



A WITCHES OF PINE LAKE
PARANORMAL COZY



CHASMS AND CHARMS

NATALIE SUMMERS

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Chasms & Charms

By Natalie Summers

Much love to the books that got wildly out of control.

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Book 3 of a paranormal cozy mystery series. Also released as a lesbian fiction version under another name.

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CHAPTER ONE

“Wait, why can’t Vivian give me the test?” I looked from Mia to Iris, my head feeling like it was stuck in a salad spinner. One of those manual ones, where you pushed the button and it whirled wildly in circles. “She’s supposed to be my mentor.”

Mia looked at Iris, and Iris looked back. Amusement lined both of their faces.

It wasn’t fair. I was still getting used to this whole witch thing. And now they had sprung the ‘apprenticeship exam’ on me. Then again, life wasn’t fair. Taylin was a good example of that. I sighed.

“She’s also your grandmother,” Iris pointed out with the reasonableness she demonstrated towards everything except Harry Potter.

“Well. Yeah.” I frowned. “Didn’t Mia proctor Kara’s exam?”

“That’s different.” Mia waved her hand. “It was supervised.”

I was fairly certain they were full of it, but I wasn’t going to say that to their faces. At least not yet. “So I have to take my first witch test in front of a total stranger?”

“You can have us there for support,” Iris said helpfully. “But none of us can assist or provide instruction during the actual exam.”

I hadn’t originally signed up to be a witch. I’d escaped my job as a social worker and fled to the small town of Pine Lake, into a house my mystery great-Aunt had gifted to me. Turned out there was a magical ward

surrounding it and ta-da! I was a witch. And a weather witch, too. Which meant lightning. Lots of it.

“What is the apprenticeship exam?” Magic was a lot more complicated than pointing a wand and saying a spell. “This is the official one?”

“Yes.” Iris leaned back on the couch. “If – when – you pass, you’ll officially be Vivian’s apprentice.” We were in the living room of the main house, where I had been summoned after breakfast. Taylin - the 11yo girl I’d taken in after her grandmother had died - was at school. School was the best sort of babysitter.

I glanced at the clock. We were hoping to open the pet shop in the next week or so, but there was a lot of work to be done before it got to that point. I didn’t even want to think about the state of my to-do list. It was never ending. I tapped my fingers against the velvet fabric of the armchair.

Who had velvet in Arizona? It promised to be miserably hot in the summer.

“Who’s going to proctor it, then?” Nerves skittered through me. After clearing Taylin’s name and the name of her family, and helping find a couple murderers, I didn’t have the best reputation in the town of supernaturals. To them, I was either clueless or trouble. Or both.

“Her name is Emmaline,” Mia said, her face politely blank.

There was a low whistle and “shit” could be heard from behind the closed door to the hallway. Someone was eavesdropping.

Iris shook her head and flicked a hand in that direction, sending the door flying open with a small bang. There was no one there. Small vines wrapped around an invisible something, outlining two bodies. Iris smirked. “Nice try.”

“Oops.” That was Gracia’s voice.

I watched as the two of them - my cousins, Kara and Gracia - appeared in the door frame. Gracia was holding a bracelet of some type. She was a metals witch, one who specialized in creating all sorts of fancy magical gadgets. This one apparently could make people invisible. Kara, like Mia, was a cooking witch. She specialized in being covered in flour.

“If you wanted to sit in, you just had to ask,” I told them. I hadn’t known them before I’d moved to Pine Lake, but they were my cousins, new best friends, and my guide to the witching world. Mostly. They also regularly saved me from my bad habit of learning things by sticking my nose in them.

“But this way we could pretend to be surprised,” Kara said as she sauntered in, sinking down on the couch next to Mia.

I rolled my eyes, but I was grinning. Kara had a flair for the dramatic. “And you?” I raised my eyes at Gracia.

Gracia shrugged, barely hiding a grin. “I just wanted to test a new gadget.” She held it up for us to see. It was thin and silver, with a circular obsidian rock in the middle of the circuit board. “Works.”

“Didn’t stop Kara from talking, though,” I pointed out.

