

Excerpt from *The Never Witch*

In a world of witches and warlocks, the deadliest magic might be the kind never meant to exist.

Adeline Thorne was a witch with no power, until a convicted warlock, in an act of desperation, dumps his magic into her. Power was an irresistible drug to Adeline. The Never Witch now had magic. The only problem? The warlock wants it back.

ONE

Had she been a witch in anything but name, Adeline Thorne would have taken the tingling sensation between her shoulder blades as a warning that someone was watching her. For the second time in as many days.

But she wasn't a witch. Maybe it was a sixth sense, something plenty of humans had.

She rolled her shoulders and stole a glance through the solarium's glass wall, first left, then right. But no one lurked in the garden. She chalked up her feeling to an annoying habit and reminded herself to stay in her own lane. *Right*. Not a witch, not even a human with a sixth sense.

She was a reluctant graphic designer, a better-than-average portrait painter, a big sister, auntie, daughter, and ex-wife, and that was enough. Besides which, it was a beautiful spring day with perfect light. She turned back to the canvas, where Mrs. Doppler's portrait awaited the final brush strokes that would capture her unique essence.

The roll and slam of a van's door in her driveway brought her head around. *Damn*. She'd forgotten she'd agreed to look after her sister's kids for a few hours. She swirled her angle brush in the murky water of the jelly jar. There'd be no more painting today. Tomorrow, she'd tackle

Mrs. Doppler's eyes again. They weren't quite right, and the heart of any portrait rested in the eyes.

Adeline's tranquil morning scattered with the thud of her front door. Jack blurred past the living room, sneakers squeaking on hardwood as he thundered toward the back of the house. A clunk, an abrupt stop, a whispered apology, and the sneaker squeak resumed with vigour. She knew she should have moved the fern further into the alcove.

"Hi, Auntie A. Sorry about Fernie. Charlie home?" Her nephew didn't wait for an answer before he threw open the kitchen door and raced to the back stairs. At almost thirteen, his shoes were the size of Mini Coopers.

Adeline's sister called after him. "Jack Booth, where are your manners?" Jack's tall, gangly form had already disappeared down the stairs.

Ever since Charlie had moved into her rental suite, Adeline had dropped down to second billing.

Olive chased after her brother as fast as her four-year-old legs could carry her. "Wait for me!" Her mass of blonde curls bounced with each step.

"Hands on the rail, Olive," Sarah said, her voice a warning as she closed the front door behind her. "You here, Addie?"

Adeline poked her head out the solarium door. "In here."

Sarah Booth should have looked frazzled. She appeared anything but, striding in as if she'd just stepped out of a younger Cameron Diaz's Instagram feed. Artfully mussed blonde hair framed her impossibly fresh face. Her yoga getup clung to her slim frame like haute couture. Adeline felt like Sarah's inferior prototype: older, darker, and flawed. She stood and removed her smock, draping it over the back of the bar stool.

"I hope Charlie doesn't mind company." Sarah stopped in front of Mrs. Doppler's likeness. "It's coming along," she said. "What's the deadline?"

"Next month. Mr. Doppler wants to present it to her on their thirtieth wedding anniversary. It'll be ready. Has to be. Can't disappoint my first five-figure client."

"You won't. He's going to love it. It's beautiful. She's beautiful. Must have married right out of the womb." She leaned in close, studying the brush strokes. "I don't know how you do it. Swipes of purple and orange, and yet when you stand back, the colours just . . . work."

"You need help with those?" Adeline asked, gesturing to the heavy tote over her sister's shoulder and the shopping bag in her hand.

"I'll just put them in the kitchen," Sarah said, walking into the adjoining room. "Thanks for taking the kids on such short notice. Joe was called away." Sarah's husband was an architect with no role in the Stonewater coven or interest in the governing council. "I won't get another salon appointment before the summer solstice."

Adeline cocked her head. "It's only April." She followed her to the kitchen.

Sarah dropped the bags on the counter. "It seems Natalie's been 'discovered.' She cut some influencer's hair, and suddenly everyone on the west coast in need of a stylist is beating a path to her door."

