

THE CHIRPING OF CRICKETS KEPT HER AWAKE throughout the night, or, at least, that was what Corey told herself. She couldn't allow herself to fall asleep again after her nightmare. It felt too painful, too real. She had forcefully emerged from her slumber, feeling as though she was being suffocated. It reminded her of the pain she had felt when Madison *'stole'* her spell; the blonde's repayment to the new girl for making sure the man who hurt her couldn't do the same to anyone else.

By the time she willed herself out of bed, the sun was beginning to rise. Corey tossed the comforter to the side, her bare feet sticking to the wood as they touched the floor. She couldn't stay in her bedroom any longer.

Couldn't spend another moment in an otherwise empty bed with a cat that was more attached to Madison than herself.

Couldn't believe that she had let herself fall asleep before Madison came home.

Couldn't sit and stare at the blonde's pillow as it slowly lost the impression of her head the further time ticked on.

Couldn't spend another second battling with herself on whether she was just seeing things or if someone really had been in her bedroom the moment she had shot up from her deep sleep.

She reached into her bedside table, pulling out her pack of cigarettes. She let one rest between her lips, focusing for a fraction of a second to light it without digging through her dirty clothes, which laid in piles on the floor, in search of a lighter.

She wandered out of her bedroom and down the hallway, the jingle of a black cat trotting after her the only sound aside from the creaking floorboards. Pinks and purples reflected against the walls as she nudged the door to Madison and Zoe's bedroom open without thinking. She had been so used to the room only housing one witch that she moved on muscle memory, forgetting for a moment that the room hadn't solely belonged to Madison anymore.

Zoe sprawled out in her bed, laying on her stomach as she read through a tattered and torn copy of *'The Price of Salt'* by Patricia Highsmith. Corey recognized the copy as Madison's

and her shoulders relaxed; the tension she hadn't realized she'd been holding in partially melted away. Zoe looked up over the edge of her book, the scent of cinnamon, toasted tobacco, and smoke that followed the redhead having caught her attention.

"Corey?" She asked, her brow furrowed. She was slightly confused, unsure as to why the witch had entered her room so early in the morning. Corey's eyes drifted over to Madison's empty bed, the sheets taut against the mattress. Her chest quivered as she took in a breath.

"She didn't come home?" Her voice caught in her throat. The panic that set in caused a high pitched squeak to let out as she tried to take in a full breath. Zoe's eyes followed Corey's, her head tilted slightly as she tried to understand what was going on.

"I'm sure she's fine," she shrugged, her attention returning to the redhead that stood in her doorway. She studied the other witch for a moment, trying her hardest to understand the situation at hand.

"She probably just found a flock of *dude-bros* to tend to her every whim or something." The book in her hands remained partially covering her face. She pulled a hand up to her lips, her tongue darting out to wet the pad of her thumb before turning the page.

"She's *famous*, she'll be back before anyone *important* can even realize she's been gone." Zoe paused, catching how her comment could be unintentionally harmful to the woman who hadn't moved from the doorway. Finally, the book fell from where it had been covering the bottom half of her face.

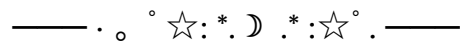
"I— I mean," she stammered. "You are too." She took a moment to think, to keep herself from accidentally offending the redhead. "And you're obviously very important. And I should have thought about what I was going to say before I said it." Zoe spoke quickly, almost stumbling over herself as she tried to make amends.

"I know you two didn't really get off on the right foot," Corey sighed. She wiped a hand across her face as she paused, trying to hold herself together. When she pulled her hand away, her expression was bland except for a slight, sad, downward turn of her lips. "But this isn't *natural* behavior for her." She cleared her throat, pulling her cigarette up to her lips with a barely noticeable shake of her hand.

“Maddie wouldn’t just not come home. She wouldn’t tell me not to wait up.” Her lip quivered as she spoke, a continuous struggle to hold in her emotions. “She wouldn’t do this, this isn’t normal.” She shook her head, exhaling smoke through her nostrils as she spoke. Her voice remained a whisper, not wanting to alert the sleeping witches amongst the other rooms throughout the hallway. She swallowed hard, her eyes training on Madison’s bed once again.

Zoe’s panicked demeanor softened, her face falling in a sympathetic sadness. Though she had come to be unable to stand her roommate, she had a sort of a fondness for the blonde’s counterpart. Corey was nothing less than kind to her in her time at the academy and Zoe didn’t enjoy seeing the other girl in so much pain. She swallowed hard before speaking once again.

“If she isn’t back by this afternoon, I’ll help you look for her.” Again, the brunette hadn’t thought before opening her mouth. “It’s New Orleans, how far away could she have gone?” The redhead, however, already had other plans. She knew that, if she couldn’t reach the blonde by the afternoon, something drastic had to have happened to her.