“Nothing can do that,” Iris said dryly.

“Hey!” Kara poked her mother in the side. “That was mean.”

“And true,” Mia muttered.

Kara huffed and crossed her arms over her chest.

“Are you a teenager?” Iris asked mildly.

“I don’t like any of you.” Kara stood, as if she was going to dramatically flee the room. Gracia, however, walked over and pushed down on her shoulder.

“We’re here for support,” Gracia said sternly. “Not throwing a tantrum.”

“I’m not -”

“Kara.” That was Iris’s stern parent voice. I recognized that from my own mother. I had been found abandoned and been adopted by Jo and Evan in Minnesota, and had stayed there my whole life until I had burned out and moved down to AZ. Mom and Dad had died a couple years after I had graduated with my Masters in Social Work and I missed them every day, especially this far from home.

“Who’s Emmaline?” I dragged my brain back to the topic that had bothered Kara in the first place. Gossip was important.

“She’s one of the more powerful witches in town,” Gracia said. She was sitting in one of the armchairs now, one leg crossed over the other.

“So, scary.” I translated.

“Exactly.” Kara sat cross-legged on the couch.

“Get your shoes off the couch.” Iris swatted her knee.

“You’re never this mean to Amalie,” Kara muttered.

“She’s not my daughter.” Iris raised her eyebrows.

“Is everything okay?” I spoke cautiously. Kara wasn’t usually that - well, whiny.

“She’s nervous for you,” Mia said. “It’s how she shows she cares.”

That made a whole lot of sense. “Noted.” I swallowed, suddenly nervous myself. If Kara was nervous, I should be terrified. “What will the test be like?”

“There will be a printed exam on Magical Theory,” Mia started. “A short one, since this is apprenticeship level. It will include questions about the history of the town, too.”

“Who writes the exam?” Vivian? Emmaline? Someone else?

“Vivian, with the Council’s supervision.” Kara looked at me, sympathy there.

I winced internally. I didn’t really have a good reputation with the Council. I doubted they were going to go easy on me. “And then a practical exam?”

Iris nodded. “Demonstration of your skills.” She paused. “Apprentice-level skills.”

I tried to look innocent and failed spectacularly. Apparently, they were all aware of Vivian’s love for the rules. “Okay.” Without intending to, my mind drifted to one of my last conversations with Vivian. I was strange for a weather witch; I could talk to the elements, to the winds that helped me. One was a friend now, a young-ish breeze named Arya.

Yet another rule I got to break.

“Vivian will put together some mock exams for you,” Gracia added. She grinned, showing her teeth. “They’re brutal.”

“That’s reassuring.” I wasn’t reassured. Although I supposed if I could pass whatever Vivian was going to throw at me, I could handle anything.

There was a clanging sound from the kitchen and Mia let out an exasperated groan. “What are you getting into this time?” She stood and stomped out to the kitchen without waiting for an answer.

“Mia stress-bakes,” Kara said. “But Ophelia likes to try her hand sometimes.”

“Ah.” Ophelia was the third of my aunts, and sort of known for being a bit out of it. She was a time witch, though, which explained it. There had to be a basis for all those stories where people went mad when they dealt with moving through time.

Iris studied each of us in turn, something unreadable in her face.

Kara narrowed her eyes, suspicious. “What are you thinking?”

“I’m just so very proud of all of you.” Iris’s voice was warm.

I turned bright pink because hey, except for Mom and Dad, I’d never had a family. I had been an orphan, then had a family, and that family had died. Now I had apparently stumbled across my biological family and they were a lot crazier than I’d expected.

“What do you want?” Kara crossed her arms over her chest.

“Upside down pineapple cake,” Iris answered promptly. “For my gardening club.”

“Couldn’t you just ask Mia?” Kara grumbled, exasperated.

Iris stood, her grin playful. She blew Kara a kiss. “Where’s the fun in that?” Then she sauntered out, presumably to keep an eye on whatever the other aunts were doing.

“She’s a jerk,” Kara muttered.

“She’s your mother,” Gracia pointed out absently. She was studying the bracelet in her hand.

