

## CHAPTER ONE

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AIDEN CONNOLLY IS MAKING me an offer I can't refuse, even when I know I should.

For the past two years, I've run a small antiques showroom in Boston. Business isn't exactly booming. I recently downgraded to a micro-apartment tiny enough that my cat is ready to serve me an eviction notice. So when this guy walks in and offers me a "unique opportunity," it's hard to say no, though if my gut warns me his job is a million miles out of my league.

Also, in the last five minutes, I've formed a very definite opinion of Mr. Connolly. He's kind of an asshole. He strode past my By Appointment Only signs as if they didn't apply to him, marched up and said, "I'm Aiden Connolly," as if I should recognize the name. I do not.

He stands there, looking down at me. Way down. He's not overly tall—maybe five eight or nine—but Connolly is one of those guys who could manage to look down their nose at someone standing at eye level. The smell of old Boston money wafts from him like fine cologne, and from his expression, my perfume is clearly eau de working class.

It doesn't help that Connolly is a ginger. I know that's usually an insult, but I have a thing for redheads, especially ones like this with red-gold hair and eyes the color of new grass and just the barest suggestion of freckles across the nose.

Combine “rich asshole” plus “hot young guy” plus “job that’s beyond my skill set,” and I should send him packing. I really should. And yet, well, I’m reaching the point where I drool every time I pass the fresh fruit stand but have to count my pennies to see whether I can buy my apple a day.

“My office needs redecorating,” he announces.

I look around my dimly lit showroom, crammed with antiques. “That . . . isn’t really—”

“You are not an interior designer,” he says. “But I believe you could be, of a sort. I’m envisioning a different process, one that begins with set pieces and builds around them.”

It takes a moment to understand his meaning. “Start with antiques and design an office to suit?”

“Yes. Someone else would do that design, of course. What I want is an expert to select the base pieces. Roger Thornton tells me you have a unique collection and an eye for quality.”

I brighten at that as Connolly’s odd offer begins to make sense. Roger Thornton is one of my best customers.

“My collection is indeed unique,” I say. “Every piece is one of a kind. Not a single factory-produced item.”

“I will take your word for that. I’ve collected a few antiques over the years, but I wouldn’t even know their period of origin.”

This admission could come with chagrin or self-deprecation. It could also come with pride, someone wanting to be clear their brain has no space for such mundanities. From Connolly, it’s a simple statement of fact, and I grant him a point for that.

“Now what I’d like—” he begins.

My front door opens, bell tinkling. I wait for the intruder to notice the By Appointment Only signs. Instead, a man strides in clutching a box. He looks like a professor. Maybe forty, tall and slender with wire-rimmed glasses and silver-streaked hair. He even wears a tweed jacket with leather patches on the elbows.

“I’m sorry,” I call. “We’re open by appointment only.”

He keeps heading straight for me.

“I’m sorry,” I say again, a little firmer now. “If you have a piece to sell, you’ll need to make an appointment. I’m busy with—”

The man thrusts the wooden box at me. “Fix this.”

I glance down at a hanging hinge. "I'm afraid I don't offer repair . . ."

I trail off. The box is a tea caddy. Regency period. Rosewood. Perched on four cat paws, with a mother-of-pearl inlaid top showing a kitten playing with yarn. That yarn seems to slide off the box and snake toward me, whispering a soft siren's call of devilry. Joker's jinx.

I clear my throat. "I do purchase damaged items, but if you want me to take a look at this, you'll need an appointment—"

He thrusts the box into my stomach. "I mean the curse. Fix *that*. Take it off."

I force a light laugh and try not to cast a nervous look at Connolly. "I'm afraid that's a whole other level of repair. I'm not sure why you think this is 'cursed'"—I air-quote the word with my tone—"but that is definitely not my department. Maybe you have the wrong address? There's a psychic two doors down, upper apartment."

"Are you Kennedy Bennett?"

