pants.

But I needed to hear the words, so I tugged his head away by his hair. He stared up at me, his eyes as drenched in desire as my pajama bottoms.

"Wha'?" he asked, stupidly.

"Homecoming," I said. "Who are you taking to Homecoming?"

"Oh. You, if you'd go with me, Jess. You."

I let go of his hair, and his mouth went right back to my chest, before sliding lower. Then lower. "You," he murmured again, like an incantation. "You, you, you, you."



Samhain is when the wise goodwife finishes her preparations for winter. Animals should be fattened up enough for culling. Fruits, herbs, and harvest vegetables should be preserved for the cold winter days ahead.

Goody Fletcher,
Book of Useful Household Tips

I started to laugh—until I realized Derrick Winters wasn't joking.

"Wait," I said. "The Chosen One? *Me?*"

Apparently he was serious, since he produced a pile of paper from the inside pocket of his leather jacket and unfolded it.

"This was copied from a witch's grimoire found plastered into the wall of a house in upstate New York," he said. "It's thought to have been hidden there nearly four hundred years ago."

"Wait." I couldn't believe this was happening. "This isn't an *ancient prophecy*, is it?"

He eyed me sternly over the top of the papers. "Ms. Gold, I can assure you that though you may find it amusing, what's happening here in your town is deadly serious."

"What's happening in my town?"

He stared at me like I'd just asked if the sky was blue. "A rift. A shift in the cosmic balance. Are you honestly telling me you haven't noticed? Nothing unusual at all lately around West Harbor?"

"Well, no, not really." When he continued to give me the hairy eyeball, I said, "I mean, I've been a bit busy getting ready for this sale." When the disbelieving look turned into bewilderment, I explained, "My Fall into Fall sale? I have it every year. It's when we slash our prices to get rid of all of our summer stock to make room for our winter inventory—"

Now the look turned to one of impatience. "Ms. Gold. Are you serious? You've noticed *nothing* strange around this village at all lately? Sinkholes? Missing pets? Unusual weather patterns? Anything unusual at all?"

"Well, if you put it that way . . ."

You couldn't be a witch—even a nonhereditary witch like me—and not have some inkling when things weren't quite right. Dina had been complaining for months that West Harbor real estate sales were down, while sales in neighboring Greenwich and Fairfield remained as brisk as ever. The shop next door to Enchantments had had a *Vacant: For Lease* sign in its papered-over display window for months, and I'd even noticed a slight decline in the usually vigorous market for my wide-leg loungers.

All of those things could be explained by a local—*very* local—economic slump.

But the wolf Mark swore he'd seen along the jogging trail while he'd been out for his daily run the other day? There hadn't been a wolf spotted in Connecticut since the seventeen hundreds, when colonists, fearing for their livestock, hunted them into extinction.

Yet the more we tried to convince Mark that he'd only imagined the one he'd seen—or that it had been someone's husky escaped from its leash or backyard—the more he stuck to his story.

Now I was wondering if he might actually have been right.

And then there was the water.

"I mean, sure, there've been a few odd things here and there," I replied, carefully. The pleasant glowy feeling his touch had wrapped me in had all but disappeared, and I was beginning to feel something else instead . . . a slight chill. It wasn't coming from the open window behind me, either. "Some flooding in town. Every time there's a king tide or it rains more than a fraction of an inch, the Post Road floods, especially in the cafeteria over by the high school. That never used to happen. And there've been some odd animal sightings. But that kind of thing is going on all over the world, isn't it? Climate change, or something—?"

"No." Derrick's silver gaze was steady. "It's because of the rift right here in West Harbor. And it's going to keep getting worse every day until the Chosen One puts a stop to it."

"And by the Chosen One, you mean me? All because it says so in some book someone found buried in a wall? Oh, *come on*." I guffawed, but the air around me did seem to be getting chillier. "You know this is basically the beginning of every supernatural horror film ever made, right? You can't actually believe it."

"I do believe it," he said quietly. "Because I've seen it happen before, dozens of times. I'm sure you've heard of it happening before, too. Towns just like this one that were wiped off the map like they never existed—"

"You mean by fire or flood? Those were natural disasters."

"Were they?" His eyes glowed. "Or was it because of an old wrong, a crime committed long ago that was never righted, so that the forces of evil were allowed to fester beneath the town until finally they created a rift they were able to slip through and destroy the area completely?"

"Oh." I blinked. "I hadn't thought of that."