I was more than glad for something to direct my attention away from my nerves. I was not ready for a magic exam. Nope. I still made it rain inside, although I had managed to summon lightning on purpose a couple weeks ago. It was something to be proud of.

“Is Emmaline really that bad?” I sank down into the chair and wished I could disappear. I was nearing thirty, yes, but I had been out of school for

four years and I'd thought I was done with tests.

"She's worked with Vivian on a few council assignments," Kara said diplomatically. "They don't get along."

Oh God. I was doomed to fail. "Fabulous."

"Don't worry," Gracia said cheerfully. "We're going to create some mock exams for you. We can hold them in the warehouse, so you can't hurt anyone."

Even better. There was an abandoned warehouse not far out of town that we used as a training place. The local humans believed it was haunted, which explained the strange noises and weather patterns that appeared. We sort of encouraged it.

I checked the time on my phone and sighed. "I need to go get some work done at Glass Oceans."

"When's that going to open, matter of fact?" Kara propped an elbow on the arm of the couch and looked at me.

"Next Thursday?" I said hopefully. The tanks were all cycled, even the large ones. We were just waiting on the fish being healthy enough to stock the 125 and 180-gallon tanks. As one could imagine, once you put a fish in that, they were hard to get out.

"Will there be sharks? I saw those on TV." Kara looked intent.

"There will not be sharks," I said wryly.

Kara looked disappointed. Gracia rolled her eyes. "Ignore her," Gracia advised. It was common advice when it came to Kara.

I grinned at them. For all the teasing, I had become quite fond of them over the couple months I had lived in Pine Lake. "Would you two be willing to help out next Monday? Last minute things, cleaning the shop... Getting everything ready and testing it..."

"Of course," Gracia said, elbowing Kara.

"Sure." Kara looked put out, but the grin lurking on her lips sort of ruined the effect she was going for. She looked at me, leaning forward. "You should get a haircut."

I blinked at her, unconsciously reaching up to touch my brown hair, which was now midway down my back. "I haven't gotten one in a while."

Kara looked at me pointedly. "That's why you need one."

"I'll think about it." I stood, making sure my phone and keys were in my pockets. "Text me if you need anything." I leaned down to hug Kara, then Gracia. Kara was the more physical of the two, wrapping both arms around my shoulders and dragging me forward. Gracia was more reticent, except for when she was around her girlfriend.

Speaking of.

"Do you think Imogen would be up for helping?" I asked hopefully.

Gracia's lips tugged up at the corner, a fondness on her face. "I'll ask her. Depends on if she can close the library."

"Good." I grinned at her. Gracia was quiet, but she always seemed to light up when Imogen was around, or came up as a topic of conversation.

My phone's alarm beeped, drawing my attention. I groaned and looked at the alarm. It was giving me the two-hour warning to get Taylin from school - intentionally set as a '*go get work done you procrastinating idiot*' alarm.

"Right, I'm going." I waved good-bye to them and then headed out the door, gratified to be able to stop the alarm instead of snoozing it. I was an early riser without an alarm, so the noise grated on me every time it went off. I didn't need it! Yet I sort of did, given how much I procrastinated. Sigh.

Parking in front of the pet shop, I headed in.

"You're late," Walter said immediately.

I sighed. Walter was a talking axolotl that had arrived in the formerly-generic-pet shop just after I'd taken over guardianship. The shop had been Taylin's grandmother's, and since I had temporary custody of Taylin, I had decided it was my job to keep it going. "You didn't die," I told Walter pointedly. I had installed an automatic feeder, not that it stopped him from complaining.

"What were you doing that was more interesting?" Walter sounded almost interested. "That cute detective of yours?"

“How do you know about Reese?” I turned towards him and narrowed my eyes.

“You’re not nearly as subtle as you think you are,” Walter said. The axolotl even looked amused.

“I’m not talking to you,” I declared, heading over to the birds. Haidra - Taylin’s grandmother - had raised three large parrots from chicks, and Taylin had been so attached to them that I didn’t want to relocate them, so we had giant birds in a fish shop. It did mean I had to learn how to take care of giant birds with pretty much no preparation.

