

Suddenly Spellbound

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To Louise

For pushing me to finish what I started.

Thank you.

Chapter 1

The rusty shopping cart wobbled, sending tiny shockwaves up and down my arms as I strolled down the narrow aisle between two rows of secondhand designer labels. For reasons I never quite grasped, the store organized items by color rather than size, making every shopping expedition feel like a treasure hunt in the Andes. As I inched closer to the blues, I did my best to ignore the high-pitched screech emanating from my cart's wonky front wheel, but I couldn't help imagining random senior citizens wincing as they turned down the volume on their hearing aids. Then I envisioned dogs lining up outside, waiting for someone to open the door so they could rush past and investigate the earsplitting sound.

It never failed. I always managed to grab the defective buggy. Not that I had a wide selection of *nondefective* carts to choose from, but shaking *and* squealing added up to an embarrassing double whammy, even amongst the crowd at the local Goodwill.

And yes, despite vigorous protests from my best friend Chloe—who was convinced I

should simply use magic to conjure up designer clothes—I still shopped at thrift stores. It was a bit of an addiction, actually. Besides, where magic was concerned, I was still a novice, but I had ninja skills when it came to sticking to a budget.

In my continuing quest for the perfect spring wardrobe, I spied a practically new Michael Kors blouse sandwiched between two lesser names. The cerulean color jumped out at me, and I plucked it from the rack with glee. Jack loved me in blue. Then again, Jack loved me in anything... or *nothing*.

“Where have you been all my life?” I murmured, tossing the shirt into my basket. I cringed at the accompanying whine of the mangled cart as I rolled the rest of the way down the row, glancing at the rack as I went. *Blues. Purples. Grays.*

Oooh, blacks.

One particular fuzzy black sweater stood out from the rest, reminding me of Karma, the cat I’d rescued from a dumpster behind the private school where I taught kindergarten. It’d been five months since I’d transformed my overfed housecat into the man who’d raised me, and I still hadn’t gotten used to having my father back from the so-called dead. I mean, of course, he wasn’t *really* dead. As it turned out, he’d just transformed himself into a dog—then a cat—with no way of verbalizing the spell to change himself back into a man. I never figured out how he’d managed to work magic while still in animal form. Not that it mattered. Thanks to me—and my genetic predisposition to witchcraft—I had my dad back.

Ivie Marie McKie: Nonpracticing witch... um... sorceress.

My time *practicing* had been fleeting. And my hair thanked me for being on the wagon. Funny thing about magic—it messed with your chemistry. It’d taken me weeks to eradicate the fiery red streaks from my almost-black hair once I’d given up working spells. I

didn't miss the magic. Not one bit.

Okay, maybe a *little*. I glanced down at my ample breasts. Magic certainly had its perks.

As I trailed behind my squeaky wheel, I spotted another rare find—especially in such good condition—across the aisle. Like a golden needle in a vast haystack, the pair of Rag and Bone jeans caught my eye and drew me in. I plucked them from the rack and clutched them to my chest for a long moment before daring to check the tag. As if the universe had aligned itself perfectly, like—*like magic*—they were my size.

Swallowing a squeal of my own, I tossed the denim into the cart with the blue blouse, the fuzzy sweater, and the rest of my booty, and took stock of my assortment of treasures. Chloe would be so proud of me.

Speaking of Chloe...

As if Chloe's ears had been burning, the chorus of "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun" blared from inside my purse. I dug out my phone and pressed it to my ear. "Hey, shopaholic."

"Hey, Sabrina, I'm glad I caught you." Her pet name for me used to refer to the Audrey Hepburn movie, but that was before we found out I was a post-teenage witch. "Your wedding is creeping closer every day, and we need to discuss the dresses. Did you see the ideas I added to your Pinterest?"

"Mmhm." With the phone sandwiched between my ear and my shoulder and my hip guiding the cart, I browsed the racks as Chloe prattled on. *Oh, pretty*. A pair of skinny jeans in the exact fire-engine-red color my hair used to be called out to me, and I parked myself across the aisle to hold them up to my body. They would likely be tight but totally doable. I

even had the perfect pair of secondhand Louboutins, and —

“Did you hear what I said? Ivie? Are you even listening to me?”

Shit! I’d forgotten about Chloe. “Hey, sorry. I’m shopping.”

She huffed so hard it practically blew my hair back. “Let me guess, Goodwill?”

I grumbled a nonverbal reply and balled up the jeans to throw them in the cart.

Her musical laughter reverberated over the line. “You’re marrying a *Blake* in a few months. You don’t have to shop with the welfare crowd anymore.”

“Chloe! I can’t believe you said that!” I glanced over my shoulder to be sure no one had overheard me. Or worse, *her*. “This particular store happens to be on the edge of Buckhead.” Chloe was intimately acquainted with the exclusive area of Atlanta. It housed most of her favorite stores, including Coach, Prada, Michael Kors, and Kate Spade. “All the best clothes end up here. And a lot of them still have the tags on. I mean, I just found”— Digging through my loot, I pulled out a sheer white blouse—“the cutest little capped-sleeve *Balenciaga*.”

