

## CHAPTER ONE

“MAN, THAT NEW GIRL Cynthia Rymes is seriously hot,” Matt said. “That level of hotness in one girl should be banned or something.”

Banned or something. Yeah. Nathan squinted at the girls playing lacrosse in Uni Parks and thought that if anything was going to be banned, it was him and Matt hanging out and ogling the girls from Headington School in the park.

“Which one’s she?” he asked, nicking Matt’s bottle of coke because he’d finished his own.

“Mate!” Matt whined. “The blond one with the two plaits. Front and centre. Seriously!”

“Yeah, hot,” Nathan agreed. He peered at her again. Maybe it was because he was exhausted—he’d been up half the night trying to finish his bio homework—but she had a bird in her aura. Like, a swan or something, but black. Nah, couldn’t be.

“Nice legs,” he said, flopping back on the grass and staring at the trees.

“What time did you go to bed last night?” Matt sniggered. He lay back beside his friend and shoved a handful of crisps in his mouth. Matt always ate like a pig.

“Dunno, maybe four AM?” Nathan thought for a moment. “Late. I forgot about bio, and Mr Jackson’s homework literally killed me.”

“Didn’t think it took that long,” Matt said, spraying crisps everywhere.

Yes, but Matt didn’t have self-defence six days a week, nor all manner of supernatural drama. Monica had wailed on Skype for half an hour about how she was sure that the witch she was training with in Morocco was trying to kill her and make soup out of her entrails, or something. Then Dad had called to cancel Nathan’s trip to London this weekend because he was going on an urgent hunt in Liverpool,

or maybe Newcastle. And between everything, he'd just forgotten that bio homework was still a thing.

"Lucky," Nathan said. One of the girls scored, and he watched as Headington's team did a group hug. Girls were nice to watch. Try and talk to them, and it was a whole different game. He seemed to be surrounded by them, but it never got any easier. Everything he said was wrong, somehow. Even when it was right, it was still wrong.

Monica was Nathan's closest friend, and her definition of advice was "just sleep with her and get her out of your system". That had not helped Nathan in the slightest when he'd had a terrible crush on Suzanne Ecclestone last year. What Monica failed to understand was that humans did not just sleep with people to get it out of their system. Monica didn't see any differences between being a witch and being human.

It was completely different.

Maybe he should ask Adrian for help?

But Nathan could just picture how that would go. It wasn't hard to imagine, actually. Adrian would laugh so hard they'd hear him in Mexico. And then Nathan's cheeks would explode from blushing so hard, or something.

Not the way he planned on going.

"Nate, are you even listening to me?" Matt asked.

"Sorry," Nathan said, not sorry in the slightest. "I think I fell asleep for a second. What were you saying?"

"I was asking if you wanted to catch the new *Maze Runner* movie on the weekend, but I reckon the only thing you're going to be catching is forty winks."

"I'll be fine by Saturday," Nathan said. "We can do the movie. Will you check the screenings?"

"And dinner at the Noodlebar," Matt demanded. "You owe me dinner."

"I do?" Nathan asked.

"I paid last time!"

“Shit, I totally forgot.” Nathan sighed. “Fine, dinner at the Noodlebar, but we have to do the late screening because I’m probably training Saturday.”

“You and your karate shit, man, so boring,” Matt said.

“Shut up!” Nathan reached over and hit his friend. Matt tried to roll away, but if there was one thing being a vampire-hunter-in-training was good for, it was hitting bratty mates who had exceeded their daily witty quip quota.

“Oi!” Matt sat up suddenly. “Hey, match’s over. Looks like Headington won.”

They supported the Headington team, mostly because Matt found Cynthia Rymes hot. Well, also because they were playing some Witney team, so Nathan supposed that he had some loyalty towards the local girls. With reluctance, he sat up.

“What would Poppy say if she knew you were checking out the lacrosse team at the park?” he asked, watching idly as the girls shook each other’s hands.

“Poppy and I aren’t together,” Matt replied. “We’re taking a break.”

“For what, the fifth time?”

“No!”

“Maybe the sixth,” Nathan said.

“Nate, don’t be a dick.”

Nathan was considering pointing out that Matt should just break up with Poppy, but then Cynthia looked over at them and waved, and he forgot what he was planning on saying.

“Mate, wave back!” Matt hissed, elbowing him hard. Nathan obediently waved, trying not to wince. Matt had sharp elbows.

Cynthia beamed and jogged over to pick up the cones on the edge of the field near where they were sitting. Was she exaggerating the way she bent over a bit? Damn, she had nice legs. Wait, wasn’t it rude to stare? Shit.

Cynthia picked up the last cone, hesitated for a moment, then stepped towards them. “Hey, you guys are from MCS, right?” she asked shyly.

“H—hi,” Nathan said. Was he blushing? His cheeks felt hot. Damn!

“Aren’t you Poppy Wiggen’s boyfriend?” Cynthia asked Matt.

“Matt,” he called back cheerfully. Matt was very suave when it came to girls. Nathan theorised that this had something to do with having a girlfriend or losing his virginity, probably the latter, because it was a recent development. Matt of his youth had not been suave. He added, “My friend Nate’s a big fan of lacrosse, actually.”