It was about as easy as you expected it to be.

Rocky was the biggest, a rare hyacinth macaw. He was a light-ish shade of blue, his beak long and hooked, his eyes beady as he stared at me. “Food.”

“You have half a dish left!” Oh yeah, and the birds could talk. I pointed towards his food dish.

I was rewarded with a spray of whatever was on the bottom of his cage.

“That’s not fair,” I grumbled, heading to get the broom and dustpan.

“Food.” Rocky sounded almost nonchalant, like he hadn’t just covered me in half-eaten seed.

“Fine!” I tossed the dustpan and broom to the side, listening to Melon making a clicking noise that was her laughter. Kiwi was the third one, the nice one. He didn’t make fun of me. Generally. I had the impression he was the youngest, too. To be safe, I topped off Melon’s food, too, then Kiwi’s. All had different diets.

Melon was the middle-sized one, a red and gold Macaw. She stared at me intently, walking close to the door and sticking her beak up between two of the rungs. “Out.”

“Are you going to eat me?” I narrowed my eyes at her.

“Maybe.” The word came out a bit mushed, but it was understandable.

Guilt pulled me both ways. The birds needed to be let out of their cages, have time to exercise and explore the world around them. I wasn’t afraid to admit I was sort of terrified of them. “When Taylin gets here.” Not that I needed an 11-year-old as backup, but she had handled them before.

I didn't *need* her as backup, but I certainly wanted her.

Rocky made a sulking noise, but headed back up in his huge cage to one of the dangling toys. It was like a dog toy, a colorful ball that was entirely hollow so he could hang off of it. He cawed loudly, apparently amusing himself as he dangled upside down.

I shook my head at them, grinning, and then got to work. First was to clean up Rocky's mess, then I wanted to do a final clean of the large tanks before we transferred the fish over tonight. In case something bad happened, I wanted to get the fish to their new tanks now. It was better to have them completely adjusted instead of finding a dead fish on opening day.

Setting an alarm to remind me to go get Taylin, I got to work.



"YOU NEED to keep extra clothes at the shop," Taylin grumbled as she got out of the car in front of the house. We had finished up at Glass Oceans after three hours, and only managed to transfer half of the fish into the two 6-foot long, 125-gallon tanks. Both of us had gotten soaked, which had served to amuse the three medium-to-giant birds walking around the pet shop. Even Walter had been snickering.

"Put together a bag and I'll store it under the counter." I was too tired to argue. Besides, she was right. My shirt was starting to dry (thank you, Arizona), but it was still damp and stuck to my skin. I had been wearing jeans and those were now on the wrong side of uncomfortable. Turned out that even in 40-gallon tanks, fish were hard to catch.

Taylin shook her head at me, but there was a grin there under the tiredness. Glass Oceans would be hers someday, once she hit 18 and it went back in her name. I included her in all the decisions I could. "Make dinner," Taylin ordered.

"I'm the parent here," I pointed out, even as she walked past me and straight towards her bedroom. Not hearing a response, I shook my head with

a smile and headed towards mine. A clean shirt and sweatpants later, I was back downstairs, staring at the kitchen.

“Are you going to try and cook tonight?” Great-Aunt Penelope appeared out of nowhere. I only jumped a few inches.

“No.” I frowned, then checked my phone. What take-out place had we not gotten something from lately? It was hard in a small town where there were only five that delivered. I wanted to keep them from memorizing my name for as long as possible.

“I was hoping for the entertainment,” Penelope said, sounding disappointed. “Where’s the young one?”

“I’m not that young,” Taylin grumbled as she appeared at her door, dressed in clean clothes. “What if I try cooking?”

I stared at her. “You can cook?”

“We’ll find out, won’t we?” Taylin raised an eyebrow, challenging.

“We’ll have Kara come over and supervise,” I said, shaking my head when she took a half-step towards the kitchen. “I want you to be safe in the kitchen.”

Taylin narrowed her eyes, almost as if she intended to challenge what I said, then shrugged. “I’ve got homework to do anyway.” She headed back into her bedroom, theoretically to grab her backpack.