"Er, yes, but—"

"From the Bennett family of Unstable, Massachusetts?"

"It's pronounced Unst-a-bull," I murmur reflexively.

"Owners of 'Unhex Me Here,' also in Unstable?"

"Er, yes." I tug at my button-down shirtfront, straightening it. "But I . . . I'm not part of the family business."

"Your sisters sent me. They say this curse is a joker's jinx, and that's your area of expertise. Now unhex my damn box, or I'll leave a one-star review."

"Go," Connolly says.

The man turns and blinks as if Connolly teleported in from an alternate dimension.

"I said, go," Connolly says. "Ms. Bennett clearly has no idea what you are talking about. Just as clearly, she has another client. Now take *that*"—his lip curls—"piece of kitschy trash and leave."

The man's face flushes in outrage. "Who the hell are you?"

"The person Ms. Bennett is currently dealing with. The client with an appointment."

"Y-yes," I say. "Mr. Connolly absolutely had an appointment,

and I must insist that you make one yourself if you're interested in selling that box. As for anything else you think I can do with it, my sisters have a very weird sense of humor. I'll totally understand if you one-star *their* business."

The man's jaw works. Then he plunks the box on a sideboard. "Fine. You know what? You just bought yourself a curse, young lady. *That's* my one-star review."

He stalks out, leaving the box behind. As the door bells jangle, Connolly murmurs, "That was interesting."

I force a laugh. "Right?" I ease the cursed tea caddy off the sideboard and tuck it safely out of reach. "So tell me more about this job, Mr. Connolly."



I AGREE to stop by Connolly's office after lunch so I can see the space. Once he's gone, I exhale and slump over the sideboard. Then I lock the door, place the tea caddy on my desk and peer at it.

While Connolly called it kitsch, it's actually a valuable antique like everything in here. As I told him, all my goods are one of a kind. That's because they're cursed. Formerly cursed, I should say. The *former* part is very important.

I come from a family of curse weavers—a gift said to stretch back to the Greek *arae*. While we can weave curses, we can also unweave them, and that's our true calling. Most times we're asked to uncurse an item, though, we fake it. Not that we leave the curse on. That would be wrong. The problem is that those who show up on our doorstep rarely suffer from an actual cursed object. Instead, they suffer from an anxious mind that needs settling, and for generations, the Bennett women have provided that service, pretending to uncurse some heirloom or other.

People who have a real cursed object usually don't realize it. They may only know Great Aunt Edna's jewelry box gives them the creeps. Worse, no one wants to buy it because it gives *them* the creeps, too. That's where I come in. I will take that box off your hands. I'll even pay you for it. Then I'll uncurse it and resell it.

One might think that the ethical thing to do would be to offer to

uncurse the object. I tried that a few times. The owner stared at me as if I'd sprouted a turban and hoop earrings. Lift a *curse*? What kind of wacko was I? They just wanted to sell their dead aunt's weird jewelry box.

A couple of times, when I felt really bad about buying an heirloom, I tried quietly uncursing the object and giving it back. Didn't help. They wanted it gone. That explains the tea caddy suddenly in my possession. While the owner obviously believed in the curse, he decided dumping it on me was safer than keeping it. Or he just got pissy and wanted to storm off with a grand gesture . . . which ultimately benefited one of us more than the other.

I'll uncurse the caddy tonight, and if the former owner returns, I'll buy it from him. Fair and square. Right now, though, I have a far more important task: texting my sisters to tell them I'm going to kill them in some fresh new way that is totally different from the other two times this week I threatened to do it.

**Kennedy:** Suffocation. Inside an antique tea caddy.

It only takes a moment for my younger sister to reply.

**Hope:** I don't think we'd fit.

**Kennedy:** Oh, you will when I get through with you.

Our older sister, Turani, joins in.