Except that I had. A crime committed long ago that was never

righted? I had personal knowledge of such a crime . . . several such crimes, actually. I'd contributed to them. I'd always wondered when—or if—anything would ever come of them.

I guess I had my answer.

"But what if that evil could have been stopped?" he went on, those silver eyes gleaming excitedly. "That's why I'm here. I'm hoping to keep such a rift from happening to West Harbor—but I can only do it with your help."

"Okay," I said. No way was I going to mention having personal knowledge of any crime that might possibly have contributed to the evil festering beneath my town. I was going to keep it cool. As cool as a witch in a neon jumpsuit could keep things. "In that case, yeah, I think maybe I should hear about this ancient prophecy of yours. Just to be on the safe side."

Looking pleased, Derrick lifted his stack of papers and began to read aloud from the first page. "Every thirteenth generation, a child is born. Into this child, the light will be implanted—"

Implanted?

"—by one trained to wield it. That child will become the bringer of light. Through her, compassion and empathy will be reborn. Through her, harmony in nature will once again be restored. Through her, evil will be extinguished—"

"Sorry to interrupt." My heart, which had already been drumming at the possibility of my having contributed in some way to the formulation of this supernatural fault line, was beginning to slam inside my chest. "But was this fact-checked by anyone? Because it seems a bit—"

"There's more." Derrick pointed to his paper.

"I'm sure. But—"

"Just let me get to the end. 'Without her, hope dies. And without hope, humanity dies itself. And because there will always be those who prefer evil,'" Derrick continued reading, "she must be

protected by the one who is chosen. When the Bringer of Light is joined by the Chosen One, her power will increase tenfold. Because it is only with light that evil can be destroyed, and it is only with light that life can flourish.’”

I realized my hand had crept toward the amethyst stone I always wore on a silver chain at my throat—or had worn, at least, since the trouble with Billy. Amethyst had protective properties, and the stone had always worked.

Up until now.

“There,” he said. “That’s it. This is your copy to keep.” He laid the folded pages on top of the pile of lacy bralettes between us. “You can ask your questions now if you still have any.”

“Um,” I said, the cheesiest of the supernatural horror movies I’d watched obsessively as a teen now replaying on a loop in my mind. “Listen. I’m sorry. But if the Council sent you here to implant the light into me so that you can protect it, I’m going to have to give that a hard pass.”

He stared. “Pardon?”

“Not that I don’t think you’re attractive, because I do.” Like, *majorly* attractive—except for the part where he worked for the WCW. “I like the witch hunter vibe you have going on there with the hair and the leather jacket and the boots and everything. And I *love* that thing you do with your fingers—you’re going to have to show me how you do that. But the whole reason I’m on continuous birth control is so no implantation-type situation can ever take place. And before you say anything about how I’m missing out on the joys of motherhood, I don’t consider myself *childless* as much as *child-free*. I love kids, but I tried the relationship thing, and it *really* didn’t work out, so I’m done with all of that. I’m happy to be a single, prosperous, child-free business witch with my own home and a cat. So while I’m sorry about this rift thing, I have to decline your invitation. Do you want your parking vali-

dated? Because I can do that.”

The corners of Derrick’s mouth twitched. I wouldn’t have said he was smiling, though. That seemed beyond his emotional range. “I’m not here to implant anything in you, Jessica.”

“Oh.” I had to admit that, despite having meant every word I’d just said, I felt a little disappointed. Derrick Winters may have been with the WCW, but he was hot. Living in a village as small as West Harbor, the dating prospects were appallingly slim, especially when you were looking for someone who was supportive of entrepreneurial businesswomen and uninterested in any kind of long-term relationship. If I’d *had* to have sex with him—in order to save my town—it would not have been the worst thing imaginable. “Then I don’t get it.”

“*You* are the Chosen One.” He tapped the parchment paper. “The One selected to implant—and protect—the light.”

I shook my head. “And how am I supposed to do that, exactly?”

He reached for the papers he’d laid on the pile of bras and unfolded them again. On the second page was what looked like a bio that included a full color photo—a school photo, from the looks of it, and not a very good one—of a shyly smiling brown-skinned girl, a teenager in glasses and braces.

“Esther Dodge,” he said, and tapped the photo. “Through forensic genealogy, we believe she’s the Bringer of Light.”

“*She’s* supposed to save West Harbor from the rift?” I gaped. “She’s just a kid!”

