

In the Company of Witches

Chapter 1

“I’m going to kill her.”

The corner of my mouth twitched, but I kept my gaze on my book. I was very cozy curled up in the green velvet sofa by the fire. I did not want to encourage the tear my aunt was working herself up to.

“I never should have agreed to this,” she went on, completely ignoring the fact that I was ignoring her. She was also ignoring the annoyed cat on the chaise lounge behind her, thumping his tail. He was trying to sleep. “You know I can’t tolerate the vast majority of people for longer than a day or two—”

I would have said a couple of hours tops, but who was I to quibble?

“—but to let that woman stay for five days? Madness.”

I reached for my mug of Honeybush orange tea. It was very soothing. I probably should have made a pot to share. And I don’t know if I would call it madness. The woman in question was paying for her stay while her historic home was undergoing some much-needed renovations, and when you run a B&B you have to expect that on occasion you are going to have demanding guests. Although some guests really were more demanding than others.

Case in point, Constance Graves.

Constance had been staying with us at Ivywood Hollow the past week, and it hadn’t taken long for us to discover it was not going to be an easy stay. Evenfall, Connecticut, was a small town, so we knew Constance could be demanding, but we really hadn’t been concerned. After all, we had always been able to

win over hard-to-please guests in the past—we were *very* good at what we did—but Constance turned out to be a special case.

To begin, she insisted there be no other guests staying at the B&B while she was there. It was a completely reasonable request given she was willing to pay for all the rooms, and it seemed like it would make our lives a whole lot easier. Less people, less work, right? Not so. Not. So.

Personally, I knew we were in for trouble when I showed her where she'd be staying. The Rosewater Room. It's gorgeous. Four-poster bed. Floor to ceiling windows. Silk upholstered divan that was perfect for reclining when life became too much. What Constance saw, however, was the white Egyptian cotton sheets peeking out from under the damask comforter on her bed. They were too white. She was afraid of the glare they might give off in the morning sun. When I changed them to a lovely taupe, she found the shade a bit too muddy. I was able to get away with a blush-colored set, but I'm pretty sure that was only because she couldn't think of an objection to throw at them quickly enough.

And it didn't end there.

The meals were always too hot. Or too cold. Too spicy. Or too bland. And all these complaints usually came before she had even lifted her fork, if she lifted it at all. Oh! And her room temperature. We could never get that right. Seventy-four degrees at Ivywood Hollow Bed and Breakfast did not feel like the seventy-four degrees she was used to in her house. My absolute favorite, though, was when she told me she found the antique blue inlay of the fireplace to be a little garish. I asked her if she'd like to change rooms, given she was paying for them all, but she told me with a drawn-out sigh that she'd suffer through.

I couldn't help but feel for her though. She was obviously unhappy, and someone that unhappy deserved a little leeway.

"I could push her off the balconette."

Or not.

I smiled at my Aunt Nora. She couldn't help herself. She was fiery by nature. Constance had just asked for the flower arrangement in her room to be replaced because the fresh-cut hydrangeas were a little *much*, and it was a miracle Nora hadn't finished her off then and there. Most people had the good sense not to

trifle with my aunt and her plants.

Nora, along with her sister Izzy and I, ran the B&B together, but she was the one who took care of the gardens and general *ambiance* of the bed and breakfast. It was amazing how she could take the simplest of places and transform it into something warm and welcoming, especially given the fact that *warm* and *welcoming* were probably two words that had never been used to describe her. When she walked down the street, usually dressed in black with her red hair flowing, you'd find at least two or three kids following behind. It was a game of bravery for them. Nora was a lot like a tiger in a rickety cage, beautiful to look at and dangerous. Those kids knew at any moment she might turn and lunge at them, giving them the thrill of a lifetime. Not that she ever really lunged. The turn was enough to send them off in peals of terrified laughter.

"I don't think pushing anyone off of anything will be necessary, Nora," a voice came from the top of the stairs. "I believe I finally have Constance settled for the night. She just needed a little help with the bath water."