**Ani:** Pfft. I'm not worried. To kill us, you'd need to come to Unstable. Which apparently has fallen off your GPS.

**Kennedy:** I missed one weekend. ONE. Also, the highway runs both ways. You could come here.

**Ani:** To that den of iniquity?

**Kennedy:** We call it 'Boston.'

**Hope:** Can we go pub-hopping?

**Ani:** Yes. When you're twenty-one. Now what's this about a tea caddy?

**Kennedy:** Joker's jinx Regency tea caddy. Guy barged in during a client showing.

**Ani:** I didn't send him. Hope?

**Hope:** Hell, no. I learned my lesson. I hate you, by the way, K. I had a date last week. Made the mistake of offering to drive, forgetting that every time I sit in the driver's seat, it makes a fart noise. 🙄

**Kennedy:** Unhex it. Oh, wait, you can't. Jinx.

**Hope:** Hate. You.

**Kennedy:** Well, whoever sent the guy, please just don't do it again.

**Ani:** We didn't, K.

**Kennedy:** Confer. Get your story straight. Gotta run. 🍷🔪🔪🍷

They don't text back to protest. They know better. One of them sent that guy, and I don't care which—I just want it to stop.

My sisters aren't trying to ruin my business. They just don't understand why I need to run it in Boston rather than Unstable where I'd pay a fraction of the rent and have a steady stream of tourist clients. Except I don't want bargain-hunting tourists. I also don't want to live at home. Not right now.

Mom died of cancer a month before I fled to Boston. Three years earlier, a car accident claimed our father. That time I fled in the opposite direction—quitting college to come home and be with my family. After Mom died, I needed out. I needed to breathe, to be somewhere that didn't have my parents—our family, our memories—imprinted on every damn blade of grass.

Besides, I'm twenty-five, and if there is an age when I should be living wild, this is it. Yes, there are times when I miss Unstable and my sisters so badly I could cry. Times when I must admit that "living wild" means "going to a bar, telling myself I'm going to hook up with a hot guy, and then spending all night chatting with the bartender instead." But I just . . . I want to give this a shot. I want to prove that I can make it on my own, even if I don't need to prove it to anyone but myself.

## CHAPTER TWO

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THIS IS . . . not what I expected.

Those words keep cycling through my head that afternoon as I sit in the reception area of Connolly's office. I did my research on the guy. As I guessed, he comes from old money. His family arrived in America even before mine. Connolly himself runs one of those vaguely named companies whose actual line of business remained unclear no matter how hard I searched. Something about securities. Stocks, maybe?

From that, I thought I knew exactly what to expect from his place of business. It'd be old-school Boston. Dimly lit hallways linking a warren of tiny offices, the stink of age permeating the building. That fit with someone looking to redecorate with antiques and recreate the kind of office his great-grandfather might have had. Massive carved-oak pedestal desk. Swivel desk chair with buttoned red leather. An antique globe for the corner. Maybe a few mismatched Tiffany lamps. Bookcases full of first editions that will languish, unopened, for the rest of their lives. Aiden Connolly will sit in that leather chair, his loafers perched on a desk worth more than I make in a good year, as he sips single-malt whiskey from a cut-glass tumbler.

That is what I expect. Instead, his offices are in a modern skyscraper, the rooms all steel and marble and glass. I have no idea

where I could even put an antique without it seeming as out of place as a wet dog in a formal parlor.

I'm in the reception area, perched on a glass chair that, with each fidget, threatens to send me sliding to the floor like a penguin on a ski slope. Speaking of penguins, I wish I'd worn the black pencil skirt and white Oxford shirt I'd contemplated when I slipped home to change. So far, I've seen three people, all of them dressed in shades of black and white. The Nordic blonde behind the desk wears a pearl-gray dress that I keep expecting to tinkle like crackling ice when she moves.

Forget antiques. What this place needs is a splash of *color*. Technically, my red dress provides it, but I feel like an open wound ready to ooze onto the white marble tiles.

"Ms. Bennett?"

