

"A spooky romantic-comedy treat that had me sighing at one page, laughing out loud at the next. The perfect book for fall." —TESSA BAILEY, *New York Times* bestselling author of *It Happened One Summer*

THE



EX

a novel

HEX



ERIN
STERLING



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Dedication

To Sandra Brown, Jude Deveraux, Julie Garwood, Judith McNaught and Amanda Quick, the writers who made me want to be a romance novelist when I was twelve. It took thirty years, but I'm finally here!

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Prologue

Never mix vodka and witchcraft.

Vivi knew that. Not only had her aunt Elaine said it about a thousand times, but it was also printed on dish towels and T-shirts and, ironically, shot glasses in Something Wicked, the store Aunt Elaine ran in downtown Graves Glen, Georgia.

It might've actually been the closest thing the Jones family had to a family motto.

But, Vivi reasoned as she sank deeper into the bathtub and took another slurp of the vodka and cranberry concoction her cousin Gwyn had made her, there had to be exceptions for broken hearts.

And hers currently felt very thoroughly broken. Shattered maybe. Little bitty pieces of heart, rattling around in her chest, all because she got sucked in by a cute accent and a pair of very blue eyes.

Sniffing, she flicked her fingers again, filling the air with the smell of Rhys's cologne, something citrusy and spicy that she'd never managed to put her finger on, but had clearly imprinted on her brain enough that her magic could just summon it up.

Even now, slumped in Gwyn's claw-foot tub, she could remember how that scent made her head spin when she

buried her face against his chest, how warm his skin had been.

“Vivi, not again!” Gwyn called from the bedroom. “It’s giving me a headache!”

Vivi slid farther into the water, letting it slosh over the sides of the tub, nearly extinguishing one of the candles she’d put around the rim.

Another one of Aunt Elaine’s lessons—the best cure for anything was candles and a bath, and even though Vivi had put plenty of rosemary and handfuls of pink salt in the water, lit just about every candle Gwyn owned, she wasn’t feeling any better.

Although the vodka was helping, she allowed, leaning over to take another sip through the bright purple crazy straw.

“Let me live!” she called back once she’d drained the glass, and Gwyn stuck her head around the door, pink hair swinging over her shoulders.

“My darling, I adore you, but you dated the guy for three months.”

“We’ve only been broken up for nine hours,” Vivi said, not adding that it was actually nine hours and thirty-six minutes, almost thirty-seven. “I get at least another fifteen hours before I have to stop sulking. It’s in the rule book.”

Gwyn rolled her eyes. “This is why I told you not to date Witch Boys,” she said. “Especially Penhallow Witch Boys. Those assholes may have founded this town, but they’re still fucking Witch Boys.”

“Fucking Witch Boys,” Vivi agreed, looking sadly at her empty glass as Gwyn disappeared back into the bedroom.

Vivi was still a lot newer to the whole witch thing than Gwyn. While her cousin had grown up with Aunt Elaine, a happily practicing witch, Vivi’s own mom, Elaine’s sister, had kept her witchery under wraps. It was only after she’d died and Vivi had gone to live with Elaine and Gwyn that she’d started tapping into this side of herself.

Which meant she hadn't known about Witch Boys and how meeting one at a Solstice Revel on a warm summer night could be both the best and worst thing that had ever happened to you.

Lifting her hand, Vivi wiggled her fingers, and after a moment, a hazy, wavering image rose above the water.

The face was handsome, all good bone structure, dark hair, twinkling eyes and rakish grin.

Vivi scowled at it before flicking her hand again, sending a miniature tidal wave up out of the bath to splash down, the face vanishing in a shower of sparks.

Would've been nice if she could've erased his memory just as easily, but even in her sad and vodka-soaked state, Vivi knew better than to mess around with that kind of magic. And a couple of those little pieces of her heart didn't want to forget the past three months, wanted to hold on to the memory of that night they'd met, the musical way he'd said her name, always *Vivienne*, never Vivi, how that first night he'd asked, *May I kiss you?* and she'd said, *Now?* and he'd smiled that slow smile and said, *Now is preferable, but I'm open to whatever your schedule allows*, and how was any woman supposed to resist that? Especially a nineteen-year-old one at her first Solstice Revel? Especially when the man saying those words was tall and ridiculously handsome, and *Welsh*?

It was illegal, was what it was, and she was going to lodge some kind of complaint with the Witches Council as soon as she—

"Vivi!" Gwyn yelled from the bedroom. "You're making the lights flicker."

Oops.