My aunt Izzy came down the stairs, tucking some wayward strawberry blond curls back up into the loose bun on her head. Izzy did the cooking and baking at Ivywood Hollow, and she was fabulous at it. She knew it too. Izzy could get anyone to do just about anything with her culinary creations. Thankfully, she was also just about the sweetest woman to have ever lived, given it wasn't uncommon for guests to promise their firstborns for another bite of dessert. Izzy sat herself down beside me on the sofa and patted my leg companionably.

"Oh, you think you have her settled, do you? I'll believe that when I hear it," Nora drawled. "And by the way, I will never forgive you for giving that woman a bell."

My smile widened. That's right. Izzy had given Constance a bell. Our esteemed guest had found all the stairs of the house difficult to manage, and she felt she required a way to get ahold of us should she need anything. I didn't really think the stairs were that much of an issue for her, but Constance needed a lot of things, so if she had to go up and down the stairs every time she needed one of those things, well, that would be a lot. For an Olympic athlete it would be a lot.

“Did you hear it ringing last night at 3:00 a.m.?” Nora asked me. “No, of course you didn’t. Tucked away in your little nest.”

I lived in the loft above the old carriage house, now garage, of the B&B, unlike my aunts whose rooms were in the house. The small loft certainly wasn’t as beautiful or as impressive as any of the spaces inside Ivywood Hollow, but it was cozy, and I had come to believe a little bit of privacy was good for the soul.

“She needed me to fluff her pillow. At three in the morning. Oh! I just realized I could have smothered her with it, and this would all be over.”

“Evanora,” Izzy chided with a laugh. As the older sister, she was the only one permitted to use Nora’s full name. It wasn’t a harsh reprimand though. We both knew Nora was just being Nora. “What a terrible thing to say. And, really, she’s a lovely woman. She just knows what she likes.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Nora replied. “She’s a horrible woman, and you know it. Brynn and I were just discussing how much we’d both like to strangle her.”

“What?” I asked in the high-pitched voice of the falsely accused. I straightened up on the sofa, which wasn’t easy because it was ridiculously plush. “We’d *both* like to strangle her?” I was pretty sure Nora had had that particular conversation all by herself.

“She finally speaks.” Nora collapsed dramatically back against the chaise lounge and draped her arm over her forehead. The cat resting above her peeked one eye open probably trying to determine if my aunt was actually settling down or just resting momentarily before she worked herself up again. “And yes, you might not have said the words, but I could tell you were thinking them.”

“I didn’t realize mind reading was one of your many talents.” I took another sip of my tea.

“What else can I do? You’ve become so quiet. You’re practically a—”

Nora caught herself before she said the word out loud, but it was too late.

Ghost.

A softness came to her face as she met my eye. “Brynn, I’m sorry. That was insensitive.”

“It’s okay. I know.” I gave her a weak smile. How could I be upset? Maybe she shouldn’t have said it, but she wasn’t exactly wrong. I had changed a lot. My life had fallen apart over a year ago now, and I wasn’t

the person I used to be.

“Let’s just enjoy what’s left of the evening, shall we?” Izzy said, giving my knee a squeeze. “It’s the perfect fall night to be snug inside by the fire.”

I smiled, grateful to let the subject drop. My aunts had been expressing more and more concern about my well-being lately, and I didn’t feel up to yet another discussion about how I was doing. Besides, this was very cozy, the three of us listening to the wind whistle outside while the firelight danced over the dark honeyed walls of the parlor. It was a nice moment.

“When was the last time you tried a little mascara?”

And the moment was over.

I slid my gaze over to Nora.

“What? You have such beautiful eyes. Do you think everybody has that shade of green? And what about your hair?” she swirled a finger in the direction of the black braid that hung over my shoulder. “Is this style permanent now?”

“Evanora, leave the girl alone,” Izzy said. “Now’s not the time. We’ve all had a long day.”

I shot her a thankful smile.

“Nonsense!”

My smile dropped.