“No shit? Balenciaga at a thrift store? Snap that one up for sure. In fact, grab one for me if you can, but when I get there next week, I’m taking you shopping for your dress. And you’d better not even *think* about looking at Goodwill. I’m serious, Ivie. We’re hitting the boutiques.”

My eyes drifted to the rack overflowing with used white satin, only two rows away, and I swallowed against the crystal-ball-sized lump in my throat. I hadn’t lost my enthusiasm about the wedding—I couldn’t wait to become Mrs. Jackson Blake—but unlike Chloe, it wouldn’t matter to me if I married Jack wearing an off-the-rack gown or a flour sack. “No Goodwill. Got it.”

“Good. But I have to go. I need to rescue my husband from these damn nymphos he calls fans. Can you believe I found one hiding in his dressing room last week? The bitch tried pulling that ‘I’m part of the act’ line on me. As if I’d fall for that!”

I suppressed a giggle and tried not to remind her we’d done the exact same thing when we’d first met Jon.

“It’s as if they’re all jacked up on your magical Viagra. And it’s not like I think he’d cheat on me, but I just wish he didn’t get off on all the attention.” She groaned, and I could practically hear her scowl. She huffed out a breath, and her voice got all melancholy. “Be thankful Jack gave up the magic shows.”

I thought about my sexy fiancé-slash-one-time-magician and the magic groupies who used to hang around Vlad’s Castle, and I swallowed hard. I was infinitely glad he hadn’t given up the day job. As far as I knew, he didn’t have any groupies as a veterinarian. “I am. Every day.”

Chloe exhaled into the phone. “I’ve gotta go. Talk to you soon.”

The line went dead before I had a chance to ask her what was really bothering her, but my phone rang again before I’d tucked it away. This time, the ringtone was generic, and I didn’t recognize the number.

“Hello?”

“Ah, Ivie Marie, mah wee bonnie lass.” My father’s thick Scottish brogue rang through the line.

I forced a smile into my voice. “Hi, Daddy.”

“I need you to come to the university. There’s this spell...” After twelve years as a domestic pet, my father had somehow convinced the university to reinstate him to his

position as a chemistry professor. I wasn't sure I wanted to know how he'd pulled off *that* little feat. As much as I loved my father, his obsession with my newfound ability to work magic made Jack uncomfortable.

It unnerved me too, especially when I knew there could only be one reason for my father to call me in the middle of a Saturday afternoon. "Daddy, I can't right now. I'm in the middle of something *important*," I lied easily as I wandered, oblivious to my surroundings until I ended up in the toy aisle. I stood in front of what looked suspiciously like a... a *Magic 8 Ball*?

"Oh, come on now. What could be more important than yer dear ol' dad?"

I stifled a groan. His time as a cat hadn't helped with his stubborn streak. "Fine. I'll swing by the lab on my way home."

"Perfect! I've got a surprise for you."

Dad hung up before I could ask about his so-called surprise, but my sorceress sense tingled as I returned my attention to the shelf in front of me. I picked up the fortune-telling toy in both hands, turning the answer window face down, and closed my eyes. "I'm about to be in big trouble, aren't I?" I flipped it over to read the blurred display.

Signs point to yes.

~SS~

My Ralph Lauren boots sank into the soft earth with a squish as I climbed out of my powder-blue Volkswagen Beetle. Each step forced me to escape the light suction holding my feet hostage as I made my way to the split-rail fence. I should've parked in the official

Maxwell Farm lot rather than the muddy field adjacent to the barn, but I was in a hurry to see Jack. I spotted him across the pasture and did my best mud-dash the rest of the way to the fence.

“Jack!” A warm tingle went over my skin at the sight of him, as if it had been days rather than merely a few hours since I’d last seen him.

He pushed his Ray Bans into his hair, and even from a football field’s distance away, I saw his eyes light up when he saw me. That look—as if I was the only reason he could breathe—made the trip worthwhile.

It was no accident that I hadn’t been back to the farm since October. The words “goat semen” popped into my head uninvited, and I shuddered at the memory.

The field trip.

Ever since that day, I couldn’t even eat goat *cheese* without breaking into hives. If not for my obsessive love of all things beef, I might have gone completely vegan.

Jack abandoned whatever he was doing and gave me a quick wave. He cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, “Hey, sweetheart!”

Ignoring the pungent odor of manure wafting in my direction, I rested my elbows on the wooden rail and watched my sexy-as-hell fiancé jog toward me, his forehead glistening with a sheen of sweat and his damp T-shirt pulling across his muscled chest. I would have braved an entire *herd* of horny goats for that view.

“Hi.” My lips tipped into a smile, and he pressed his against them in a sweet kiss. Like a magnet drawn to him, I wrapped my arms around his neck to pull him in for more. “Got any clean piles of hay we could dirty?”

“You’re killing me here.” He groaned, and his fingers twitched as he gripped my hips.

“I wish you weren’t kidding.”

We both knew my distaste for the farm was stronger than my libido. I stole one last kiss before releasing him. “Sorry. I got carried away for a minute.”

