

Chapter 7

"You're actually going over to Mrs. Sinclair's?" Selene asked in disbelief as she watched Melanie tie her hair back into a high pony tail.

"Well she invited me and I think refusing would have been rude," Melanie said by way of explanation as she decided that she looked ne in her dark blue overalls.

"She's never invited me over to her place," Selene said honestly, envy tinging her voice. "If I go, I go because Dylan takes me."

Melanie shrugged.

"I think it's because she's heard about my green thumb and you know I really am looking forward to tackling her greenhouse," Melanie said excitedly.

"Just...you know be careful," Selene said slowly. "And try to put a few good words in about me, hmmm? I know she doesn't like the fact that Dylan wants me as his chosen mate. She's still caught in the old ways, wants him to wait for his mate."

"Waiting for your mate is part of the old ways?" Melanie asked curiously as the two sisters made their way downstairs. She'd always thought this was something everyone was keen to do.

Selene laughed nervously.

"You know what I mean Mel. If you don't nd your mate within a few years of turning 16, you can't let that stop you from nding someone that makes you happy and being in a relationship."

"I guess I won't have an opinion until after I turn," Melanie said with a shrug of her shoulders. "I hope I do nd my mate," Melanie confessed on the front porch of their house.

"I hope you do too Mel," Selene said with a loving smile, waving her younger sister off.

Melanie got into the car Selene and her shared, making her way to the Crimson Phoenix Pack lands. She squared her shoudlers, ready to get to work on Josie's green house. The patrols stopped her but a quick mind-link conrmed for them that Melanie had indeed been invited by Josie.

When Melanie arrived, she was taken aback when the rst person she saw standing outside Josie's home was Beta Tony along with his mate, Lana. A very attractive women with electric blue streaks in her dark hair was sitting on the patio laughing with the pair.

Melanie suddenly felt herself go pink in the face. Beta Tony was someone she realized was her ideal. He was kind, handsome and funny. She knew it was a harmless little crush born more from hero-worship but she couldn't help the goofy grin on her face when Tony waved her over good-naturedly.

"Hey Melanie," Lana said with a smile. "Josie's already outback ready to tackle her new project. She's really excited to work with you."

Melanie gave Lana a shy grin. She couldn't believe the female beta of the Crimson Phoenix Pack actually remembered her name. They'd only met very brieiy last year at Dylan's Halloween party.

"You wouldn't happen to be Melanie Santiago? Beta Antonio's daughter?" the older woman, who looked to be in her thirties, sitting next to Lana asked sharply.

Melanie nodded hesitantly wondering if her father had pissed off someone from another pack.

"This is Aria, she's a witch visiting here on an assignment," Lana explained quickly. "She dropped in here to bring Josie some homemade cakes from her sister."

"My aunt is part of the pack Aria works for," Tony said by way of explanation. He looked over at Aria with furrowed brows. "You know Antonio?"

Aria nodded fervently and looked at Melanie closely.

"I knew your mother too," Aria said meaningfully, standing up all of a sudden as if she just remembered something. "I'll see you all later, I just remembered I have...ah...I have to go see Courtney."

Melanie knew Courtney was the witch that worked for the Crimson Phoenix Pack.

"But didn't you just see her earlier today?" Tony asked bewildered.

"I need to see her again," Aria mumbled and made quick work of making her way to one of the parked cars.

"Hmm so they don't travel by broom?" Melanie said casually as Aria backed out of Josie's driveway.

Tony burst into laughter.

"You better not ever let her hear you saying that," Lana warned on a chuckle. "Witches aren't the all powerful magical beings we see them portrayed as on T.V."

"Still, she's pretty cool," Melanie said appreciatively as she watched Aria go careening down the street at full speed.

"We'll see if you think the same if she ever starts talking about your mate's bedrooms skills in front of you," Lana said darkly. She shot Tony a scathing glare.

"Hey, that's not my fault," he said holding his hands up defensively.

"Well you did sleep with her one time," Lana retorted.