Nathan’s cheeks heated up even further. Hello, death-by-exploding-cheeks. “Um, uh,” he stammered, searching for an excuse. “My sister plays lacrosse.”

“Oh, cool.” Cynthia smiled. She shifted the orange cones under her arm then came over and held her hand out to him. Nathan stared at it with extreme panic for a second, until he received another elbow to the gut from Matt and remembered that human beings shook hands when they met. He stood, awkwardly, and grasped her hand.

“I’m Cynthia,” she said.

“I know,” he blurted out. Fuck. He was too tired for this; his brain was on holiday or something. “I mean, uh... your name’s on your jersey.” *Nate, shut up!*

Cynthia’s cheeks went pink. It was adorable. At least she was blushing too. Solidarity in blushing—or wait, did that mean he’d embarrassed her? Shit, he didn’t mean to embarrass her!

“I guess it is,” she said wryly. “And you are... Nate?”

“Nathan,” he said. “Um, Nathan Delacroix.”

“Nice to meet you,” she replied. “Our next match is next week. You could bring your sister, I guess?”

Nathan nodded like the idiotic nodding-dog his sister had stuck on the rear dash of his aunt’s car when she was six. “Sure, why not?” he asked, forcing himself to stop nodding. “I’ll, um, see you then?”

Cynthia beamed at him. “Cool!” she said. “I’d better, um, get these back to our teacher.” She pointed at the cones. “And, you know, go home and shower. Gosh, I probably smell.” And then she blinked at him, went scarlet, and turned and fled. Nathan stared after her, completely bemused.

“You’re a wanker,” Matt said cheerfully from behind him.

“Why?” Nathan complained.

“You embarrassed her.” Matt looked way too happy. “I think she likes you.”

“Sure, I’m likeable, right?” Nathan asked.

“No, you’re awful.” Matt smirked. “Ask her out.”

“Not in this lifetime,” Nathan said. He looked over his shoulder at Cynthia, in time to see her bury her face against a friend’s arm. “Girls like her don’t date guys like me.”

“What, hot sporty girls don’t date athletic guys with stuttering problems?” Matt teased. “You don’t say!”

Nathan slugged him hard on the arm. “Come on, arsehole,” he said. “I’m exhausted, I have training, and I still gotta write that economics essay for tomorrow. Let’s get home.”

Lily von Klichtzner was sitting on his doorstep when he got home from training that night.

Well, not literally. She was waiting two doors down, on the low wall in front of number seven’s garden. But Nathan had to walk past her to get to his aunt’s house, and there was no way she was waiting for the batty couple who lived at number seven.

He drew level with her. “No. Lily, I have homework.”

“I need one ward, please,” she begged. “Damien is being such a control freak since the whole thing with the Council.”

The Thing with the Council—name pending patent—had taken place in May, now around five months ago. Nathan was surprisingly sketchy on the details, despite having been present for most of it, because no one told seventeen-year-olds anything. He knew it had involved a kidnapping attempt.

“Don’t you have any witch friends for this stuff?”

“Monica’s in Morocco.” Lily pouted.

“I know.” Nathan sighed and scuffed his toe against the ground.

Lily peered at him from her position on the wall and said the magic words. “I’ll pay.”

Nathan pretended he was thinking about it, he honestly did, but Lily's father was a billionaire or something, and Nathan owed Matt dinner. "How much?" he asked finally.

"How much do you want?"

"Depends on the ward, I guess," he replied.

"It's an anti-scrying ward," Lily said.

Nathan's heart sank. Wards were protective talismans, sort of a hunter speciality, but Nathan wasn't a proper hunter yet. Anti-scrying wards were hard, because they weren't rooted in one spot. Wards that went on a person were always trickier.

"You know he'll probably just call Adrian back to follow you around if you stop him from scrying you, right?"

"Adrian's a better deal," Lily said. "Adrian gets bored easily."

"Truer words," Nathan said miserably. When Adrian got bored in Oxford, he did one of three things. Savaged the locals, had sex with the locals, or annoyed Nathan. The latter had become his favourite activity, of late. "Travelling wards are tricky, Lily."

"Five hundred pounds," she said. "If you can do it before the weekend."

Five hundred pounds for another sleepless night. Nathan sighed again.

"I'll be in town to watch a movie Saturday night; can I give it to you then?"

"Oh, sure," Lily said. "But I don't mind coming to you."

She didn't get it at all.

"Lily, if you keep coming here, Aunt Anna's going to notice," he told her patiently. "And I'm going to be a dead hunter, for doing deals with vampires."

Lily pouted. It was the same look she used on Damien and Adrian, and they both gave her whatever she wanted. Nathan stared at the house behind her.

"Okay, Saturday," she agreed in a sing-song voice. "I wouldn't have to come here if you gave me your phone number, you know!"

It was the age-old debate. What was worse on the cavorting-with-the-enemy scale? Clandestine meetings or having their phone number? Nathan pulled out his phone and let her put her number in.

“I’ll text you when I know what time I can meet,” he said. “You have to pay into my bank account, kapeesh? I can’t carry that much cash.”