“Now that the subject has been raised, we should discuss it. You know as well as I so, Sister, this situation isn’t healthy. And we’re all pretending it isn’t happening. She doesn’t want to *help*. She doesn’t want to do that other job she used to go on about. All she wants to do is hide herself away here in the house doing chores. And, again, just look at her.”

I frowned.

“What? You look terrible.”

I didn’t look that terrible. Nora’s expectations for everyday fashion were child beauty pageant high.

“Soon enough she’ll be up in the attic with Gideon. Is that what you want?”

The cat behind Nora finally gave up on getting rest anywhere near my aunt. He dropped to the floor

with a thud and padded over to the foot of the stairs.

“Oh, see now,” Izzy scolded. “You’ve upset Faustus.”

Faustus, the B&B’s resident Maine coon cat, was a lovely large beast. He was covered in black fur except for a faint frosting of grey across his face, which gave him quite the dignified look. We did lose some business from visitors with allergies, but that was the price of beauty I suppose.

“I’m sure his highness will survive,” Nora said before shooting up to a seated position. “You have got to be kidding me!”

A half-second later a bell tinkled upstairs.

“That woman is insufferable!”

A loud crack sounded from the fireplace as flames surged up the chimney.

“Calm down. Calm down,” Izzy said, getting to her feet. “I forgot I said I’d bring her up some chamomile tea. I’ll go get it. You get the door. It’s almost nine o’clock. I wonder who it could be?”

Before the words had left Izzy’s mouth, the doorbell rang.

Nora swept to her feet as Izzy headed for the kitchen.

“I’ve finally got it,” Nora said, pointing a finger in the air while reaching with the other hand for the door. “I could shove that bell down Constance’s throat. Wouldn’t that be poetic? Oh, it’s you.”

“That’s a fine way to open the door. Who are you trying to kill now?”

I stifled a laugh as a cold little wind rushed through the door along with Williams, our neighbor from across the street.

Now I really liked Williams. I found her to be super stylish, not unlike Nora, supremely intelligent, and incredibly interesting. She had moved in ten years ago when she started teaching music history at the university—although Nora still referred to her as the *new* neighbor—and since that time she had become a valued member of Evenfall’s town council. I knew Izzy felt the same way about our neighbor as I did, but the rapport between Nora and Williams was a touch more contentious. Like most neighbor relationships we did have the occasional issue to work out, and Nora, unfortunately, was willing to fight to the death over each and every one them. Once a branch from one of the B&B’s many trees was blocking light to Williams’s

azaleas, and she requested we prune it back. Nora was horrified. They had argued about it in the street for nearly three straight hours before Izzy was able to negotiate a peace treaty. In all honesty, though, I think both women liked sparring.

That being said, Williams's latest complaint was proving a touch more difficult to resolve.

"I'm sorry," Nora said, moving to shut the door, "but we're very busy discussing how to murder one of our guests right now, so if you've come to complain about Dog, we'll have to discuss your murder at a later date."

"Nora!" Izzy said, sweeping in from the dining room with a silver tea platter. "I can't leave you alone for a second. Is that any way to greet a guest? Come in, Williams, please. The nights are getting chilly, aren't they?"

Williams raised a finely sculpted eyebrow at Nora before stepping past her.

"What brings you by?" Izzy asked. "Not that it isn't always a pleasure to see you."

"Don't lie, Izzy," Nora said before Williams could answer. "It's bad for the complexion."

Izzy ignored her. "I was just bringing up some tea for Constance Graves, but I could always pour you a cup if you'd like."

Williams cringed a little at Constance's name. Evenfall really was a small town. "That explains somebody's bad mood."

"What mood?" Nora asked, shooting up to her full height again. "I can hardly be blamed for—what in the world is going on up there?"

Just then the bell from upstairs started ringing again and then a door slammed.

Faustus let out a low meow. I eyed the cat as he adjusted his feet on the bottom step of the staircase. He didn't often deign to speak to us, so I could only imagine Constance's behavior was getting to him too.

Nora rolled her eyes back to Williams. "If you'll excuse me, I have to go take care of something. Or rather someone."