I jump and see Connolly waiting at an open door. His fingers tap the doorframe, impatient at this two-second delay. I leap up . . . and my heels promptly slide across the marble. Connolly's PA shakes her head. Her boss, fortunately, has already retreated into his office. I find my footing and follow him with as much dignity as I can muster.

When I step into Connolly's office, he's at his desk, leaning over it to rustle through papers. Earlier, I'd squashed Connolly into the narrative I created for this job—and into the wood-paneled office I imagined—but seeing him here, I realize I'd been deluding myself. I cannot actually imagine him lounging with his shoes on a big antique desk. His surroundings here suit him perfectly. Chilly, austere, stylish and haughty. His personal office is no different. I'm sure it's gorgeous, in a Scandinavian way. It just makes me long for a warm, woolly sweater and a crackling fire.

"Mr. Connolly?" I say as he rustles through papers.

Green eyes lift to mine as one sandy brow arches. He does not say "Call me Aiden, please." He could be talking to someone ten years his senior, and he'd still insist on the formality. Old money, old ways.

"I . . . think there might be a misunderstanding," I say. "This doesn't seem like the . . . environment for antiques."

"No, it's not, is it?" he says. "Which is precisely the problem."

He opens a side door and strides through. The door half shuts behind him before he grabs it and gives me a sharp wave, lips tightening in annoyance that I didn't follow.

I walk in and—

"Oh," I say, my breath catching.

We're on the fourteenth floor, and until now, I haven't glanced out a window. I can't avoid that here—one entire wall is glass, jutting out to form the curving nook of a solarium. Sunlight streams through, bedazzling a view that overlooks the Common.

"This is the room I want to redecorate," he says. "The sunlight made it too warm most of the year, but thankfully, the air conditioning has been upgraded."

Upgraded is definitely the word. The room is about sixty-five degrees, AC pumping an arctic jet stream. I inch closer to the sunny windows.

"I wish to repurpose it as a staff area," Connolly says.

"A lounge?"

That lip press again, as if the word is too informal, conjuring images of employees actually relaxing, possibly in real chairs.

"A staff *area*," he repeats. "I understand that my choice of decor may invoke . . ."

"Antarctica without the penguins?"

The faintest narrowing of his eyes. "I was going to say it invokes a sense of asceticism that some find off-putting."

"Asceticism is great," I murmur. "If you're a monk."

He continues as if he hasn't heard me. "Personally, I *like* clean lines and simplicity. Clutter in one's environment produces clutter in one's mind. However, I am aware that employee productivity may suffer in a setting that is not comfortable. So I wish to remodel this room in a more traditional style."

He walks to a built-in bookcase of glass shelves. That's when I notice the antiques. Three pieces small enough to fit on those shelves: a snuffbox, a cigarette case and a mahogany triptych mirror.

I'm drawn to the cigarette case first. It's art deco, the silver lid inlaid with jade showing a twenties-style flapper smoking oh-so-elegantly.

"This is beautiful," I say, curling my fingers against the urge to touch it.

"I won it in a card game."

My glance must be sharper than I intended, thinking he's joking, though I'm not sure which is harder to picture—Connolly playing cards or Connolly telling a joke.

"I have an excellent poker face," he says.

He points at the snuffbox. "I won that on the same night. I have a bit of luck now and then." His lips twitch, as if this is indeed a joke, albeit a personal one I am neither supposed to understand nor pursue.

"And this—" I stop short, fingers extended toward the mirror. I wasn't going to touch it. I know better. I was just gesturing. Still, the moment I do, I yank back.

Curse.

I hesitate and then give myself a mental shake. Obviously, my brain is misfiring, because the irony there would just be too rich. This morning, Connolly dismissed the guy with the cursed tea caddy . . . only to have a cursed object himself.

I glance at the mirror again and those tendrils of magic snake out, whispering . . .

Nope, definitely cursed.

Damn.