“She’s sixteen. But even so, if she’s the witch we seek, her powers—coupled with yours—are all that can save this town.”

I studied the photo skeptically. “Really? What type of witch is she?”

When he looked blank, I prompted, “Storm witch, cottage witch, hedge witch, sun witch?” There were almost as many kinds of witches as there were spells. Each of them drew their power

from different types of energy, but they were all legitimate practitioners of the Craft—in my opinion. As a member of the WCW, he might disagree.

“Right,” he said quickly. “Right. Well, the truth is, I don’t know if she’s even aware of her powers. That’s where you, as the Chosen One, come in. Only you can determine if Esther truly is the Bringer of Light, by awakening that light within her yourself.”

Awakening sounded a lot better than implanting, but it was still pretty vague. “How do I do that?”

“In my experience,” he said, “if you’re truly the Chosen One, it will come naturally. According to my sources, her family isn’t magically inclined, so you’ll probably be the first witch she’s ever met.”

Great. No pressure. All of this sounded horrible. “But why me? Why am *I* the Chosen One? Why not you, since you obviously know so much about it?”

He scowled, though at the calendar on my wall, not at me. “I don’t have the necessary skills. You do.”

“Necessary skills? But I don’t know anything about—” Then I realized what he meant by necessary skills. “Is it because I’m a woman and she’s a sixteen-year-old high school girl, and you’re . . .” My gaze strayed from his eyes to his whiskers and leather jacket. “. . . you?”

“I don’t know what to tell you,” he said, flatly refusing to acknowledge what I was saying. “Our research says the Chosen One is you.”

“Uh-huh.” Typical Council member, never taking accountability for anything. “Your *research*. Tell me this, then. Since when has the WCW been using forensic genealogy to test members of the public—minors, I might add—for proof of supernatural ancestry? Besides the fact that it’s stupid, is that even legal?”

Now his scowl was definitely directed at me. “Ms. Gold, you

do realize that every moment we spend here, arguing over this, is another moment the forces of evil are able to gather strength, don't you?"

"Oh, the *forces of evil*." I widened my eyes at him mockingly, but truthfully, his words gave me another chill—enough so that I reached for a mini chocolate bar. Suddenly, I needed the comfort of a quick hit of sugar.

I hated the World Council of Witches, but I loved my town—obviously, since I'd moved back to it after college, and was sitting here listening to a WCW member explain to me how I could save it from ruin when every instinct in my body was telling me to run—run far away from him.

But a stronger impulse was compelling me to stay. Stay and right the wrong I was pretty sure I was at least partially responsible for committing.

"How exactly am I supposed to protect this girl—sorry, the Bringer of Light—who I don't even know from the *forces of evil*?" I asked. "This is West Harbor. People here hardly bother keeping their doors locked at night. I don't even own pepper spray."

"Well, I suggest you start keeping your doors locked at night. This village is very quaint, but it's only forty-five miles from New York City." One corner of his mouth was turned up, which for him I guess counted as a smile. "And I'm fairly certain the powers of evil are resistant to pepper spray."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better about any of this?" The chocolate wasn't helping. "What does the Council think it's doing, anyway, putting all the responsibility of saving the universe on me and a teenaged girl?"

"Not the universe. West Harbor."

"Right. Sorry." I stared down at the photo. It wasn't every day that a hot guy walked into my shop and told me that the fate of the universe—well, okay, my small town—rested on my shoul-

ders. Maybe that's why it took me so long to realize the girl's maroon sweater vest and yellow striped tie looked familiar. "Hold on. Does she go to school *here*—West Harbor High?"

"I'm told that she does."

"That's where I went to school. Is that why I'm the Chosen One? Because I'll have some kind of rapport with her?"

"It's possible," he said. Then he added, carefully, "That and the book."

I raised my gaze to blink at him. "What book?"

"Don't you have some sort of ancient book of spells . . . ?"

Comprehension dawned. "Goody Fletcher's book? Oh my God, who told you about that? Was it Rosalie Hopkins?" It had to be. God, I couldn't believe this. Rosalie had been itching to get her hands on that book since high school.

His gaze, which had always been sharp, became razor-edged. "So you and Rosalie Hopkins are friends?"

I opened my mouth to blurt out the truth—that Rosalie Hopkins and I were mortal enemies, and that if the rift was my fault, she was at least as responsible for it as I was.

But that didn't seem the wisest thing to say in front of someone who'd been sent to help repair it.

