



A WITCHES OF PINE LAKE  
PARANORMAL COZY



# PEAKS AND POTIONS

NATALIE SUMMERS

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Peaks and Potions

By Natalie Summers

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Book 5 of a paranormal cozy mystery series.

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*This book is for you, Dad. I still remember getting the texts and calls when you'd been tracking how my books are doing and were so excited every time they did even better.*

*I miss you. I wish I could share this with you, too.*

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## CHAPTER ONE

I SAT in my car in front of the Council House, hesitant to go inside. None of the council members were particularly fond of me, and I was depending on them to approve my application for Taylin's adoption. Taylin, my foster daughter, sat in the passenger seat next to me, her nerves obvious by the way her knee was bouncing.

The one council member I could have counted on was excluded from this. My grandmother, Vivian, was one of the most powerful witches in town. However, since we were related, the new head of the council, Absinthe, had decided Vivian wasn't allowed to weigh in on decisions relating to Taylin or her family.

I was hella nervous, I would be the first to admit it. It wasn't even just not having Vivian's support; it was that every time a situation came up like this, I wondered who had dared decide I qualified for an Adult card. Yes, I was almost thirty, and Taylin was my foster daughter, but sometimes the whole situation felt surreal. Throw in the whole being-a-witch thing and it sounded straight out of a movie.

On top of that, Taylin had been sent home with a letter saying she was missing too many assignments in two classes and would I please make sure she did her homework. I forced myself to take a deep breath. Taylin really wasn't that far behind, and we would fix it.

Logically, I knew even if she was behind in school, if we put a plan in place and got it set up with the district, it wouldn't be a mark against me. Not

that the knowledge stopped my brain from running away with everything bad that could happen.

"It'll be fine," Taylin said with a confidence she didn't seem to feel.

I drummed my fingers against the steering wheel. "It will," I agreed, although I wasn't entirely certain I felt that either.

She was quiet for a while, looking out the window even as time continued to tick down. "I think you make a good mom," Taylin said offhandedly.

I stared at her, momentarily wondering if she'd been taken over by a creature from another realm.

She scowled at me, self-conscious. "Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?"

She scowled some more. "Sure. Like you don't already know what I'm talking about."

She was as nervous as I was. The thought settled heavily in my stomach. No matter what happened, no matter what the outcome was, I wanted her to be happy. I was the adult of the two of us, which meant it was up to me to put on a brave face.

Getting out of the car, I waited for her to come around to meet me before I draped an arm over her shoulder. "You know I love you, right?"

Taylin froze but didn't look at me.

Inwardly my stomach dropped. Shit. Was I pressuring her? Was she afraid to hurt my feelings and tell me she didn't want me to, or maybe she didn't want to live with me anymore? I knew I'd screw this parenting thing up eventually.

Then she ducked out from underneath my arm and tossed her hair back. "Of course, you do," she said, as cockily as ever. "I'm amazing."

I laughed, a smile curving my lips. She really was an amazing kid, and I was lucky as hell to be her mother. "Hopefully this will be quick," I said, although I doubted that would be the case. From my experience, nothing the Council ever did was quick.

Especially without Vivian involved. Beyond just being family, Vivian loved my daughter. I would have given a lot to have someone biased in our

favor to help us navigate the train wreck that this process might become.

I forced myself to take a deep breath and then walked inside, Taylin by my side. A tall brunette woman walked up to me, her heels clicking on the hardwood floor. "Miss Holmes?" she asked, her voice smooth. She had glasses on, and her gaze flickered from the clipboard tucked into the crook of her arm to me.

I always found it disconcerting when I was addressed like that. I always wanted to look for my mother. But I nodded. "Yes," I answered. "And you are?"

"Teresa," she said, her voice smooth. "I'm Absinthe's new assistant."

I shook her hand, then waited for her to acknowledge Taylin. When she didn't, I frowned. "I'm here for Taylin's meeting?"

She gave me an odd look. "I don't see you on the schedule?" The expression on her face clearly told me it was my fault, somehow.

"We got a call earlier today," I said, bewildered. "It's been scheduled for two weeks."

Teresa gave me a scrutinizing look as if she couldn't decide whether or not I was lying. My heart was starting to race. If the call hadn't been from them, then who had it been from? It would have been an incredibly strange type of prank call. A very specific one.

She cleared her throat. "I'll go talk with the council members," she said. "They may be able to spare time in their schedule." She let herself out the far door without a glance back.

"Maybe it was just a miscommunication." I wasn't sure who I was trying to convince. Probably myself.