Izzy's eyes widened. "Oh, don't you think I should be the one to check on Constance?"

"Oh no, no," Nora said, waving both hands in the air. "I'll take good care of our guest. Williams, please

feel free to share your stories of doggy woe with my sister. After all, she has the more sympathetic ear.”

I couldn’t help but think Nora *taking care* of Constance was probably not the best plan. I snapped my book shut and pushed myself up, but the moment I got to my feet, Nora pointed at me and said, “Sit.”

I plopped back down.

Izzy took a step to head off her sister’s path. “Are you at least going to take the—”

Nora swept by her and up the stairs, Faustus leading the way.

“—tea?” Izzy finished, her shoulders slumping. True to form, though, my aunt recovered quickly. “So sorry about that,” she said, hurrying over to Williams. “How are things at the university? I used to love the beginning of the fall semester. The smell of new books. The start of sweater season. The crisp fall air so ripe with possibility!”

Izzy tended to ramble when she got nervous.

“Well said,” Williams agreed. “And it will be at least a few more weeks before all the students are beaten down and sleep deprived. Now, could we discuss the reason for my visit?”

“I know. It’s Dog. He’s still—goodness!”

We all looked up. Something had hit the floor with enough force to rattle the chandelier.

I was much more successful getting myself up off the sofa on my second attempt. “Why don’t you go see what’s going on up there?” I suggested to Izzy. “I’d be more than happy to entertain Williams.”

“Oh, well, if you don’t mind,” Izzy said, looking to our neighbor. Ever the hostess, my aunt could hardly imagine being so rude as to leave a guest mid-conversation.

“Not at all,” Williams said, looking just the teensiest bit annoyed at having to begin her complaint a third time.

I waited until my aunt had made it all the way to the top of the stairs before I turned back to Williams. “Let me guess. Dog’s been after Oscar again?”

“I don’t know what to do, Brynn. That crow of your uncle’s just won’t leave him alone,” she said, worry creasing her otherwise unlined forehead. Williams could be aloof at times, definitely professorial, but she really loved her dog.

I nodded sympathetically. Dog, the crow, just to be clear, did have a habit of plucking at our neighbor's English bulldog's tail. But in fairness, Oscar did also have a habit of losing his mind barking every time he saw Dog, and if Dog dared land anywhere near his yard, he'd go tearing after him. Well, tearing after him as fast as an older, heavier English bulldog can. "I get it, but I'm not sure you could say Uncle Gideon owns Dog. He just feeds him occasionally."

"And that's another thing. I'm finding peanut shells everywhere. In the garden. On the walk. Over the—"

"Brynn!"

I shot a quick look over to the stairs. Nora's voice sounded panicked. I looked back to Williams and took a step toward the door. "We may have to finish this later."

"Certainly, but could you at least talk to him?"

Another crash came from upstairs. This time it sounded like the tea service.

"Absolutely," I said, opening the door so that she could step out. "I'll have a word with Gideon tonight."

"Brynn! We need you!"

"Bye!" I clicked the door shut probably a little too close to my neighbor's face and hurried up the stairs. "Coming!" I raced for Constance's room. The door was open, as was the one to the adjoining bathroom. I jumped over the teapot and tray toppled on the floor, then rushed past Faustus standing guard at the threshold of the en suite. "Sorry. I just had to see Williams out."

I stopped dead in my tracks.

Constance Graves lay motionless on the floor, her eyes open and lifeless, blood seeping from her head.

"Oh my, is she . . . ?"

"She's dead," Izzy said, twisting her fingers together. "Dead. Dead. Dead. Oh dear. She's very dead."

I looked to Nora.

"What are you looking at me for?!"

"I don't know! No reason!"

“If you’re looking for confirmation, she’s really dead. We checked.”

The three of us stared down at poor Constance.

It seemed like ages before any of us even breathed.

It was Nora who finally broke the silence.

“You know, in hindsight, Brynn, I think *our* previous conversation may have been in poor taste.”