



## Six

JANE PULLED HER BODY UP INTO A SITTING POSITION AND RAN an absent hand through the disastrous tangle of her blond hair. Her muscles felt loose and rubbery, as though she'd just run a marathon, and the world looked overly bright, the way it did when she awoke from a deep sleep. She turned her left hand curiously; the silver ring sat perfectly normally on her finger, looking as harmless as a declawed kitten. Her hand was trembling, yet her breathing was steady, her mind detached.

The scrap of stationery that had fallen out with the ring was a few inches from her knee. She unfolded it with care; there was no real hurry now that she knew what was inside. The date was six years old, but the ink was barely faded.

*My dearest Jane,*

*I am so very sorry, but there is no way to say this gently: you are a witch. So am I, so was your mother, and so are many others around the world. Magic is real and powerful and all too ready for the taking. I have spent my lifetime hiding myself, my daughter, and then you from those who would kill to steal this terrible gift from us.*

*You left for Paris last night, and this morning at dawn I put the most powerful protection spells around you that I could. You are as safe as I can make you without telling you the truth about who you are. I simply cannot bring myself to do that, even now, even if in my bones I feel I should. When you were born, your mother, my darling Angeline, made me promise to never share our secret with you. She wanted to raise you as a normal girl, just as she had always wished to be. I had hoped to someday persuade her of the value of our heritage, but when she died, I had no choice but to honor her wish.*

*Still, I fear it is a mistake. I feel my age a little deeper in my bones every winter, and when I die, my spells will die with me. I don't know what you will do then, or how you can possibly be ready, and I do know that people will be looking for you. I have to hope that this last gift of mine will be enough to keep you safe then.*

*Jane: you are powerful. Extraordinarily so. I have seen what you can do: the words you hear that haven't been spoken, the things you move that haven't been touched. The enclosed ring will add to your abilities, enhance them, make you as powerful as your enemies are desperate to be.*

*If you are reading this, then I am dead, and that means that*

*you are in danger. Please, please find a place to hide and learn how to use your gift so you can keep yourself safe. And under no circumstances tell anyone the truth about who you are; you'll never know whom you can trust.*

*I am so proud of you, my Jane, and I only wish that I could have done more to help you.*

*I love you, and I always will.*

*Gran*

Hot tears pricked at the back of Jane's eyes. "I have seen what you can do: the words you hear that haven't been spoken, the things you move that haven't been touched." *The lights I blow out or the cash registers that I break?* She had spent her entire life misinterpreting the world around her: believing that Gran was too strict, that violent weather was a coincidence, that she, Jane, was just "unlucky" with electronics. She had heard thoughts, blown circuits, called Gran to her when she was about to drown in the neighboring farm's pond. There were no accidents . . . just powers.

A small part of Jane—the part that allotted 10 percent of her paycheck to savings and only allowed herself three cigarettes per week—resisted. Magic was preposterous; witches were old-wives' tales. But the rest of her, the vast majority of her, couldn't force itself to question something so obviously true.

She closed her eyes, barely able to process the sound of the wind howling past the leaded windows or the creak of the bed under her weight. She was a witch. And now she was going to be hunted, tracked, sought after, unless she hid away from the world, as her grandmother had . . . or died, like her mother. The pain and betrayal and loss of it all hit her like a brick wall, mingling with

her new power, until Jane began to think that she really might explode.

*No wonder Gran was always so jumpy.* No wonder they had had a bomb shelter, code words, crisis plans. No wonder Gran had seen enemies everywhere. Jane shuddered: could the world really be so dangerous? She had lived on her own for six years with nothing worse than the occasional blown fuse, and she had taken that as proof that Gran was off her rocker. But what if that was because Gran had cast a protective spell around her? *What if Gran was right?* Was living a “normal” life impossibly reckless?

“It can’t be,” Jane whispered to herself. Dangerous, sure, but crossing the street was dangerous. She couldn’t live in fear now just because she knew the danger’s name. She couldn’t wind up alone with bear-trap nerves on a farm in the middle of nowhere. There had to be another way to handle this gift—this burden.

From what felt like light-years away, she registered the sound of the front door creaking open. Heavy footsteps sounded, and several voices filtered up from the front room. “Jane?” Malcolm called, but her throat was too thick with emotion to answer.

“Jane?” Malcolm said again.

Jane’s eyes flew open; Malcolm stooped in the narrow doorway of her bedroom. She surreptitiously shoved the letter into her jeans’ pocket. “You’re so pale,” he murmured, moving to fold her into his arms. For a moment, she was almost surprised that he recognized her; it felt impossible that she could still look the same when so much had changed.

*But I need to be the same.* She concentrated on that thought as hard as she could, trying to force her mind to work in spite of the battering it had just taken. At first it rebelled, but after a long moment, a decision began to form. She wouldn’t be like her

grandmother. She wouldn't shut herself away, hoping to hide from disaster by closing herself off from the world.

"Jane?" Malcolm's dark eyes were gentle and worried, a trace of a frown on his full lips. Danger, magic, mysterious enemies . . . it was hard to imagine all those existing in the same world as Malcolm. *He'll never know that they do*, she told herself fiercely. *I'm not losing anyone else. I'm not giving any more ground.*

"You're all I have now." She took his hand, a tear slipping down her cheek. "You're my family."

He took her left hand and kissed the diamond on her ring finger. If he noticed the smooth silver ring beside it, he didn't say anything. He just laced his own fingers between hers and led her back toward the door. "Always and forever," he promised.