"You could fix that," Adeline said, twirling an air wand.

Sarah turned, her expression morphing from surprise to amusement. "Is Adeline Thorne suggesting I use magic?"

Adeline grinned. "That was my monthly allotted effort." Her sister, wisely, didn't push the subject, but she did laugh, which smoothed over the magical fissure in the room.

"I'd never *fix it*. I wouldn't do that to the poor girl," she said, pulling apples and bananas from her tote. "Natalie's worked hard. I don't begrudge her the success." She dropped her hand in the tote a few more times, removing half a dozen sandwiches wrapped in wax paper. "Although I could arrange for a cancellation in a pinch, I suppose." Her next dip produced a six-pack of pudding cups. From the canvas bag,

she liberated a Halloween night-sized box of assorted potato chips.

“Sarah,” Adeline said, staring in disbelief at the crowded counter. “I have food. You don’t need to bring all this for a few hours.”

Sarah dropped her hands to the counter. “Oh. It is quite a lot, isn’t it?” She offered Adeline a wince of apology. “I don’t want to be a burden.”

“You never are. I adore Jack and Olive and love having them all to myself for a while. Well, myself and Charlie.”

“They love you too, and Charlie is a gem for putting up with them,” Sarah said, folding the canvas bag. “Still, Jack eats as much as three linebackers these days. Can’t believe how fast he’s outgrowing his clothes.” Sarah grabbed the six-pack of pudding and the stack of sandwiches and set them in the fridge. She straightened and tugged the hem of her form-fitting jacket. “Well, I should get going.” With a subtle turn of her wrist, she unfurled her fingers, and a steaming cup appeared in her hand. “A little treat for you. Mocha cappuccino. Extra whip.” She raised her other hand to put a cork in Adeline’s protest. “I know. Don’t think of it as magic. Think of it as aversion therapy.” She leaned in and kissed her sister’s cheek. “I love you. And thank you. Again.”

Adeline accepted the gift with a roll of her eyes and took a tentative sip. “Perfect. If you lose your day job, you’re a shoo-in at Starbucks.”

Sarah’s laughter trailed behind her as she started down the hall. “I won’t be more than two hours, but if something comes up, Joe will be home soon. I can ask him to pick up—” She stopped mid-stride, stumbled, and reached a steadying hand for the staircase balusters.

Adeline rushed to her side. “What’s wrong?”

Sarah grimaced, taking short, sharp breaths. “Don’t . . . know.” She held her stomach like she’d been sucker-punched. Adeline wrapped a protective arm around her sister’s waist and guided her to the sofa in the living room.

Sarah bent over and Adeline rubbed slow circles on her back until her breathing evened out.

“Feeling better?” Adeline said.

Sarah nodded and straightened. “Yes. It’s passed.”

“Do I need to take you to Emerg?”

“No. It was the grid. Feels like . . . something hit it. Hard.” The grid was the warp and weft of power that fuelled the magic of witchkind. Adeline stiffened. Damaging the grid was like taking an axe to the tree of life.

“What was it?”

“Who, I think. Someone’s targeting the grid, and it’s not the first time. Probably a warlock. A powerful one.” The phone in Sarah’s pocket buzzed. She pulled it out. “I’ve been summoned. Shit.”



Luke Churchwell stormed into his office, tie in hand, pulling at the top button of his shirt. He tossed his suit jacket onto the sofa and rounded his desk, staring blankly out the floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked downtown Vancouver.

He spun at the soft ding of the intercom on the desk. *Not wasting any time, are they?* He punched the flashing button.

It was Connie. She’d self-titled herself his PA and had an office one floor down. “Boss? Kai Oxen and his escorts are here. You expecting them?”

“Yeah.” As if she didn’t know. He rubbed his forehead. “Park them in the conference room. I’ll be right there.”

Luke strode into his private bathroom and planted his hands on either side of the sink. Just three years into a twenty-five-year sentence and he didn’t think he was going to make it out intact. Or alive. Nicholas Tanner, the pompous son of a bitch he’d tried to overthrow, had outplayed him, outmagicked him, and now owned his hide.

