



A WITCHES OF PINE LAKE
PARANORMAL COZY



HIGHLANDS AND HEXES

NATALIE SUMMERS

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Highlands and Hexes

By Natalie Summers

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

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CHAPTER ONE

I had to stop myself from staring out the window as the bus rumbled up one of many hills. Why, exactly, had I signed up to chaperone Taylin's 8th-grade field trip? That was the eternal question. After she had skipped a few times last year, I had decided to make a more concentrated effort to be involved in her school life, and this was the first opportunity that had sounded even remotely interesting.

"Where are we going?" Great-Aunt Penelope asked, her lips pursed as she surveyed the preteens. She was sitting next to me, a ghost that only Taylin and I could see. That was definitely new for any field trip I'd ever gone on.

"Observatory," I said as quietly as I could, trying not to move my lips. The last thing I wanted was to get a reputation for talking to myself. These kids were supposed to listen to me. As it was, the other adult on the bus, my co-chaperone, was regarding me with narrowed eyes. Her name was Becky, and she had the bright blonde hair and blue eyes that I thought wouldn't exist in the desert or anywhere outside of TV. She completed her image with a bright, bleached smile.

In short, she was the type of girl I had loved to hate in high school. And college. And graduate school. What no one told teens about higher education was that it was basically all a higher-stakes game of high school anyway. It definitely hadn't prepared me for the real world. Or for parenting, for that matter. Even my degree in social work.

Parenting was one of those things that sounded so easy in theory, but practice involved multiple situations never found in books. Everyone basically did the best they could. For some of them, though, that best wasn't good enough.

My fingers tapped my thigh restlessly, and I turned in the seat and caught Becky's gaze again. She was watching me intently, instead of the kids that we were supposed to be paying attention to. I couldn't tell if it was curiosity because I was relatively new to both the town and Taylin, or if it was disdain because I didn't look like her, or something else.

The way her lips kept curving into a smug smile when I looked at her made me think disdain, but who knew. Besides, I had to keep my calm. I hadn't sparked anyone with lightning in a long time, but that didn't mean it took more than one idiot to push me that far.

That was the other thing. All of them were human, as far as I knew. Taylin had had the bad luck to end up at a mostly human school in an entirely human class. Magic wasn't known or acceptable, which required a certain level of control. Even though I did get some vindictive happiness at imagining lightning hitting her and ruining that perfect blonde hair of hers.

"You're doing that weird thing again." Taylin sank into the seat next to me, on top of Aunt Penelope.

I turned to look at her, trying not to look alarmed at the half-Taylin, half-Penelope who sat there.

"Children these days." Great-Aunt Penelope let out a loud sniff and then vanished, leaving Taylin and I alone.

"Her life is so tragic," Taylin muttered.

I raised an eyebrow at her. Taylin just grinned back, her grey-blue eyes playful.

"What weird thing was I doing?" I reached out and patted her knee, attempting to reassure. Taylin looked fine, but her leg was bouncing as rapidly as mine was.

"Zoning out." Taylin stared wistfully into the distance, her eyes unfocused.

I probably was making that face. She looked like a lovestruck zombie.

“At least they don’t know you’re a -”

“Taylin!” That was far closer to a shriek than was probably wise, not that it had stopped me from doing it anyway. Wasn’t it like fight club or something? No one talked about witch stuff outside of witch land. Or whatever.

When I looked up, the entire bus was staring at me. Becky had a perfectly plucked eyebrow raised, as if disapproving of my entire existence, or as if that outburst had confirmed that I was crazy, like she thought.

Taylin gave me her favorite exasperated look. “You’re a loon.”

I wasn’t weak from relief, but it was close. I should have known Taylin was more than discreet enough to keep the secret.

“Aren’t you supposed to be sitting in your assigned seat?” Becky’s voice was syrupy-sweet, so thick with it it was almost dripping. I felt disgust coil in my stomach and ignored it. “We’ve got another ten minutes to reach the Observatory.”

Taylin looked less than impressed. “Whatever.”

I tried to look stern and approving of Becky’s words, but it was hard. Assigned seat or no, I felt more comfortable when I could keep an eye on Taylin. She headed back to her seat after casting one more look at Becky. It wasn’t the type of look she should have been giving adults, but I didn’t like Becky either so I wasn’t going to stop her.