"That's weird," Taylin muttered, shifting her weight from foot to foot. I glanced at her. "If it wasn't them, then who was it?"

"Could be a clerical error," I said with a confidence I didn't feel.

Taylin's look was skeptical, but she let it go.

Then Teresa reappeared, her smile distant and welcoming at the same time. "They have time to see you."

"Thanks," I said, still wondering what in the hell had happened. Maybe they were just asserting how much power they had. Chalking it up to a mistake, I started walking next to Teresa. "So how long have you been doing this?" I asked, making conversation during the short walk to the grand room. Taylin snorted next to me.

The look Teresa gave me was skeptical, as if she wasn't certain why I was asking or what my motives were. "A few months," she said finally. "It's a rewarding job."

I studied her in silence for a few moments. She sounded like I had near the end in Minnesota, trying to convince myself that something was true even when it wasn't. Still, I didn't say anything. It wasn't my place.

Could someone burn out on a job in just a couple months? Yes, yes someone could. Even if Teresa really only had been working for them for a few months, sometimes the work environment just wasn't worth it.

"They're waiting for you," Teresa said, inclining her head. "Let me know if you need anything else." She turned and disappeared, her clipboard still clutched firmly in her hand.

"She's weird," Taylin said.

"That's not nice," I replied absently.

"But it's true," Taylin pointed out.

I felt bad for saying it, but it was. She seemed a little strange, and not exactly who I would've expected to take over for Astonia. They hadn't replaced Rasha on the council, either, at least as far as I knew.

Apparently, it was my turn to be surprised. I didn't recognize the woman sitting on Absinthe's other side.

"Ms. Holmes," Absinthe said, her voice frosty. It didn't seem to be that she disliked me, it seemed to be the way she spoke.

"Hello, Council," I said with a faint nod.

"We understand that you wish to adopt Taylin," she said, the words formal.

"Yes," I said. "She has asked, and I agreed." I reached over and drew Taylin close, trying to provide some reassurance.

Absinthe's eyes held mine, although I noticed Joseph was looking at me warily. He was a water witch I'd had prior dealings with in other cases, and I didn't really think he liked me. Not that I really cared, because I didn't need to be liked. But it did make me cautious when it came to the here and now. Vivian wasn't here to provide a buffer.

I turned to the new woman and studied her. I hadn't seen her before. She had fiery red hair and stunning green eyes, but her smile was kind.

"You understand the magnitude of the task to which you are agreeing?" Absinthe asked, her voice neutral.

"I think so." My answer seemed to surprise Taylin because she jerked away from me. I could see the alarm on her face, so I squeezed her shoulder. I didn't think a definite answer was required, nor did I think the Council wanted one. I liked to think that I understood the magnitude of what I was agreeing to, but from my experience, parenting was never really what you thought it was. Reality was so very different.

Absinthe's eyes narrowed. "Explain."

"I think I have a lot to learn," I said frankly. "I don't think I'll understand the magnitude of everything until I'm doing it. It's one thing to know how things work in theory, and to know how they've worked over the last year. It's a whole different thing to be ten years down the road."

Surprise flickered across Joseph's face, and the redhead looked startled. All I could think about was how over ten months ago, I'd been sitting there in the middle of the night, exhausted, about to learn that I was a witch for the first time.

So much had changed. Now I was here for a very different reason.

"You believe you can provide her with a sufficient environment?" Absinthe asked.

I nodded firmly. "I do."

There was some murmuring, but they didn't seem to outright disagree. "What about magical education?" Absinthe asked coolly.

I hesitated, but I forged forward. "I'm aware I have a lot to learn," I said, not sugarcoating it. "But I have a strong family here who are more than

willing to help me with problems when they arise.”

Absinthe studied me intently, but she didn't seem entirely convinced.

"The Council prefers to see more demonstrations of your magic talents before you're able to commit to teaching a youngster magic." This time it was Joseph who spoke. The fact that he had done so without them even talking about it worried me. Had they already decided from the beginning that I wasn't a fit parent? Was it actually magic they were worried about or was it something else?

"She's fine," Taylin said defensively. It was the first time she had spoken since we entered.

I reached over and squeezed her arm, trying to shush her. I appreciated her support, but I didn't think the Council would. "My mentor, Vivian, can attest to my magic skills," I said firmly. "And I passed my initial exams—"

"Vivian is not an objective observer," Joseph pointed out. "And that exam is basic for any witch. It's not an accomplishment."