I inch closer and let the first notes of that hex wash over me. A lover's lament. Better known as an ex-hex. Hell hath no fury like a lover scorned. And from the vibes rising from this mirror, someone felt *very* scorned.

"Did you win this one?" I ask hopefully.

"No, that was a gift from a woman I was seeing. Quite surprising, actually. I'd long admired the mirror, and when we had a falling out, she gave it to me. A peace offering to show there were no hard feelings."

He waves away his words. "Which is more than you care—or need—to know. But of the three, it's my personal favorite, and whatever you suggest for this room, that one piece must stay."

Of course it must. He couldn't just say, *Oh, I don't really care for that particular piece, perhaps you'd like to buy it from me?*

Connolly clearly doesn't realize it's cursed—it takes a psychically attuned person to pick up even just “bad vibes.”

I can see why he likes the mirror. Of the three, it's the simplest piece. Edwardian. Gleaming red mahogany. Original mirror glass, only faintly warped. The center piece is oval with brass fittings that allow it to tilt.

I will admit I have a predilection for more ornate items—gaudy, Ani would say—and the cigarette box is more my style, but I must appreciate the sheer artistry and elegance of the mirror. A truly perfect piece . . . flawed by a nasty little curse.

Two hexed items in one day?

It's been a year since I last stumbled over a cursed object “in the wild.” And yet, technically, I've only stumbled over one today. The tea caddy was brought to me after my sisters sent the owner, which they do with irritating regularity.

Also, let's be blunt, I am not the least bit surprised that Aiden Connolly has earned himself an ex-hex. Something tells me his romantic history is a Christmas-light string blinking red with angry exes. He's young, attractive, successful and single. He'll have no problem finding companionship, and I suspect he'd have no problem moving on a month later, probably via breakup text. He's also exactly the sort of guy who'd see nothing suspicious about an ex offering a lovely parting gift.

“Ideally, I'd want a dual-purpose area,” Connolly says, and I tear my gaze from the mirror to find him across the room. “A place for staff to decompress, but also a place to entertain clientele. A more traditional meeting room.”

“Got it. Now, I must admit I wasn't able to find a lot about your company online. What, uh, exactly do you do?”

“Insurance.”

My soul drops. I'll admit, I'd held out hope for something a little more interesting, a little sexier. But no, this fits. Sadly, this fits.

“What sort of insurance?” I ask, struggling to sound intrigued.

A wave of his hand. “This and that. Now, I only have a few more minutes before my next appointment. Do you have any questions, Ms. Bennett?”

*Any chance you'll let me take that mirror home? Fix it up for you?*

That is a problem to consider later. I ask to take photographs of the room, hoping to get a little more face time with the mirror. Connolly stays right where he is, watching. I snap my shots and leave with a promise to call later this week.

## CHAPTER THREE

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I'M HOME, my mind still churning through my dilemma. As I'd been leaving Connolly's building, I'd texted and called my sisters. I'd tried again, walking home from my showroom. They aren't answering, which could mean they're annoyed at me, but it more likely indicates cell service is down in Unstable. That's the problem with living in a place where the average resident is still on dial-up internet. The psychics of Unstable have a direct line to God, Fate and the future. To Boston? Not so much.

I push open the door to my apartment to see a black cat on the kitchen counter and my favorite bone china mug resting precariously on the edge. One small kitty paw rests against the mug. Green eyes meet mine . . . and the mug creeps toward the edge.

"Don't you dare, Ellie."

Another nudge.

"Yes, we ran out of wet food, and you hate kibble." I reach into my shopping bag and hold up a can. "Better?"

She considers. Then another nudge sets the mug teetering.

I snatch out a can of tuna and wave it. "There. Happy? I felt bad, so I bought you a treat."

She sniffs and hops down to wait by her dish. As I push the mug back, she's purring as loud as a buzz saw. I shake my head and open the can.