He splashed cold water on his face, headed back to his office, and retrieved the silver cuff from his suit jacket. Then he composed himself, tucked the cuff into his pocket, and headed to the conference room.

Kai Oxen lounged in one of the plush chairs that surrounded a massive raw-edge slab of cedar. He scrolled through his phone, giving off a not-a-care-in-the-world vibe—unlike his escorts, dressed in black body armour. They stood at attention, one by the door, the other behind Kai.

“Hello, Kai,” Luke said, greeting his childhood friend.

Kai dropped his phone in his pocket and leaned back in the chair. “Luke. You’re looking good. Lord Tanner treating you well?”

Luke deflected the underlying sarcasm that only a comrade-in-arms would hear. “Your sentence has come down, as you may have guessed,” he said, nodding at the guard behind Kai. A guard behind each of them, Luke observed.

“I figured as much, though the guards are overkill,” Kai said, straightening in his chair. “How big’s the fine this time?”

Luke rubbed the back of his neck. He hated what this was going to do to Kai. “No fine,” Luke said. “Not this time.”

“What’s going on? Tanner’s usually begging for cash.”

Luke cringed. Tanner was no doubt listening in, and he’d have a visceral reaction to Kai’s disrespect.

Kai narrowed his eyes with a tilt of his head. “Surely not corporal?”

“No. The high court’s not inclined to be lenient with a third conviction.”

“Lenient? Their version of corporal isn’t anything I’d call lenient. So what punishment does a minor siphoning infraction get a lowly warlock these days? A magical block?” Kai said, raising a calculating eyebrow, as if he were already working out a way around it. “For how long?”

“Not a block.” Luke drew in a long breath. “Forfeiture.”

Kai jerked to his feet, sending his chair rolling backwards. "For siphoning? For Christ's sake. We all do it. The high court's punishing me for the equivalent of masturbating? I barely touched her."

Luke didn't doubt it. Kai siphoned magic like an Olympic-level pickpocket. That, and his low regard for the no-siphoning laws, resulted in him possessing a breadth of magic few warlocks could match.

"The 'her' in question is one of the king's inner circle. How did you think this was going to play out?"

"She didn't even fucking notice!"

"Not until she tried to form ice. And couldn't." Luke hated the position Kai had put him in.

"This isn't right! A minor third offence? The correction is a magical block, a time out. Not an express train to the fucking end of the line."

"It's forfeiture, and Lord Tanner has charged me with carrying out your sentence."

Kai nodded, hollowing his cheeks. "And you're going to be a good soldier? That's a little below your station, isn't it?"

"I believe that is the point. He finds these types of reminders . . . amusing." Luke pulled the cuff from his pocket. Kai's eyes flashed surprise. Luke soft-lobbed the cuff, and Kai caught it deftly with his right hand.

Kai glanced at the cuff with disdain. "Is this really necessary? It's not like I can escape with these two clowns glued to my ass."

Said clowns didn't bat an eyelash. *Clown* wouldn't even register on their list of insults. The King's nulls were trained assassins immune to all magic but his. It was a lifetime commitment they escaped only upon their own death or the death of the king. The sight of them struck terror in most warlocks.

"Right wrist. Put it on."

"What the hell happened to you? We used to be friends."

“Put it on. It’ll take me a few days to find a suitable host. The high court’s not going to any further expense to find you when I do.” The cuff would track him, but its similarity to ankle monitors ended there. If he tried to magic it off, or remove it in any way, it would detonate. The loss of his hand would be the least of the damage. He wouldn’t be able to access higher magic; rune magic required two hands.

“Unnecessarily harsh, wouldn’t you say?” Kai flared his nostrils at Luke and then turned the cuff in his hands, carefully examining the runes engraved on the inside.

“Not my choice.” Luke looked to the floor. He had no leeway to offer Kai. Not this time. And if Kai didn’t comply, the nulls would put the cuff on for him.

“This your work?” Kai asked, referring to the runes.

Luke shook his head, keeping his regret from leaking through. “No.”

Kai nodded absently. “You sure it’s going to work the way it supposed to and not blow off my hand prematurely?”