Jerk. No wonder I didn't like him. "I'll do whatever the Council needs," I said, although what I wished to say to the council at that moment was not something I should say out loud. At least not to their faces.

"Should we not find you suitable, we may place the child back with her original foster parent who can give her a better magical education." This was the red head.

"But she didn't even want her," I said through gritted teeth.

When Absinthe met my gaze, there was something distant and dark in her eyes. "In our world, it's not just affection that a child needs," she said. "Affection cannot make up for the danger that a lack of training brings."

I bitterly, bitterly disagreed. "If you think giving her to a house that doesn't love her just so she can get better training is a good idea, then why do you even care about her in the first place?" I could hear the volume of my voice rising, but I wasn't going to let it go. What they were talking about went against everything I knew.

Absinthe's eyes narrowed. "Are you challenging us?"

"I fail to understand how my lack of magic training would sufficiently negatively impact the child to the point which the Council would consider subjecting her to a house where she's not wanted." Apparently irritating me turned on my academic language setting.

"Oh, Zani has already agreed to take her back," Absinthe said smoothly.

I stared at her. This was probably why they had dismissed Vivian from this case. There was no way in hell Vivian would have allowed this plan to go forward. I had no doubt Zani would take Taylin back, but I knew it wasn't because she wanted Taylin. While most foster parents were a godsend, there were still some who did it for the money.

But why *me*? Why Taylin? My family had a good reputation in town, albeit a crazy one. Why were they so against me? "All right," I said, trying to keep my anger from lacing my voice. "What do you want to see for proof, then?"

Absinthe looked thoughtful. "You tell us."

I took a deep breath in and out through my nose. "If I can prove I have the resources to continue her teaching, even with my limitations, would that satisfy the Council?" I kept my fists from clenching out of sheer force of will. I knew, to some extent, they were just looking out for Taylin's well-being. But they were doing it in the absolute worst way.

Absinthe stared at me for a long while, and then inclined her head. "We suppose we would find that acceptable. We'd like you to become familiar with her specific type of magic. We'd also like to sit in on lessons." She tapped her finger on the table, and it echoed like a gavel was pounded. "We'll check in in two weeks. You're dismissed."

Without another word, I took Taylin's hand and we left. She was ashen now, not that I could blame her. "Are they gonna take me away?" she asked, her voice shaking.

"Not if I have my way," I said fiercely.

"She was nice at your tests," Taylin said, her voice bitter. "But people are always like that. Nice where others can see."

She surprised me with that, and I made a note to follow up with that later. “Let’s get home,” I murmured, kissing her on the top of her head.

Taylin squeezed an arm around my waist, some of the tension draining from her. “Okay.”



## CHAPTER TWO

“WE’RE HOME,” I said as I pushed open the front door, setting my keys to the side. I hadn’t seen Reese’s car, but I liked to cover my bases just in case.

“Finally,” Great-Aunt Penelope muttered. “Taylin and I have a weekly poker game.”

I looked at Taylin, somewhat perplexed. “How can you play poker when she doesn’t know what the cards are?”

“She can see through them.” Taylin shrugged her backpack over her shoulder and darted for her room without a second glance.

Aunt Penelope floated in place for a few seconds, and I could feel her eyes boring into me. “That dreadful meeting was today, wasn’t it?”

“The one where the council decided that I need to demonstrate that I can teach magic, or they’ll give her back to Zani?” My voice was dry. “Yes, that dreadful conference.”

Silence reigned in the house for the longest moment, and a shiver went down my spine at the sight of Aunt Penelope’s face. She did not look happy. “They can do that?”

“It’s not just the human side of the law we need to go through,” I admitted, hating that fact more than ever. “And they’re right, sort of. I don’t know how to teach someone magic.”

Aunt Penelope narrowed her eyes. “Like that woman could do any better. She couldn’t handle Taylin.”

“Yeah.” I knew what we were both thinking of. Taylin’s magic was unpredictable, something we didn’t have a ruleset for. She struggled with randomly being possessed by ghosts and saw them at inconvenient times. While we had started figuring out what she could do on her own, it was still going to be a long road littered with trial and error.

Plus, Pine Lake as a whole didn’t have a good history with non-traditional magic. The fact Taylin could communicate with the dead was already a black mark on her record, if you asked most people.

“You’ll be fine,” Aunt Penelope said with a confidence I didn’t feel. Then she disappeared, and I was left standing in the kitchen by myself.