Then Becky stood up, putting a knee on her seat and facing the students all sitting behind us. “All right, students,” Becky said, her voice as bright as her hair. “We’ll be arriving in about two minutes, so please gather anything you took out of your backpack and make sure there’s no trash around you.”

The preteens grumbled their assent and Becky gave them one last faintly stern look before she sat down. I could feel her looking at me like a bug under a microscope. We were sitting across from each other, only the aisle between us, both of us with at least half of our attention focused on the kids behind us. Beyond a brief introduction when we had checked the kids in, we hadn’t really interacted.

She stared at me, the chatter of kids fading in the background. “I’m Amalie,” I said, offering a hand for her to shake. I’d been good in social situations at work, and had been an effective social worker, but I was still trying to find my feet when it came to the whole parenting thing. Plus, Becky was the head of the PTA and I was fairly certain the parent-teacher association had gotten a reputation somehow.

“It’s so nice to finally meet you,” she gushed, her voice so over the top that I felt uncomfortable. “Taylor talks about you all the time.”

“Taylin is a good kid.” I tried not to let the irritation get to me. Maybe she had just misheard her name, or misread it. Taylin wasn’t a super common name.

‘I’m so happy to see that she turned out so well despite her circumstances!’ Becky put her hand to her heart. “Kids like her aren’t usually so lucky.”

It was only the reminder that I was supposed to be a chaperone that kept me from decking her right then and there. That and risking breaking my knuckles, but Taylin would be worth it. As it was, I felt the energy spark across my skin and I could see Taylin looking alarmed, her attention on me now.

“I’m the lucky one,” I said finally. I waited until I had regained control to smile.

“I mean, not everyone would take in a kid like her.” Becky arched an eyebrow, but she still managed to look perfectly concerned. “They’re such difficult children.”

My heart sank. Becky was speaking loud enough that her voice was carrying, and I could almost *hear* the kids straining to listen. “She’s a good kid,” I repeated, not sure what else to say. “What do you mean, difficult?” I could guess, but it was so much better to make them say it. Only then would they even have a chance at confronting their own prejudice.

“Orphans, of course.” She tilted her head to the side. On the outside she looked almost sympathetic, but when I met her eyes, she looked mocking. “Blake and I thought about adopting an orphan – Courtney is an only child,

after all. But we decided that we couldn't give the child all the attention they would need." She reached out and patted my hand with hers. "We need more people like you, willing to handle children like her."

What I wanted to say wasn't appropriate for a bus full of preteens, but I didn't like Becky. I didn't like her at all. "Are you saying that I took her in out of charity?" I kept my voice low so it couldn't be overheard, but loud enough that Becky could hear me.

Becky put her hand over her chest again, leaning back like she was shocked. Then she leaned forward, tilting her head. "Didn't you? I hear it's the only way you got a job."

The electricity sparking over my skin was getting overwhelming, the lighting fizzing in my ears. Who did she think she was? "I don't think that's any of your business," I managed, trying to sound firm.

Becky just leaned back in her seat, her smile satisfied, like she had just won a round. I was apparently playing a game where I didn't know the rules.

"Which one is your daughter?" I nodded towards the kids. It was a pathetic way to change the topic but I didn't care. If Becky didn't stop the direction she was going in, I was going to punch her. That was a fact.

Becky turned, apparently satisfied with the change of topic, and nodded to one of the girls in the back. "That's Courtney." She was tall for her age even sitting down, her sandy blonde hair past her shoulders and her eyes the same as her mother's. She caught sight of her mother and waved, although when she looked at me she had that same smug look her mother wore. What, exactly, had they heard about me?

Guilt threatened to choke me. What had they been telling Taylin at school? Had they been taunting her? Humans of any age could be so cruel, but kids especially so.

"It's so nice to see you taking an interest in Taylor's academics," Becky said, apparently not done with whatever she was doing.

I rewrote my thought. Kids were cruel, but the PTA seemed to be crueler. There wasn't really any way to respond to that that wouldn't give her more ammunition. I didn't want to give her or the other kids another reason to be

mean to Taylin. “Her name is Taylin,” I said, metaphorically standing my ground. Standing as the bus started slowing wasn’t advised.

“Isn’t that what I said?” Becky smiled. “You must have misheard me.”

I glanced back at the students and just smiled back, albeit weakly. It wasn’t the time or the place. “We’re almost there.”