"Bad choice, I know. But it was before us. Come on angel, stop throwing that in my face," Tony implored, draping an arm across her shoulder casually. "She slept with your ex-mate too. Remember?"

Tony and Lana were second-chance mates. That much even Melanie knew.

"Yeah well I never slept with my previous mate," Lana retorted, re in her eyes as Tony squeezed her shoulder imploringly.

"You know I love you," Tony countered.

Melanie couldn't help but think that Lana and Tony were awesome together. She quietly excused herself as Lana smacked his hand away that was attempting to twirl a strand of her hair. Seems like Aria got around. For one awful moment, Melanie thought maybe she'd also had a ing with her father. But Aria was too young. Her father was nearly 50 now.

When Melanie found Josie in the back, she couldn't help but yell in surprise. Josie was hauling big bags of mulch and soil, humming to herself excitedly.

"I wanted to make sure we had enough fertilizer," Josie said happily.

Melanie looked at the big bags which she estimated to be about 30 pounds worth of the stuff.

"I think we've got more than enough," Melanie ventured hesitantly. "The rst day we're just going to be looking at what we can salvage and what needs to be thrown out."

Josie's face suddenly fell.

"So we don't need all of this yet?"

Melanie shook her head.

"But we will eventually," Melanie tried to say in a supportive tone.

She walked over to examine the old greenhouse. After walking around it a few times she nodded, satished.

"Your glass seems perfectly intact, but even it wasn't, replacing broken glass on an aluminum, frame is easy. We just need to clean the glass with soap and water. Now let's check in insiiii-i-" Melanie stopped talking as she walked into what she thought was a wasteland of dead plants and animals. There was a stench that made her rmly decide that a bird must have died in here.

"I told you, no one's been in here since well...." Josie trailed off sheepishly and held a hand over her own nose.

"Let's get to work," sighed Melanie, realizing it was worse than she'd thought. "First we need to remove weeds and debris. Then we're going to have to disinfect this entire place. There's fungus, knats and root rot. Can't grow something new until we revamp this area."

And so the two women got to work. . For hours on end, Melanie found herself pulling at weeds while Josie swept the oor and cleaned the windows. By the end of it all, her arms ached, there was dirt all over her clothes and she was sure she smelled like she belonged in a compost pile.

"Melanie," Josie called from outside the greenhouse.

Arms heavy and cheeks ushed from exertion, Melanie made her way to the back deck where Josie stood with a pile of clothes.

"I thought you'd like to change before dinner. Janet's clothes won't t you but I managed to nd some stuff lying around that will have to do."

Janet, Melanie knew was the youngest and only sister of the Sinclair brothers. Melanie guessed she was probably around ten and Melanie had brieiy glimpsed her talking with Josie earlier as they attempted to clean up the greenhouse.

Melanie took up Josie's offer and went upstairs to shower, holding a black shirt and black tights in her hands that she promptly deposited in the guest room before going into the bathroom situated opposite of the guest bedroom. Tony and Lana had left to go on patrols. Josie had assured her that it was only her and Janet at home this evening so Melanie could take her time in the shower. She let out a moan of satisfaction as the hot water eased the knots in her back and arms. Idly, Melanie began excitedly wondering about the different types of plants they could put in the greenhouse and maybe she could encourage Josie to try growing vegetables.

Caught up in these thoughts, Melanie wrapped a towel around herself and attempted to leave the bathroom and make her way to the guest bedroom. Perhaps that's why she didn't pay attention and walked smack into a great wall of muscle the moment she opened the bathroom door.

Her mouth ran dry as she tumbled to the oor, a pair of strong arms wrapping around her to steady her, shifting his body so that he took the brunt of the fall. Melanie looked up from where her nose was buried in a heady scent of grass and wood. She looked up startled to meet a pair of stormy blue eyes looking at her almost fearfully. The apology became lodged in her throat as mortification engulfed her. Paralyzed in embarrassment, she realized she'd just ran smack into Brad and fallen atop him in nothing but a towel.