I groaned, leaning back until the marble of the counter dug into my skin. The click of the front door unlocking pulled me out of my thoughts. Given the time and who was here already, the best bet was Reese.

Pushing myself up, I headed towards the front foyer. He was talking on the phone when he entered, toeing off his shoes with his eyes on the ground.

“Yeah, yeah.” He sounded exasperated. “Yes, I know. He doesn’t need to keep reminding me.” Reese slid off his jacket, catching sight of me when he turned to hang his coat up. The frustration on his face slid into a warmth that made my stomach flip every time, no matter how many times I’d seen it.

He leaned forward as if to give me a kiss and then paused, an exasperated huff ruining the moment. “I know,” Reese snapped. “I have it under control. You’re not my mother, Henry.”

I raised my eyebrows and took a half-step back. It wasn’t unlike Reese to get frustrated over a case, but it was unusual for him to be frustrated with his partner. Reese sighed as he ended the call and shoved his phone into the pocket of his slacks.

“Bad day at work?” I asked, trying to keep the question light-hearted.

Surprise crossed Reese’s face, then was replaced with the deep weariness that was part of his character. “Picked up a new case.”

“With Henry?” I hadn’t had a chance to meet him, but I knew him through Reese. He was a good person, unlike the police chief. I hated the

police chief and he hated me. Oh, and the Chief hated Reese. Which was difficult, because he was Reese's boss.

"Independently." His lips were set in a stubborn line, but after a heartbeat he softened and leaned forward, giving me a kiss. "Hi."

I hate to say it, but I almost giggled. What was wrong with me? I was never someone to giggle. But the thought that he may actually move in, become a more permanent part of my life... it was tempting.

"Where's the stalker?" Reese peered behind me, looking for the ghost he couldn't see. "She's not making commentary, or you'd be more annoyed."

I pursed my lips, which made Reese look at me quizzically.

"Something wrong?" he asked, taking a step back and giving me a look-over.

"We had our council meeting today." I tried not to grimace.

"It didn't go well?" Reese looked like he'd just seen someone kick a puppy.

My heart sank and I looked towards the floor, trying to find the right words to say. "They think I can't teach her magic." I glanced towards Taylin's room, not sure if she was listening. "Absinthe is threatening to return her to her original foster home."

"What—" Reese cut himself off by pinching the bridge of his nose and taking a deep breath. Instead of continuing his words, he wrapped me in his arms, pulling me against his broad chest. It was easy enough to lean into, close my eyes and take some deep breaths to let the worries of the day slide away.

Something felt different about Reese's quiet. Normally when we would hug, or be close, I could see where his mind was, see the ticking. But this felt like a distant quiet where his mind was far away. Not that there was anything wrong with that. It just wasn't what I expected.

"Hey." I pulled back, not surprised to see Reese blink like he hadn't been paying attention.

"Mhm?" Reese cocked his head to the side.

“You okay?” Worry pulled at me and I wasn’t sure why. There wasn’t anything blatantly off about him; it was just a feeling.

Not that I really needed more to worry about at the moment.

Reese’s green eyes flickered to the side and then back to me. “Just a long day.” His smile was weary. “Are you ready for dinner?”

Distraction plus a topic change. I wasn’t sure whether to be more or less worried. “Almost,” I said instead. We were heading to the Main House for the usual weekly family dinner. I stood where I was, a hand on my hip and my eyes on him. “Are you sure you’re okay?” I bit the inside of my cheek. “You just seem off.”

“Can’t hide anything, can I?” Reese half-smiled. “I need to talk to you after dinner.”

I stared at him, my heart plummeting to my stomach. That wasn’t what I had expected.

“Nothing bad,” Reese added hastily. “I just need to talk to you about a case.”

Oh. My shoulders relaxed, and so did the rest of me. “I should probably change.” I glanced down at my council-conference-clothes. Most times the family dinner was casual attire rather than formal, so jeans fit in better than dressing up.

“I’ll come change, too.” Reese nodded, his eyes going distracted again.

My phone rang, which was a distraction on my end. I gestured for him to go ahead to the bedroom before answering. “Hello?”

“Amalie?” It was Erin, one of Glass Oceans’ most frequent customers.

I glanced at the clock. “How can I help you?” The store was still open for a couple more hours, although Stephanie was the one working there. “Is something wrong?”

“Your shop is closed.” I could hear Erin’s lips purse as she spoke. “I wanted to buy some more filter material.”

“Closed?” I tried not to sound as alarmed as I felt. “Are the lights on or off? Any sign of a break-in?”