Becky gave me the ‘oh you poor peasant’ expression I had seen on rich people before. Taylin’s school was in one of the higher-income parts of Pine Lake, full of competitive moms who had too much free time. It was an expression I was quite familiar with, both from parenting Taylin and from working for the government.

The bus wheels squeaked as it slowed to a stop. Becky stood and turned in her seat, ignoring me. She clapped her hands together. “Boys and girls, it’s time to listen.” As if she was magic, the preteens quieted and looked at her.

She launched into a spiel that I ignored. I would probably regret it later, but at the moment the last thing I wanted to think about was Becky or anything she had done. Her words about Taylin made rage burn through my veins. If that was how she was treating me, how was she treating Taylin?

“I’m sorry, were you listening to me?” Becky’s voice caught me off guard. I blinked, coming back to the real world. The kids were off the bus, leaving Becky standing at the front next to the door and looking at me with that condescending face of hers. Even the bus driver was in the back of the bus, focusing on something else.

“There’s a lot going on.” I shrugged, embarrassment making my cheeks burn. Why hadn’t I paid attention? More importantly, why was Becky making a point of calling me out on it?

Becky made a vaguely sympathetic noise. “I hear you were a social worker,” she said. “You must be broken, just like her.”

CHAPTER TWO

I gripped the back of the seat I now stood in front of. “Excuse me?”

Becky glanced outside at the kids, who were chattering eagerly with their friends, seemingly under other chaperone control at the moment. “I’m surprised they let you keep her. Didn’t she murder her mother and grandmother?” Becky shook her head. “Such a dangerous child shouldn’t be allowed with other children. Wouldn’t want her influencing them by any means.”

I raised my hand before realizing it, and caught myself before I slapped her. My fingertips were sparking, something I tried to hide by clenching my hands into fists. “You don’t know a single thing about her,” I said, my voice fierce. “She’s innocent, and she doesn’t deserve any of the shit you’re saying about her.”

Becky’s smile was ice. “Is that why you haven’t bothered getting involved in her life until now?” She shook her head. “Bad child or no, she doesn’t have a chance at surviving with a mother like you.”

Gone was the faux-kind act. All that was left was cool ice, her eyes locked on mine, daring me to do something she could get me in trouble for. I forced myself to take a deep breath. Shoving past her probably too hard, I stomped down out of the bus, ignored the children, and headed off to the side of the road.

The gravel crunched underneath my feet, and I went close to the edge, staring at the scraggly grass and skinny trees, trying to get my emotions

under control. My fingers felt like needles were prickling over the skin, lightning desperately wanting to escape and strike the cause of the agitation, but that was more than enough to get noticed when surrounded by humans.

“Amalie?” Taylin sounded alarmed, but her voice was quiet enough to not be heard by anyone else. “Are you okay? I saw you talking to Becky.” There was a tight downturn to her lips.

“How often does she help in your class?” I hated myself a lot at the moment, in reality. I hadn’t even thought about how cruel the non-magic adults could have been, and I should have headed it off long ago. “What does she say to you?”

Taylin looked at me, and then looked away. “Nothing I haven’t heard before,” she said simply.

I wouldn’t say that my heart shattered, but it came pretty close. I reached out to squeeze her hand and Taylin shied away, shaking her head. It hurt, even when she smiled at me.

“Don’t want to give her anything else to talk about,” Taylin said. “It’ll be okay.” This time she reached over and bracingly patted my forearm, her smile resigned.

I allowed myself to daydream about smashing Becky’s face in, then put the thought away for now. No one messed with Taylin and got away with it.

I reached out to my favorite breeze, Arya, who spun around me making the happy wind-chirp I associated with her. I had seen a map of the few buildings that made up the Outland Observatory, and in order to calm some of my nerves, I sent her to do a perimeter sweep. Caron, one of my other named winds, was assigned to Becky. I wanted to know what she was doing at all times, just in case I needed to interfere.

“Roll call!” Becky’s voice was loud enough to be heard over the chattering of the kids. Reluctantly our group formed, about twenty kids that we checked off by name. And by we I meant her, since she was ignoring me. I tried not to let it get under my skin and failed.

Then another woman who looked like Becky’s slightly shorter, slightly-less blonde twin appeared at the head of the groups of kids. There were five

or six sets of pairs, with the others heading to one of the other buildings. The woman – Jessica, I saw on her nametag - had the same bright smile as Becky as she herded the class into the largest of the buildings. “Now, we’re starting in the main building for the planetarium.” Jessica had the bright, bubbly voice that made everything sound awesome.