“Something’s up with her,” Penelope said, disapproval in her voice. “Young ones have no sense of what they should be upset about.”

I pointed a finger at Penelope, which was less effective than I had hoped given she was hovering a few feet away in the air. “Be nice to her.” If I had to do something drastic, I was going to make sure Penelope didn’t unintentionally insult Taylin. Taylin had been through enough.

Penelope sniffed, her ghostly nose up in the air. She apparently didn’t appreciate being corrected. “Young people these days.”

Ignoring her (although okay, part of me preened at being called young while I was nearing thirty), I got my laptop and pulled it onto my lap on the couch, taking the time to browse some internet recipes. I couldn’t mess those up too badly, right? Maybe Taylin could try some of them, or at least the

parts that didn't involve the oven. There was a pizza crust recipe that looked fairly simple. I liked pizza.

Shoving the thought out of my mind for the moment, I headed to order pizza. For now, it would work.

CHAPTER TWO

“She’s not here.” Iris even sounded apologetic.

“What do you mean she’s not here?” I stared at Iris, standing at the front door of the main house where Vivian and my aunts lived. Normally I let myself in, but Iris had beaten me to the door today. “Where is she?”

Iris shrugged. “I never know. She does what she wants.”

“Then what am I supposed to do?” I was supposed to have a magic lesson. How the heck was I going to pass an Apprenticeship exam if Vivian decided to wander off when I was supposed to have lessons? Panic was starting to prickle at my nerves, my fingers shaking involuntarily. Maybe she knew better. Maybe she didn’t need to worry.

I honestly doubted that bit.

Iris held up a finger, then closed the door in my face. It was sort of pointless, because I had a key on my key ring, but I stood there, tapping my foot impatiently. I could tell Kara and Gracia weren’t home. Kara was probably at work, Gracia at her pseudo-job, working with Graves, her mentor. Or with Journeyman, the strange man who owned the glasswork shop Gracia liked to practice in.

I had enough time to work myself up into a proper tizzy before Iris reappeared, looking half-apologetic and half-amused. I frowned. “Is she coming back?”

“She wants you to go have a lesson with Emmaline,” Iris said, something to her voice I couldn’t figure out. Worry? Amusement? “If Emmaline is

proctoring your exam, it's best you two get used to each other now rather than later."

I blanched, remembering what Kara and Gracia had said. "Do I have to?"

"Do you want me to tell Vivian that you didn't go?" Iris's raised eyebrows said she would be more than delighted to pass that message on - as long as Vivian didn't shoot the messenger. Weather magic could be unpredictable. Whether Vivian's was on purpose or by accident was debatable.

"No." I let my hands tighten into a ball, trying to ignore the static of the lightning I felt surging over my skin. It felt like something out of a movie, summoning lightning when I was angry, or making it rain when I was distracted. But nope, it was my life. I let out a breath, letting my hands fall open and some of the anger leave. It probably wasn't going to be the best first impression if I hit Emmaline with lightning. "Where is she?"

"The warehouse." That was apprehension in Iris's voice, I could tell. Oh good. A nice, neutral place. Totally not one I had made a ton of mistakes in.

"Thanks, Aunt Iris." I nodded to her, the words feeling almost uncomfortable on my tongue. While the magic was apparently an indicator, there was no proof that I was biologically related to them. Not proof apparent to me, anyway. I could accept the whole magic thing, because there was proof of that. Biology was a different matter.

Why was I being stubborn? I shook my head at myself as I headed back towards Betsy, my old (but lovable) car. I had worked at child protective services long enough to know the answer. Denial. I had lost my adoptive parents a few years ago, and I was afraid if I met my biological family, it would somehow erase them.

It was obnoxious how illogical anxiety was like that. I knew it didn't make sense, yet my brain didn't care and stomped all over it. It didn't help that I spent the drive to the warehouse thinking about what was going to happen, my knuckles white on the steering wheel.

Emmaline wasn't a weather witch, I knew that much. Vivian and I were the only two in the town. Did she know enough about weather magic to instruct me? I mean, I sort of assumed she did since she would be proctoring