“I’m guessing you didn’t come all this way to visit your old buddy, Lucky the goat.” He chuckled at my obvious shudder as he soaked in my appearance, from my face to my crisp white blouse and skinny jeans then down to my designer boots. “So to what do I owe the pleasure? And risking Ralph to see me? This *must* be important.”

I beamed at him. “It’s always important to see you.”

Jack rocked back on his heels, a curious glint in his eyes.

I wiped the smile from my lips and cleared my throat. “But in this particular case, my dad asked me to stop by the university to help him with a spe—”

“No.” Jack cut me off with a quick slash of his hand across his throat. His face flushed an unflattering shade of puce, and he crossed his arms over his sweaty chest, constructing an invisible wall between us. “We’ve already discussed this. Magic is dangerous. Bad things happen. People get hurt. Police show up.” He counted off his reasons on his fingers, his messy chestnut hair flopping over his sunglasses as he shook his head. “Absolutely not, especially when your father’s involved.”

I flinched. He was right about my dad, but it still shocked me to hear him voice it. My lips froze in a pout as Jack stared me down. “You’re right. I did promise. And I remember very well what happens when one dabbles in witchcraft.” And I did. I remembered turning my one-time fiancé, Matt, into a woodland creature—and the horrible chaos that ensued as I struggled to change him back. But had Jack forgotten it all worked out in the end? Without that magical mishap, we might never have met. “But let’s not forget all the *benefits* of

magic.”

He smirked at me, obviously thinking of the same naughty side effects, then relaxed his stance, reaching for me across the top rail. He wrapped his arms around my shoulders and brushed his lips against my ear. “That part wasn’t so bad. But the rest of it... I’m sorry, it’s just too dangerous, and you seem to lack a sense of self-preservation.”

His words sank in, bursting my happy bubble, and I pulled away to look him in the eyes. “But my father’s been *missing* for twelve years. I really do owe it to him to at least spend some quality time with him.”

Jack’s face twisted in contemplation, and I waited for him to work through the dilemma. “You spent loads of time with him when he was a cat.” He grimaced at my pout. “Fine. But you need to give me your word you’ll be safe. I know you love your dad, but you have to admit, he’s a bit of a... *flake*.” He winced on the last word, searching my eyes for a reaction.

I blinked a few times, giving my brain time to process what he’d said, then swallowed back an argument. “No... you’re right. I’ll watch from the sidelines like the dutiful daughter.”

“Okay, thank you. I know I seem like an overbearing tyrant sometimes, but I worry about you.” He tucked me under his chin again. “Just promise me you’ll steer clear of the hocus pocus.”

I stretched up for a quick kiss, crossing my fingers behind my back. “Promise.”

Guilt gnawed at me the entire way to the university. I hated lying to Jack, but it just wasn't in me to disappoint my father. Playing monkey in the middle with the two most important men in my life was getting old fast. Part of me understood Jack's fears, but it wasn't as if Dad had asked me to do anything *illegal*. Just a little magic, right? It was in my blood—in my genetic makeup, for crying out loud. And I'd gotten good at it a few months ago. In fact, if I'd kept practicing, I probably would've gotten even better. So what if there were a few side effects? It wasn't as if Jack didn't love the insatiable part of me. But dangerous?

Well, maybe a little. But no more so than climbing into a pasture filled with horny goats or wandering into the wrong side of town after dark—two more things I'd managed to survive relatively unscathed. Hell, I could have died a thousand times over from eating raw cookie dough, for that matter. He was just being an overprotective fiancé. That's all. Nothing bad would come from doing a little magic.

Convincing myself was easy. Persuading Jack would be near impossible. His argument hinged on my being “out of control”—both physically and emotionally—and maybe he was right. Magic had an intoxicating effect on me. And a little seemed to go a long way.

After looping around the parking lot for what seemed like an eternity, searching for the science building, I parked beside my mother's worn-out Wagoneer and made my way inside. My father's booming voice echoed through the vacant halls, and I followed the sound to the last door on the left, pushing the lingering sense of foreboding to the back of my mind with a shiver.

Dad looked up from his gurgling beaker to beam at me. “Ivie! You made it. I'm so

pleased. Liam, come meet my little girl.” My father yanked off his Plexiglas goggles and dropped them to the table in front of him. Before I realized what he was doing, he’d grabbed a tall, dark, and handsome stranger by the sleeve of his fitted navy pullover and dragged him in my direction.

My face flamed as I watched the younger man approach, his blue eyes sparkling and his cheeks dimpling as he smiled. I’d never seen him before, but the way he gazed at me—as if he’d crossed a desert to drink me in—made me uncomfortable.

Dad’s uncharacteristically eager expression didn’t do anything to allay my anxiety. “Liam, this is my beautiful daughter, Ivie.”

“Pleased to meet you, Miss McKie,” he said with a faint Scottish accent and extended his hand. “Your father’s told me so much about you.”

His fingers curled around mine, and I darted my eyes from Liam to Dad then back again. I seemed to be the only one in the room *not* in on the secret. “It’s a pleasure to meet you too, but it would seem I’m at a disadvantage. My father hasn’t mentioned you at all.”