Sitting up, Vivi pulled the plug in Gwyn's tub, hoping some of her misery was swirling down the drain with the water.

She carefully stepped over the candles, and pulled the robe Gwyn had lent her off the hook on the wall, feeling a

little bit better as she tightened the black silk belt around her waist. This was why she'd come to Elaine and Gwyn's cabin in the woods high up in the mountains above Graves Glen instead of back to her dorm room at the college. Up here in this cozy little space with its candles and cats, every room smelling like woodsmoke and herbs, Vivi was home.

Maybe she and Gwyn could do face masks or something. Have another drink or five. Listen to Taylor Swift.

Or, Vivi amended as she walked out of the bathroom to see Gwyn pouring a salt circle on the floor, they could do . . . whatever this was.

"What are you doing?" she asked, waving a hand toward the bathroom. After a second, her glass floated out, crazy straw bobbing, and Vivi closed her fingers around it before heading to Gwyn's desk to pour herself another drink.

"We're cursing this dickbag," Gwyn replied with a grin.

"He wasn't a dickbag," Vivi said, chewing on the end of her straw and studying the circle. "Not at first. And to be fair, I was the one who called it off, not him."

Snorting, Gwyn began gathering her hair up in a ponytail. "You called it off *because* he was a dickbag. He came to Graves Glen, seduced you, and all the while, his dad was back in Wales, arranging his marriage to some fancy witch. And he knew! And didn't bother to tell you! No, dickbag ruling stands, so say we all."

"We all' meaning just you."

"Me and Sir Purrcival," Gwyn said, gesturing to the tiny black kitten currently curled up on her bed. At his name, he lifted his little head, blinking bright green-yellow eyes at Vivi before giving a tiny mew that *did* kind of sound like agreement.

And Rhys *had* been engaged. Well, almost engaged. He hadn't used that word. He'd said "betrothed." Just dropped it on her this morning while they'd been snuggled up in the warmth of his bed, him kissing her shoulder, and

murmuring that he had to go back home for a week or so, get some things sorted.

“Some things” apparently meaning, “Tell my dad to call off *my actual wedding to a stranger*,” and then he’d had the nerve to be shocked that *she* was shocked, and actually, yes, they should definitely curse this dickbag.

“Fair enough,” Vivi said, folding her arms over her chest. “What do we do?”

“Open the windows,” Gwyn said, moving to her desk and picking up a candle in a glass holder that Vivi had somehow overlooked for her ritual bath.

Vivi did as she was told, the late September air cool and smelling like pine trees as it rushed in the room. Over the top of the nearest mountain, the moon shone full and white, and Vivi gave it a little drunken wave before sticking her head out the window to look up Elaine’s mountain.

Up there, somewhere in the darkness, was Rhys’s family home, the one he’d never even visited before this summer. It was dark now because Rhys was gone.

Gone.

Back to Wales and whatever life he’d lived there before coming to take summer classes at Penhaven College.

And they were over.

Her eyes stinging again, Vivi turned back to her cousin.

Gwyn sat just outside the circle, the candle now in the center, the flame flickering, and for a second, Vivi hesitated. Okay, so yes, Rhys had broken her heart. Yes, he hadn’t told her his father was in the process of finding him a wife. No discussion, no warning, no care for how she might’ve felt about the whole thing. One Hundred Percent Dickbag Moves.

But cursing?

And cursing while drunk?

Maybe that was a little bit much.

And then Gwyn closed her eyes, held her hands out and said, “Goddess, we beseech you that this man shall never

again darken Vivi's door nor her vagina."

Vivi nearly choked on her drink, giggling even as the alcohol seared her sinuses, and flopped down on the opposite side of the circle from Gwyn.

"Goddess," Vivi said, taking another sip, "we beseech you that he never again use his dimples for evil against unsuspecting maidens."

"Nice one," Gwyn said before adding, "Goddess, we beseech you to make sure his hair never does that thing again. You know the thing we mean."

"She totally does." Vivi nodded. "Goddess, we beseech you to make him the sort of man who will forever think the clitoris is exactly one-third of an inch away from where it actually is."

"Diabolical, Vivi. Truly dark magic."

Her head spinning, but her heart not feeling quite so piece-y, Vivi smiled and leaned over the circle, closer to the candle. "You broke my heart, Rhys Penhallow," she said. "And we curse you. You and your whole stupid, hot line."

The candle flame suddenly shot up high, startling Vivi so much that she knocked over her drink as she scrambled back, and from his spot on the bed, Sir Purrcival hissed, his back arching.