“Text me the details!” Lily bounced off towards her car. Nathan scuffed his shoes against the ground all the way back to his house. A travelling ward. Fuck.

Wards were tricky business, despite looking simple. It wasn’t about the runes and symbols you drew to make them work, though those were essential. What they were really made up of was belief and magical power. Nathan was human and tired. He had zero percent of either.

What went for static wards counted double for travelling wards. Wards liked being in one place, because they could feed off of ambient magic. There was plenty ambient magic in an old city like Oxford, particularly because there were quite a lot of witches around these parts. Witches liked old cities. Vampires also liked Oxford, although they didn’t usually love small cities because if there was an accident when they fed it was harder to cover up. Anyway, with all the witches who had lived in Oxford over the years, the city was filled to the brim with ambient magic.

Travelling wards could suck that up too, as long as you were in an area with lots of it, but it was harder because they were moving and not carved into walls—walls soaked up magic and transmitted it into wards very well. Also, as soon as you left an area with ambient magic, the ward would start getting unhappy, which either meant it would go on the fritz or it would die altogether.

It was fine for witches; they were a walking, talking power source.

Lily was a half-vampire, though. Vampires were created through magic, but they didn’t have magic.

Nathan pondered the problem whilst he did his maths homework. By the time he had, probably wrongly, calculated all of the equations on page seventy-eight, he had a mental checklist.

- Wood that conducted magic, to carve the runes on
- Carving tool—what were they called again?
- Power source
- Symbols that both of them believed in—though Lily would probably believe whatever Nathan told her to believe
- A good night's sleep

The last one was the most essential, seeing as he was going to have to infuse the thing with his own belief in order to power it enough to travel. Why had he agreed again?

On Friday, Matt ribbed him the whole day about Cynthia, and he got a D on his econ homework.

The day could not get any worse.

By the time he got home, he had fifteen text messages from Monica.

**Monica:** Fuck me

**Monica:** This woman

**Monica:** She's killing me

**Monica:** Also, it's fucking hot

**Monica:** I'm English. I don't do hot

**Monica:** I'm sweating my makeup off

**Monica:** Can I retire from being a witch

**Monica:** Baby Delacroix, donde estas?

**Monica:** Ew, she wants me to chop mouse entrails

It went on like that. Clearly, someone else was spotting Monica's phone bill for her. Nathan ignored all of her messages and sent one of his own.

**Nathan:** If I were to make a travelling anti-scrying ward, what would be the best wood to use? And what runes?

Monica must have been epically bored, because the reply came about two seconds later.

**Monica:** You want *blindaz*. The fuck you need that for?

**Nathan:** Not for me. It's for Lily

**Monica:** Don't do it. Damien will

**Monica:** Fucking



**Monica:** Kill

**Monica:** You

**Monica:** When he finds out

**Nathan:** Not my problem. Wood?

**Monica:** Depends what you can get. Hazel, if you can get it. It carries magic best. Also good for vision/clairvoyance spells. If not then cedar=protection, maple=wisdom

**Nathan:** Will have a look, thanks

**Monica:** If Damien kills you, can I have your playstation?

Nathan rolled his eyes and went to raid his aunt's supply cupboard.

Aunt Anna was not a hunter, but Uncle Jeff was, although it was an ill-kept secret that Aunt Anna did all the technical stuff for Uncle Jeff because she was something of a ward specialist. If Nathan thought he could get away with it, he would have asked her to make the ward for him.

She'd want to know why he needed an anti-scrying ward though, seeing as only witches could scry, and then he'd have to explain everything.

Aunt Anna kept everything in a cupboard in the garage, which was locked with a very large padlock. This did not take into account that lockpicking was taught to young hunters at about the age of seven. Nathan helped himself to a chisel and a runic dictionary but got stuck on the wood. She had several, and none were labelled. He snapped a picture and sent it to Monica with a panicked 'which one?'

**Monica:** The leftmost is hazel I think. I hope. If not, you're screwed

**Nathan:** It better be or you're never getting the playstation

**Monica:** Noooooo!

**Monica:** It's defo hazel, I googled it

*Blindaz* was a nice small rune in the runic dictionary, so he grabbed a vaguely round piece of wood and stole sandpaper from his uncle's DIY supplies.

It took Nathan an hour of painstaking work to sand the hunk of wood into a passable amulet and carve the rune into the front and back. That was the easy part; he'd done that quite a few times in

training. The bit that movies and books always managed to wuss-out of showing was the real hard work: imbuing the amulet with magic. Real magic wasn't clean or quick or efficient. It was messy and imprecise and involved a lot of believing in yourself.

Believing in yourself was a surprisingly tricky skill to master.

Nathan's believing involved lit candles, filched from the bathroom where his aunt kept a supply with strange scents. It also involved closed eyes and chanting. He did it at two AM so no one would walk in on him, and it took a clean two hours before the rune looked even slightly gold to his magically sensitive vision.

A witch would have dipped it in some kind of tincture and waved their hands and chanted in Latin, but none of that was an option for humans. Exhausted from two hours of intense self-belief, Nathan collapsed into bed and slept through his alarm.