I didn’t really appreciate it at the moment. Still, I followed, watching her. She didn’t look quite as happy as Becky, with just a slight downturn of her lips every time she looked our way. I did remember she was a PTA Mom, just like Becky. Jealousy? PTA drama? I couldn’t imagine I was the only one who hated Becky.

“Jealousy,” Aunt Penelope tsked. I screeched to a stop, my heart racing. She had appeared out of nowhere.

“What?” I disguised the word as a cough in my hand, lingering at the door to the auditorium in the hopes that Arya would come back before I had to go in. I could feel Caron swaying gently around, seemingly focused on Becky. Becky stood a few feet away, arms crossed over her perfect chest as she watched the children enter. Jessica was on the other side of the door, pointing each child to their apparently assigned seats.

“Jessica is jealous, that much is obvious.” Penelope sounded disapproving. “It’s quite unbecoming in a woman.”

Just like pretty much everything I did. I coughed to hide a smile.

“Are you okay?” A tall, good-looking man caught my eye, coming close with a concerned face. “Are you sick?”

“I’m fine.” I held my hands up. “Just had something in my throat.”

He glanced at me, and then at the auditorium behind me. “Are you busy?”

I waved a hand towards the auditorium. “I’m supposed to -”

“Oh, don’t worry.” He reached out and took my arm, gently tugging me to follow him. It raised the hair on the back of my neck, even though he looked like a Nice Guy.

Immediately, following instinct, I jerked out of his hands. He held his up, backing away from me. “I’m Ryan Carlson, eighth-grade math teacher. My

class came too.” He searched his pockets and then pulled out an ID card, similar to the ones I had seen on the other teachers.

Pine Lake Middle School, Ryan Carlson, 8th grade teacher. There was a smiling photo of him on the front. It seemed real.

“Oi, what’re you doing?” The woman sounded irritated, but in an exasperated way. She hadn’t come around the corner, but I could hear her footsteps. “Trying to sneak out of lunch duty?”

“This one tried to escape the auditorium, so I was trying to convince her to join us.” Ryan nodded towards me as the short, blonde-haired woman appeared.

“Would you like to help us prep lunch?” She looked at me, sharp eyes taking in my face. She didn’t recognize me, at least not yet. After talking to Becky, I wasn’t sure I wanted her to.

I glanced back at the auditorium, just in time to see Becky slip out of it.

“Can I talk to you really quick?” Becky had her fake smile on again.

“Yeah.” No. No, I definitely didn’t want to talk to her. But I couldn’t say no without it coming across as weird, and after Becky saying what she had, I didn’t want to negatively impact Taylin’s reputation.

Instead I followed Becky a few feet away. Not far enough away that I knew that we couldn’t be overheard, but far enough away that Ryan and whomever the woman was could pretend they weren’t listening.

“I understand you don’t want to be here, but you could at least pretend,” Becky said, not pulling punches.

I gritted my teeth. “Sorry.” It cost me a lot to say that. “I’ll be right there.”

Becky shook her head. “You’re fine.” Her smile was saccharine. “Go shirk your duties. I can do your work as easily as mine.” Her smile got sharper. “But don’t think that this will reflect well on that *daughter* of yours. She at least does what she’s told without complaining. You’re worse than she is.”

“Don’t you talk about her that way.” It was close to a snarl, and loud enough that the woman and Ryan weren’t even hiding their staring. “Don’t you dare talk about my daughter that way.”

There was a power in words, and claiming Taylin like that out loud was stronger than I knew until I had said it. It felt freeing and like a weight at the same time.

Becky, however, didn't look at all bothered. "I'm sorry, are you threatening me?" She just arched an eyebrow.

I clenched my hands into fists. "I'm going to go help with lunch," I managed. "I'll join you when I'm done."

Becky made a shooing motion with her hand. "Run away, then."

There wasn't really a way to respond to that that would make me feel better or keep Becky from mocking me further, so I turned on my heel and headed towards Ryan, a fake smile plastered on my face.

When I glanced back, Becky was gone. Instead, I turned to face Ryan and the woman, trying to put a smile on my face and failing. "I'm Amalie," I said uncomfortably. I was about to add Taylin's name when I could see recognition dawn on their faces, the curiosity becoming sharper.