Gwyn leapt to her feet to pick him up, but before she could, both windows suddenly slammed shut, the drapes blowing back from the force.

Yelping, Vivi stood up, her foot smudging the salt circle, and when she turned to look back at the candle, its flame seemed to rise impossibly higher, taller than Gwyn, before abruptly extinguishing itself.

Everything was quiet and still then except for Sir Purrcival, still hissing and spitting as he backed up against Gwyn's pillows, and Vivi wasn't sure she'd ever sobered up so fast in her life.

"So that was . . . weird," she ventured at last, and Gwyn walked over to the window, cautiously lifting it.

The frame slid up easily and stayed put, and when Gwyn turned back to Vivi, some of the color was returning to her face.

“You made the lights flicker earlier, remember? Probably just, like, a power surge. A magical one.”

“Can that happen?” Vivi asked, and Gwyn nodded, maybe a little too quickly.

“Sure. I mean . . . we were just goofing around. None of that was real curse magic. That candle came from Bath & Body Works, I think.”

Vivi studied the label. “Yeah, I’m pretty sure ‘Orchard Hayride’ isn’t in league with darkness.”

“Right,” Gwyn said. “So yeah, no harm, no foul, except that we scared baby boy here.” She had managed to coax Sir Purrcival into her arms, and he snuggled in even as he seemed to glare in Vivi’s general direction.

“Don’t know my own strength, I guess,” Vivi said, and then, as one, she and Gwyn added, “Never mix vodka and witchcraft.”

Laughing a little sheepishly, Vivi set the candle back on Gwyn’s desk.

“Feeling better?” Gwyn asked. “Fake-curse that man right out of your hair?”

It was going to take more than one bath, several drinks and some magical silliness to forget about Rhys, but for now, Vivi nodded. “I think so. And you’re right, it was just three months, and now he’s back to Wales, so it’s not like I’ll ever have to see him again. He can go back to his life, I can go back to mine. Now, let’s clean up all this salt before Aunt Elaine comes up here and figures out we were drinking and magicking.”

Vivi turned away and neither she nor Gwyn saw the candle briefly ignite again, the flame sparking, the smoke curling back toward the open window and the full moon.

Chapter 1

Nine Years Later

Of course it was bloody raining.

For one, it was Wales, so rain literally came with the territory, Rhys understood that, but he'd driven from London that morning through sunshine with the occasional cloud. Gorgeous blue skies, rolling green hills, the kind of day that made one want to take up painting or maybe develop some kind of poetry habit.

It was only once he drove into Dweniniaid, the tiny village where his family had lived for centuries, that it started pissing down.

He was fairly sure he knew why.

Grimacing, Rhys parked his rental car just off the High Street. He didn't have to drive, of course. Could've used a Traveling Stone, been here in the blink of an eye, but his insistence on driving everywhere irritated his father, and Rhys liked that more than he liked the convenience of magical travel.

Although, he thought as he got out of the car and frowned up at the sky, today it felt a little like cutting off his nose to spite his own face.

But what was done was done, and Rhys tugged the collar of his coat up a little and set off into the village proper.

There wasn't much on the High Street—a few shops, a church at one end and at the other, a pub. That was the direction he headed in now. There were only a handful of people out this afternoon, but all of them crossed to the other side of the street when they saw him.

Lovely to see the family reputation was still robust as ever.

At the end of the street, The Raven and Crown beckoned, its windows warm rectangles of light against the gray day, and as soon as Rhys pushed open the front door, he was assailed with some of his favorite smells—the malty richness of beer, the sharp tang of cider and the oaky warmth of aged wood.

God, he'd actually missed home.

Maybe it was just because he'd been away for so long this time. He usually tried to drop in every few months, more frequently if he thought his father was away. It put him right in between his two older brothers in terms of familial loyalty.

Llewellyn, the eldest, ran this pub and stayed in close contact with their father. Bowen, the middle brother, had fucked off to the mountains of Snowdonia two years ago, and they got occasional communications from him, mostly to alarm all of them with how intense his beard seemed to be getting.

So Rhys was, for once, not the most disappointing son, a title he was happy to hang on to until Bowen decided to stop doing whatever it was he was doing up there.

He was never going to be the favorite, though. Wells had won that role long ago, and Rhys was happy to let him have it. Besides, it was kind of fun being the black sheep. When he fucked up, that was taken as a given, and when he managed not to fuck up, everyone was pleasantly surprised.

Win-win.