I've had Ellie nearly four years, ever since someone dropped

her off at our Unstable home, claiming she was cursed. Ellie was the thirteenth cat in her litter, and she's completely black except for a white spot that bears an uncanny resemblance to the evil eye. She isn't cursed, though. She's just an asshole. In other words, as Ani would say, she's a cat. True, but Ellie inherited the asshole gene more than most of her species. Hence her full name of Elohssa.

Once Ellie is fed, I start pacing the apartment, which takes about ten strides. With each revolution, I check my phone. Nothing from Ani or Hope. My texts are delivered but unread. Damn it.

I plunk onto my sofa. Ellie takes her spot on the armrest. She isn't the world's cuddliest cat. Oh, she acts like it, rubbing up against your legs with that buzz-saw purr. It's a trap, one that has left scars on both my sisters. I've learned the pattern. Two pats are acceptable. A third will draw blood. Mostly, she just sits nearby. And she listens. Say what you will about Ellie, but she is an excellent listener.

"So I have a problem," I begin, and she stretches out, getting comfortable.

I tell her about the ex-hex.

"I want the job," I say. "Connolly's paying well. It would look good on my resume, and it might lead to more work. The guy is about as warm and cuddly as you, but I can work with that."

She rumbles in sage agreement.

"The thing is, a poorly woven curse can fray and infect those in the vicinity. My love life already sucks. What if I catch the curse, and I'm doomed to a life of lonely celibacy?"

Her look tells me I'm overreacting. Or, possibly, that I'm already on that path, so don't go blaming it on a curse.

"Yes, I suppose the chances of me catching the hex are slight. The problem . . ." I thump my head back into the sofa. "Arghh! The problem is that I'm a nice person who wants to do the right thing."

Ellie gives a disdainful sniff.

"Hey," I say. "Be thankful for that, or you'd be living in a barn. Or with a houseful of small children with grubby hands that love to pull kitty-cat tails. While I can complain about catching Connolly's curse, the truth is that I should fix it. Like seeing a loose floorboard

nail when I have a hammer in my bag. I want to fix it before anyone gets hurt. If that makes me a sucker, so be it.”

Ellie cleans one paw.

“Fine. Yes. That settles it. I need to uncurse Connolly’s mirror. The next problem is how. I need time alone with it. Time when no one’s going to walk in and ask what I’m doing.”

I pull my legs up under me and consider the matter. “Clearly, the answer is that I need to break in tonight. I’ll take my lock picks and disarm his security system . . .”

Ellie’s eyes narrow.

“That was a joke,” I say. “I can barely open the bathroom door when the lock sticks. This is going to require finesse.”

I don’t fail to catch the cat’s look then, the one that says, if finesse is what’s required, this mission is doomed from the start. I stick out my tongue and push up from the sofa. Time to grab my kit. I have a curse to unweave.



IT’S SEVEN P.M., and I’m outside Connolly’s office building, wearing the best disguise for the job: no disguise at all. While I’d only seen a few employees flitting about earlier, they were all under forty. That means at least a few will be ambitious enough to work later than the boss.

Most I saw earlier were also male, and I’d caught a few admiring glances as I walked through. I’m not the prettiest Bennett sister—that would be Hope. I’ve been told my skin is my best feature, which always feels like groping for something nice to say. I *am* blessed with clear light olive skin, though. Straight black hair swings past my shoulders. Guys have called my eyes everything from mahogany to chestnut to rich oak. In other words, brown. And apparently wooden. I have an average figure, unblessed by Ani’s curves, but if women compliment my skin, for guys, it’s all about my legs, and tonight I’m showing them off in my shortest skirt and highest heels.

My first stop is the building’s parking garage, where I find the numbered spots for Connolly’s business. I presume he gets the first,

but one through five are all empty, and the two cars remaining in his section are a pickup and an old smart car. Neither strikes me as his style.

An elevator ride takes me to Connolly's office suites. The main door isn't locked, and I walk in to find a janitor mopping the floor. A female janitor. Not ideal but . . .