The woman came closer, although she didn't reach out to shake my hand, which I was grateful for. I didn't want to risk sparking her with the electricity that threatened to jump off my skin. She looked like half kind grandmother and half wise old wizard. "My name is Willow. I'm Amaranth's mother."

I vaguely recognized the name, and wasn't sure who it was belonged to, so I nodded. After having crossed Becky, it wasn't an experience I wanted to repeat any time soon.

"She's a peach," Willow said, glancing back towards the auditorium. I didn't say anything, not sure if it was a trick question. "Follow me."

She turned and bustled off down the way she had come, Ryan not far behind her. I followed at a more leisurely pace, my blood still boiling and my temper on the wrong side of out of control to really be around humans.

"Maybe you'll learn something from this," Aunt Penelope said diplomatically as I followed. I was thankful she had stayed quiet because I doubted she would have helped me stay calm.

"How to murder someone?" I coughed into my arm. I saw Ryan give me a quizzical look with some concern mingled in. That was probably as much

coughing as I could do before they might kick me off lunch making duty. I wasn't sick, and I sure as hell didn't want to go back to the auditorium and deal with Becky. I felt like a coward having abandoned Taylin, but I was fairly certain Becky could only do so much to the children with other adults around.

"No, you do that with your cooking already," Penelope said absently. "I'm going to go check on *that woman*."

Gratefulness threatened to swamp me. At least Penelope could keep an eye on Taylin at the moment. I cast my magic out, looking for Arya. I couldn't find her, which made me uneasy. There was so much I didn't know about the magic world. Were there wards on this building? Were they even common?

Willow led us to a small side room that functioned as a kitchen, long counters broken barely by the kitchen stoves and storage places. On the island-style counter in the middle was several packs of bread, large variety packs of chips, and a couple veggie trays with ranch dip.

"Ryan, you're in charge of the veggie trays. Make sure they all stay chilled." Willow nodded sharply to the few trays on the table in front of us.

"Yes ma'am." Ryan promptly picked up the errant trays and headed into a back room. The burst of cold air made me think it was a freezer or a fridge, separate from the one I could see.

"It's sort of hot in here," I said, which wasn't really true because the city of Mokona was cooler than Pine Lake as a rule. "Could we open a window?"

Willow gave me a scrutinizing look, but then she nodded. "Of course, dear." She headed towards the small window above the sink and pushed it open, letting a slight breeze in.

The moment the window opened Arya came in, rustling around my shoulders with an agitated twitch. She was twirling a leaf in her wind, which I snatched out of the air and tucked in my pocket, hoping Willow hadn't noticed.

"This is your first time as a chaperone?" Willow asked nonchalantly, turning her attention away from the breeze and towards the table in front of

us. She didn't wait for an answer. "We're going to make several different types of sandwiches. Peanut butter and jelly, just peanut butter, just jelly, and then we have a few lunches that are made for those who have specific allergies." She nodded towards a list on the wall.

"Okay." I glanced at the island counter, at all the supplies and then back at her. "Where do you want me to start?"

"You're going to help make the sandwiches, then you're going to help pack the lunches." Willow glanced at the table, at the brown bags, then at me. "Will that be a problem?"

"Not at all." I slid on the flimsy latex gloves and got the sandwich-making station set up. I was in charge of peanut butter or jelly, at least for the moment.

"Once you're done with those, you'll do the specialty ones." Willow nodded towards the list. She was doing the long list, the combined sandwich. "You're Taylin's mother." Her eyes were focused on what she was doing, and her tone was casual instead of judgmental.

I couldn't help but think of Becky, which left a sour taste in my mouth. "Do people talk about her like that to her face?"

This time Willow did look at me, surprise mixed with caution. "You met the head of the PTA, I take it."

"Are you part of it?" I wasn't sure even from her tone what she thought about Becky or the rest of the PTA.

"Sometimes." Willow's voice was wry. "Amaranth is my second child in this school. I've had to get involved a few times."

There was a pause. "So you know Becky."

Willow hummed her agreement. "Courtney was in Amaranth's class last year."

"She's in Taylin's class this year." I squeezed the knife I was holding a bit too tightly, bending it against the edge of the peanut butter jar. I was regretting not getting more involved in Taylin's schooling before now. How could I have been so stupid? "I thought I left politics behind when I left my government job," I told the sandwich I was making.