“It’ll release the moment you’ve completed serving your sentence.”

“You mean after I’ve forfeited the magic I’ve worked my entire life to create?”

He’d lose most of his magic, but not all of it. Only death could take the seed magic that warlocks were born with. “I warned you, goddamnit. Was I not clear?” Luke hated that his friends paid the price for his own infraction. Guilt hollowed him out every time. But if he showed his former ally any kindness, the price would only get steeper. “You knew the law. You got caught. This is the ruling.”

“Fuck you,” Kai said. He slipped the cuff over his hand, and the metal immediately shrank to a snug fit.

A lump formed in Luke’s throat at the sight of Kai in a cuff. They were both prisoners now.

“You feel like a big man?” Kai said. “A real asset to your lord and master. Traitor.”

The words would have eviscerated him if he wasn't already impenetrably numb. "Lord Tanner wants to be present. I'll call you when we're ready. You'll have sixty minutes to get to the court. Don't be late."

Two

Adeline followed through with her promise to call Joe. Sarah's husband, also a witch, would have felt the hit on the grid as well, and after Sarah materialized inside the council's chamber, its wards would prevent her from contacting him.

But Joe was with a client, and Adeline got dumped into voice mail. It was a relief. Joe wasn't a big fan of Adeline's. She left what she hoped wasn't an end-of-days message. After she disconnected, she noticed the family's van was still parked in her driveway. Either Joe or, hopefully, Sarah would collect it before the night was out. Maybe there'd be some answers by then.

She'd never understood what had driven her sister to seek a position on the governing council. The GC was a nest of vipers at the best of times, and a crisis in the coven would only fuel their never-ending power games. Sarah wasn't like them. She was diligent, scholarly.

That she hadn't mentioned the earlier attacks on the grid was in keeping with Thorne family tradition. She didn't blame her. Isolating Adeline from witches and magic had begun as a kindness, but Adeline had weaponized it. Her isolation became a trip wire, and lord help anyone who breached it.

It made sense that Sarah suspected the warlocks. Warlocks didn't draw their magic from the grid but went directly to the source, draining any nearby living organism. Those living things, all living things, fed the grid. Kill the grid, kill the witches.

Hearing an excited shout from the basement brought a smile to her lips. The only time she heard laughter was when

the kids were over. It was a lovely change from the normal hush of the house. She snagged the box of potato chips and headed down the stairs.

"Come in," Charlie called at her knock. The house was built on a sloping grade, allowing for a walkout basement suite. His private entrance was near the base of her back stairs.

"I brought snacks," Adeline said, dropping the box on the kitchen counter. The roar of racing cars and canned cheering came from the next room. Charlie and Jack teetered on the edge of the sofa, hunched over hand controls, faces scrunched in concentration.

"We being too loud?" Charlie asked, darting a glance away from the big flatscreen. Dew still sparkled on the back lawn outside the patio doors.

"No," she said, dismissing his concern with a swipe of her hand. Olive had made herself at home in Charlie's overstuffed recliner, though Adeline suspected Charlie had settled her there himself. A well-worn teddy bear sat on one side of her and a china doll on the other. Olive's feet were straight out in front of her as she studiously read to her captive toy audience from a picture book in her lap.

Adeline smiled to herself, ever grateful for her good fortune in finding a tenant like Charlie Tucker. He was the first and last guest she'd ever had in her newly renovated bed-and-breakfast suite. A spry senior and war vet, he'd never married and preferred the flexibility of renting versus owning. He had no desire to amass possessions, he'd explained, and their arrangement suited him. He'd arrived with one duffle bag and nothing else. It had been almost two years now, and she still brought him breakfast every weekday. He'd drifted into her family without a ripple and taken up the vacant grandfather berth at the family wharf.

"Send them up when you need a break." She started for the door then turned back. "Join us for lunch. Sarah dropped off enough sandwiches to feed your old battalion."

“Oh, I doubt that,” Charlie said, without breaking his concentration. “I’ll bring them up at noon.”