"Oh my God," I say, breathlessly, as if I've run up thirteen flights of stairs. "Thank God someone's still here. I need access to the solarium."

"The *what?*" she says, leaning on her mop.

I wave my free hand. "The—the atrium. The solarium. The room with all the windows. I'm redecorating it, and I got home to find my cell phone pictures aren't enough. I need this." I gesture to the camera around my neck.

Her wrinkled face pinches. I raise my voice a little, letting it echo through the empty halls.

"Cell phones just aren't good enough. They don't have the right f-stop and lens aperture and exposure rate." I throw out random camera terms and pray she isn't an amateur photographer. "I need proper photos and— Oh!" I bounce on my toes and wave at an employee leaning from his office. "Hello! Can you help me, please?"

Now this guy is exactly what I was hoping to find here. Late thirties. Average appearance. Slightly harried. Staying late at the office because no one is waiting at home. Hopefully, not gay, but if so, I can appeal to any big-brother sense of responsibility toward a young career woman.

I wave frantically, and he comes out, hesitantly at first. Then his gaze sweeps over me, and he straightens and runs a hand through his hair before he strides out.

"May I help you?" he says, his voice lowering an octave with each word.

I explain the situation so far.

"Also measurements." I hold up a tape measure. "I need the width of the doorway, to know what size of furniture I can get through, plus the distance between outlets and immovable obstacles and . . ."

I exhale, drooping. "I know I should have gotten all this earlier.

Or made an appointment. But this . . . It's not my usual gig. I'm an antiques dealer. A job like this is huge, and I got frazzled, and Mr. Connolly . . ." I lower my voice, as if the man himself might be watching through a security cam. "He's kind of intimidating."

The employee chuckles. "*Kind of?* I've been here a year, and I'm still afraid to ask for a key to the washroom."

"Well, then I don't feel so bad. I just . . . I got nervous, and I snapped a few cell phone shots, and then at home, I realized that wasn't nearly enough. I just need, like, thirty minutes in there. Or even twenty. I know the room attaches to his office, but I'm presuming that door is locked."

"I don't think his PA even has a key to his office."

"Then there's no security issue just letting me into the solarium."

I turn to the janitor. "Do you have the key for *that*?"

She shrugs. "No need. Just a few pieces of old junk on a shelf. Mr. Connolly's office is the only room he wants locked." She turns to the employee. "Including the washroom."

"Er, right. I . . . knew that." He gives a strained chuckle. "Well, no more running downstairs to the coffee shop for me." He sweeps an arm along the hall. "Come along, Ms. . . ."

"Bennett," I say. "But you can call me Kennedy."

He beams. "Let's get you situated in that room, Kennedy."

## CHAPTER FOUR

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MY FAMILY HATES to call what we do *magic*. That conjures, well, conjuring. Casting spells and manipulating elements, possessing the power to smite one's enemies and conjure cupcakes from the ether. Given the choice, I'd probably take that last one. A good thing it isn't an option.

Lacking more accurate terminology, we do refer to our wider community as a *magical* one, but people in it are only blessed with a single ability, like curse weaving or dream shaping or luck working. Even in Unstable, the average psychic doesn't possess any power beyond the skills of a very good entertainer. Those who have actual abilities live in harmony with those who don't, and there's no ill-will or envy. Let's face it, even those of us *with* powers fake it most of the time, like pretending to uncurse perfectly ordinary objects.

We aren't witches or wizards, though I may have convinced Hope otherwise when she was six, in bed with chicken pox, and I read her nonstop books about magic schools. I then borrowed Mrs. Salazar's pet owl to deliver Hope's invitation to one, sending my sister into tears thinking she was about to be packed off to a boarding school. I stanchied those tears with the reassurance that hers would be an online education, and I recruited Ani to devise lessons. Ani still grumbles about it, and Hope still has her magic-school achievement certificates framed on her bedroom walls. I call that a win both ways.