Taking off his jacket, Rhys went to hang it on the coatrack by the door, the one just under an old advertisement for Strongbow cider, and as he did, he caught a glimpse of the man behind the bar watching him.

And when Rhys turned around, he realized the man behind the bar—his eldest brother, Llewellyn—was the *only* person in the pub.

Llewellyn was their father minus thirty years: same stern expression, same Roman nose—well, to be fair, they all had that nose—same thin lips. Only slightly less of a prick. But equally committed to staying in this tiny little village where everyone was terrified of him and running this pub that only the occasional tourist—and erstwhile brother—wandered into.

“Hiya, Wells,” Rhys said, to which Wells only grunted in response.

Typical.

“Business still booming, I see.” Rhys sauntered over to the bar, grabbing a handful of peanuts from a glass bowl there.

Wells shot him a dark look over the polished mahogany, and Rhys grinned, tossing a peanut into his mouth.

“Come on,” he cajoled. “Admit that you’re delighted to see me.”

“Surprised to see you,” Wells said. “Thought you’d abandoned us for good this time.”

“And forgo such warm fraternal bonding? Never.”

Wells gave him a reluctant smile at that. “Father said you were in New Zealand.”

Nodding, Rhys took another handful of peanuts. “Until a couple of days ago. Stag do. Bunch of English guys wanting the full *Lord of the Rings* experience.”

Rhys’s travel company, Penhallow Tours, had grown from a small, one-man business run out of Rhys’s London flat to a ten-person operation, running multiple trips all over the world. His customers routinely called his trips the best of

their lives, and his reviews were full of people gushing over how they never had a single day of bad weather, not one delayed flight, not a solitary case of food poisoning.

Amazing how much the smallest bits of magic could do.

“Well, I’m glad you’re back,” Wells said, resuming his cleaning. “Because now you can go talk to Father, and get him out of this mood.”

He nodded at the windows, and Rhys turned, seeing the truly abysmal weather in a new light.

Fuck me.

He’d been right, then. No ordinary storm, but one of his father’s making, which, yes, meant Rhys had undoubtedly irritated him. His brothers had never provoked a storm from his father.

Rhys had caused . . . twenty? Two dozen? Too many to count, really.

Turning back to Wells, Rhys went to reach for the peanuts again only to have his hand swatted at with a damp towel.

“Oi!” he cried, but Wells was already pointing at the door.

“Go up there and talk to him before he floods the main road and I never see a customer again.”

“Am I not a customer?”

“You’re a pain in my arse is what you are,” Wells replied, then sighed, hands on his hips. “Seriously, Rhys, just go talk to him, get it over with. He’s missed you.”

Rhys snorted even as he got up from the barstool. “I appreciate that, Wells, but you’re full of shite, mate.”

An hour later, Rhys was wondering why he hadn’t at least stayed at the pub long enough to have a pint. Possibly three.

He’d decided to walk up to the house rather than antagonize his father with the car—a real show of growth and maturity on his part, he thought—but the closer he got,

the worse the weather became, and even the protection spell he'd thrown up over himself was struggling.

For a moment, he considered dropping it, letting his father see him pathetic and bedraggled, but no, that kind of thing would only work on a father who had a heart, and Rhys was fairly certain Simon Penhallow had been born without one of those.

Or maybe he'd removed it himself at some point, some sort of experiment to see just how much of a bastard one man could be.

The wind howled down from the top of the hill, making the trees that lined the road creak and sway, and honestly, Rhys knew his father was an incredibly powerful witch, but he didn't have to be such a cliché about it.

Also a cliché: the Penhallow family manse, Penhaven Manor.

Rhys sometimes wondered how his family had managed to avoid being murdered over the five hundred years that they'd called the hulking pile of stone and obvious witchcraft home. They might as well have put signs in the front yard, *HERE THERE BE WITCHES*, for fuck's sake.

The house didn't so much sit on the hill as it crouched on it, only two stories tall, but sprawling, a warren of dark hallways and low ceilings and shadowy corners. One of the first spells Rhys had taught himself had been a basic illumination spell just so he could sodding well see things when trying to get to the breakfast table every morning.

He also sometimes wondered if the place would've been a little different, a little . . . lighter, if his mother had lived. She'd hated the house just as much as Rhys did, according to Wells, and had almost talked their father into moving to something smaller, something more modern and homier.

But then she died just a few months after Rhys was born, and any talk of moving out of this monster of a house had been squashed. Penhaven was home.

A terrifying, uncomfortable, medieval wreck of a home.