"We went to school together," I settled for saying instead.

Was it my imagination, or did he seem relieved? Some tension went out from beneath the padded shoulders of that motorcycle jacket, anyway. "That's probably how the Council found out about the book, then. And also probably why I was asked to give you this."

And then, to my utter horror, he tossed a silver amulet—an exact replica of the double moons he was wearing—onto the pile of lacy bralettes between us.

"*What?*" I stared down at the talisman in complete shock. "Are you kidding me? I'm not wearing *that*."

He shrugged again. "Suit yourself. It's for your own protection, but whether or not you wear it makes no difference to me."

I glanced from the amulet to his face, flabbergasted. "But I thought those were only for people like you."

"Me?"

"Members of the World Council of Witches."

Like all members of the WCW, he was a supremely good-looking and confident—one might even say *overconfident*—person. But suddenly, he seemed uncertain, shaking his head and stammering. "I . . . I . . . I'm not a member of the WCW."

"You're not?"

"No. What would make you think that?"

I pointed wordlessly at the amulet around his neck.

He fingered it in surprise, seeming to have forgotten he was wearing it. "Oh, right. You do know that this is the symbol of Gaia?"

"Yes. But it's also the symbol of the World Council of Witches."

"But they don't own the trademark on the symbol for the ancestral Mother Goddess of all life, do they?" The bitter sarcasm in his voice was oddly soothing. "No, they don't, despite what they might think. So I suggest you put it on. It's not pepper spray, but it's better than nothing."

Reluctantly, I lifted the amulet he'd tossed at me. The metal felt cold and hard against my fingers. Rosalie wore one exactly like it, usually tucked away on a silver chain beneath her inevitable cashmere sweater set, where she thought no one would notice it.

I did, though. I'd noticed it long ago . . . and also noticed that Rosalie's mother and grandmother wore similar ones.

It took me years to realize exactly what the pendant represented—and that I was never going to get one like it.

Until today, apparently.

Derrick was pointing to the open window above my head. "Aren't you worried about break-ins?"

"No. It can't open any farther than that, it's been stuck that way for years. But it's fine, my cat uses it to get in and out. If you don't work for the Council, how did you get all this stuff, like the forensic genealogical report on Esther, and copies of the prophecy about her, and everything?"

"Other entities exist in the world besides the World Council of Witches," he said. The sarcasm was back. "Entities that care as much as you do about saving this town from evil."

"Right, right." That called for another chocolate bar. "And precisely how long do we have before that happens? Did your bosses at this mystery entity give you a deadline?"

"Yes, actually," he said, with a brisk nod. "Halloween."

I choked a little on some peanuts and caramel. "I'm sorry—did you just say *Halloween*?"

"Yes. You know that Halloween is when the veil between this world and the spirit world is at its thinnest. That's when we'll have the best chance of defeating this evil." He must have noticed my expression, since he asked, "Sorry, is that inconvenient for you?"

"Yes, actually. Halloween is next week. How am I supposed to save West Harbor from being rifted, or whatever it is, in *a week*?"

"I don't know." He was edging toward the door. "But I'd think you could start by contacting Esther and—"

"Please don't say the word *implant* again."

That caused both corners of his mouth to turn up—a hard-won victory for me. "I was going to say, see if you think she truly is as gifted with magic as we've heard."

"Right. And how will I let you know if I do?" I'd already scanned the papers he'd left me, and seen that they had no phone numbers or email addresses or anything listed on them that could

be considered remotely useful information. This was one thing I'd always hated about the witching world. The magic was wonderful, but witches themselves could be so flaky—except of course for Rosalie Hopkins, who was a stickler for the rules, and loved nothing better than coming after those of us who didn't follow them to the letter—except herself of course. She defied them flagrantly. "Or are you just going to dump all the responsibility for this girl and the continued existence of West Harbor into my lap and then leave town?"

"I would never do that," he said, as if he were not standing by the door, looking ready to do exactly that. "I'll be around, enjoying the quaint ambience of this picturesque little seaside village during its Tricentennial celebration. You'll be able to find me when you need me. In the meantime—how do they put it on the Council? Oh, right." And then he smiled—an actual smile, showing a set of white, even teeth. "Blessed be."

Then he was gone, leaving me with only a pile of paper, a pendant, a task I didn't have the slightest idea how to accomplish, and the sinking feeling that West Harbor's "rift"—which apparently only I could heal—might somehow have been caused by me in the first place.