If actual spellcasters exists, even Jonathan doesn't know about them. Jonathan King is the local librarian and Ani's best friend since toddler-hood. After Hope and I marathoned *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* during a dual bout of mono, we started calling him Giles. No one in Unstable knows more about our secret world than he does, and he has declared there is no such thing as witches or wizards. Also, to Hope's eternal disappointment, no brooding vampires or ripped werewolves, either. Just families who've inherited one specific power.

All those powers, though, have one thing in common. Balance. You cannot create in a vacuum. Weave a curse on one object, and you must unweave another. To uncurse an object, you must cast another curse, preferably on a different object. If this sounds simple, let me assure you, it is not. Ani keeps actual spreadsheets to track cursed and uncursed objects. My method is a little . . . less rigorous.

Once the solarium door is firmly closed, I prepare. Then I cautiously approach the mirror and pick it up. Even through my gloves, the ugliness of the curse throbs.

Damn it, Connolly, what did you do to this woman?

The answer comes slowly. The mirror doesn't speak, of course. That would be weird. Although, there is an old story about a doll that actually *did* tell a curse weaver her secret. I turned that one into a bedtime horror story for Hope . . . who now has an entire collection of formerly cursed dolls.

This mirror, thankfully, does not talk. Instead, it sends out little tendrils of psychic power that slide through me and reveal their truth in sibilant whispers.

*He would not stay.*

*And now he will.*

*Whether he wants to or not.*

Ah. That makes sense. Connolly failed to provide the commitment his lover desired. He doesn't seem like the smooth-tongued devil type, so I'm guessing he didn't lead the woman on with lies and empty promises—she just wanted more than he was willing to give.

It's a nasty curse for a relatively minor relationship "crime." But Mom always said curse weaving is like selling someone a gun. You

can ask what it'll be used for . . . or you tell yourself you're just the broker and sell it without question. This is why Bennetts weave curses with great reluctance. We feel obliged to ask for the reason and then make a judgment call.

Connolly's lover wanted a commitment. He didn't. As the curse suggests, he refused to "stay." Perhaps the fitting curse would be that when he finds a woman he *does* want to be with, she'll leave him. But that's risky—what if he never finds that woman or what if he sells the mirror before then? Instead, the curse causes him to "stay" with whatever he deemed more important than his lover. If he refused to move in with her, he'll be stuck in his current residence forever. If he found their relationship interfered with his career, then he'll be trapped in his position, his business never expanding. An insidious curse, particularly for an ambitious young man like Connolly.

I set to work unweaving the curse. By the end, I'm dripping sweat and mentally wiped out.

"You'd better appreciate this, Connolly," I mutter as I clean up.

Which is ridiculous. He'll never know the mirror was cursed, much less *uncursed*. Which is for the best, really. Just call it my good deed for the month and—

The door opens. The *locked* door into Connolly's office. It swings open, and the man himself walks through, still dressed in his funeral-director-gray suit.

"Ms. Bennett," he says. "What a surprise."

I stammer my excuse about camera shots and measurements. I barely get out a line before he waves me to silence.

"I know why you're here," he says. "Unweaving the lover's lament on my mirror."

"W-what? Lover's—?"

"I believe curse weavers colloquially call them ex-hexes? Very kind of you, and much appreciated, even if I actually paid to have it cursed. A little test to discover whether you really are what they say you are. Whether you'd recognize a cursed object. You didn't seem to, which was terribly disappointing. But now you've returned and unhexed it for me. I appreciate that."

"You . . . set a trap for me?"

“A test,” he says. “As a prospective client, I needed to verify your credentials.”

“Prospective client . . .”

His lips curve in what he must consider a smile. I see only teeth. “Yes, I have a job for you, one that suits your particular talents far more than redecorating.” He gestures through the door into his office. “Come have a seat, and we’ll talk.”