Corey paced back and forth, her hands shaking as she called Madison's phone. It wasn't unusual for the blonde to not come home but— between her nightmare, the voicemail she'd left the night before, and the gut feeling that lingered a little too viciously for her liking— she'd been panicking.

She hadn't slept, not since she woke up covered in sweat and unable to breathe. Zoe had tried to get her to take a break; to rest, or calm herself, or do anything other than pace back and forth and worry herself to death. She wasn't sure how many times she had called the blonde, but she knew it had been too many to be concerned a casual check-in.

"Come on, Mads," Corey muttered. She focused on her cellphone, her free hand flying upward to clasp against the top of her head. "Just answer the god damn phone." She listened to the trill of the line for what felt like the millionth time as she looked up at her

bedroom ceiling. She could feel her whole body tremble, having no control over her nerves.

*"You've reached Madison Montgomery. I can't come to the phone right now— and, frankly, there's a high probability that I just don't want to. Leave a message; I'll either get back to you or I won't."*

Madison's chipper voice fluttered through the room. It set Corey's teeth on edge, how the blonde could sound so cheerful and happy when she was nowhere to be found.

"Fuck, this can't be happening." The redhead's empty chest rattled as the sound echoed off the stark-white walls around her. Her bottom lip trembled as her mind traveled to a dark place. The nagging thought that her nightmare was real crept up on her once again. The notion hadn't ever truly left her mind, though the voice grew exponentially louder with each missed phone call, each passing hour, each incoming message from management or friends wondering where the girl was.

"Miss Corey?" Nan's voice was full of concern and urgency. It caught Corey off-guard. She jumped, her grip on her phone tightening as she turned around to find the younger girl standing in her doorway. "I—I can't hear her." The redhead's lip trembled.

"N-no..." Corey tried to hold her emotions in, to keep herself together, but she unraveled in an instant. "Don't you *dare* fuck with me right now, Nan." Her lip curled upward in a snarl. She knew the young witch could hear her thoughts. They didn't even have to say the blonde's name to know what one another was thinking. *Madison was dead.*

"You think so too!" Nan's eyes grew wide, the immediate realization of the situation taking over. "You think someone killed her!" Corey opened her mouth to speak but she couldn't find the strength. Her jaw trembled as the tears threatened to break the dam. She pursed her lips, taking in a deep breath through her nose.

"Call the Council, and don't talk about this to anyone else until they get here." The words that managed to escape her throat were hoarse, as if she hadn't had a sip of water in years. The young witch nodded feverishly and turned on her heels to take off in search of the nearest house phone.

As soon as Nan was out of sight, Corey flung her phone against the wall in anger. It bounced off, clattering against the corner of the room loudly. It landed face down on the floor before skidding underneath her bed. Her knees buckled beneath her. Every emotion she'd kept bottled up poured out of her as her kneecaps connected with the solid wood floor. The sound of bone cracking against wood echoed as her hands covered her face.

She curled forward, her fingers grabbing and yanking at the hair against the back of her head as she let out a painful wail. Her arms shook as her head tilted backwards. Her fists clenched so hard around the curls at the base of her neck that her knuckles turned to marble. She sobbed, her brow contorted into a frown as her lips turned downward.

She knew that she had been loud enough to wake the dead, but in the moment she didn't have a care in the world. She struggled to take in a breath as she sobbed, feeling her tears splash against her knees before she even realized she was crying. Her body rocked as she coughed out through her tears, her shoulders falling limp. She was a rag doll, clattering against herself in a mess of limbs.

She let her forehead rest against her knees as she sat back on her feet. Her eyes squeezed shut as her shoulders bobbed up and down. She felt empty, like her heart had been ripped out right in front of her face and there was nothing she could do to stop it. Her cries escaped her throat in hiccups, her empty ribcage tightening one notch of the belt at a time.

She rolled backwards, her hands sliding down until her arms wrapped around her center. She leaned back, her head bouncing hard as it connected with the edge of the black wooden trunk at the foot of her bed. She didn't care about having a bump on the head. She couldn't feel the physical pain caused by her surroundings. She was too busy being consumed by the ever growing pain inside of her.

Madison was dead, she knew that for a fact. Fiona had killed an innocent witch in her hunger for immortality and it was her fault. Or, at least, she blamed herself. She knew, deep down, that Fiona would do anything to maintain her Supremacy. There had to be a reason for her rapidly growing powers, and yet she never stepped forward or made herself known because she didn't *want* to.

Her hesitation killed Madison; her denial; her incompetence; *her*. How many other witches would die at Fiona's hand before someone finally presented themselves and claimed the throne?