Back upstairs, Adeline nudged the fern a little closer into the nook under the stairs. A small octagonal window let in enough light to keep Fernie happy. The architectural feature was just one of many that had drawn Adeline to the house. A wide front porch across the full width of the house was another. Even in bad weather, she found solace there, wrapped in a blanket on the porch swing, her legs tucked up and a book in her hands.

Later that morning, Joe returned her call. He was pleasant. Offered to collect the kids, but she held him off. They weren’t a bother, and they were having fun, she assured him. She liked the life they breathed into the house.

After lunch, Adeline and Jack sat on the living room floor, working on a jigsaw puzzle she’d laid out on the coffee table. Olive slept soundly on the sofa with the teddy bear tucked under her arm.

“Auntie A,” Jack said. He kept his attention on a puzzle piece he tapped against the table. “My first unbinding is at summer solstice.” Traditionally, a newborn witch’s magic was bound for their own protection. Too many accidental fires, floods, and tornadoes had prompted the precaution. Children were brought into the magical fold at twelve years of age, and if they proved trustworthy keepers of that knowledge, their magic would be gradually unbound. “I’ve been practising. A lot.”

Adeline’s anxiety ramped up, unbidden. “Your mom told me. She’s so proud of you.” Adeline shut out unwanted memories of her own unbinding experience and prayed Jack would be spared that humiliation.

“I want you to come.” He darted a tentative glance at Adeline, and it nearly broke her heart in two.

“Jack,” Adeline started, and then stalled, searching for the words to disappoint him graciously. “I wouldn’t be welcome. I’m sorry.”

He didn't say anything for the longest time. Eventually, his shoulders slumped. "You aren't a jinx."

"Probably best not to test that," Adeline said, covering the sting with a wink. She hadn't known Jack was aware of her reputation. "And I'll be at your party, which is the best part anyway."

As the afternoon sun began to fade, and with no word from her sister, Adeline made dinner. Jack had asked for mac and cheese, which got an enthusiastic nod of approval from Olive on the condition she be allowed to put *Ketsup* on it.

Jack had two helpings and was eyeing a third when a screech of tires close by sent a jolt of adrenalin through Adeline. She set her napkin on the table and rose.

"What was that?" Jack asked.

"I don't know. Stay here," she said, and walked to the living room window. Outside in the street, a car was stopped in the middle of the road. A dark hump lay crumpled on the asphalt in front of the vehicle, illuminated in the beam of its lights.

"The car's hit something," Jack said, bringing her around. She hadn't noticed he'd followed her.

"I'll see if they need help. Keep an eye on your sister? I'll be back in a minute." *Please don't let it be the neighbour's dog*, she thought, her heart sinking.

Adeline grabbed her phone and raced out the front door. She slowed as she approached the vehicle. The man behind the wheel appeared to be unconscious. Had the driver suffered a stroke? A heart attack? She crouched near the crumpled figure on the road. Oh no. Not a dog. A man, groaning and barely conscious. She pulled out her phone and dialled 911. Where were her neighbours? Had no one else heard the accident?

"Help's coming," she said to the stranger. "Hang in there." At least he was breathing. Maybe he'd just banged his head. Adeline felt wholly unprepared. At thirty-four years of age, her Girl Guide first aid training was but a distant

memory, as was high school CPR. The operator kept her on the line.

The stranger opened his eyes, his mouth forming words she couldn't hear. She leaned in, trying to catch what he was saying. If these were his final words, she was the only one who'd hear them. He lifted a shaky hand and reached out to her. All she had to offer was comfort, so she put the 911 operator on speaker, set the phone on the road, and took his hand in both of hers.

He strained forward, but Adeline was unable to decipher what he was trying to say. She stroked his hand, assuring him that help was close. His other arm came around, his fingers working, though erratic, which she took as a good sign. "It's going to be all right," she said, praying the cliché wasn't a lie.

His grasp on her hand tightened, his strength surprising her. And then he wrapped his other hand around her wrist and met her gaze. Fear smothered her surprise. His gaze was steady, his grip a vise.

He sat up and brushed his lips by the shell of her ear. "Tell Luke that Kai has served his sentence."

And then her body exploded in pain.