

Out of Sync

Book one of the Out of Sync Series

Sample Edition

A. BIN JURAN

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by

A. Bin Juran

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This book is dedicated to my husband and kids,
for putting up with me despite my coffee-breath;
Without you our house would not be home

CONTENTS

0	Prologue	1
1	Chapter One	3
2	Chapter Two	8
3	Chapter Three	16
4	Chapter Four	25
	Links	31
	Pre-order	31
	Contact the Author	31

PROLOGUE

Low grumbles emanated from the creatures circling me, grimly advertising their intent.

The sweltering desert heat clung to me like a second skin, causing beads of sweat to trickle into my eyes.

I squinted, inadvertently blurring my vision, which posed a problem given that my newly adopted life plan had just been reduced to not ending up as dog food—or whatever you would call the equivalent for wolves.

“*Nice wolfies . . .*” I stammered, the bitter aftertaste of adrenaline lacing the back of my throat.

Pointed brown-stained teeth snapped at my feet as another wolf lunged closer, its acrid breath filling my airways. I gagged. “You really should have yourself checked; I’ve smelled doggy breath before, but this is taking it to a whole other level,” I ventured, trying my hand at nurturing some rapport as my eyes darted, searching for an escape route.

Yellow eyes trailed my movements as drool began to accumulate in anticipation.

“Eating me will not improve that smell,” I tried again, jerking my thumb at the breather. Was this really my pitch? *I wouldn’t add to your dental value?*

“I’m not that nutritious, either! Really, I eat a *lot* of junk,” I lied. I didn’t actually get to do much snacking—though I would have been happy to if anyone ever bothered to send some to my dorm room.

One of the wolves slunk closer, grazing my knee with his dry nose.

My voice caught as I continued trying to reason with the mongrels. “I’m not all that chewable, either . . . I’m bonier than I look.” Then I remembered how fond canines were of bones and shut up, shaking my head with disbelief at what was coming out of my mouth just in time to miss a set of snarling jaws hurtling at my throat.

Being eaten by a pack of hungry mutts was definitively **not** the way I wanted to go.

I could feel the panic crackle through me, swiftly building up inside me.

I tried to regulate my breathing as my fingers itched with electricity.

Deciding it was time to take what action I could, I jerked my hands forward, and a bolt of lightning erupted from my hands and into the pack. Yes, it worked! Not only had I managed not to set myself on fire, the bolt had actually landed in the general vicinity of what I’d aimed at! Most of my thunderbolt throwing thus far had been limited to uncontrolled spasms from nerves or anger, so this was quite a feat. But there was no time for an awkward victory dance.

The wolves recoiled momentarily from the sudden attack, giving me the opening I had been waiting for. I lunged forward, hurtling my body toward the gap, hoping the light show would afford me enough time to reach safety.

I scrambled, gathering whatever energy I had left and *ran*.

After a few minutes of frantic chase, I perceived a discoloration in the distance. I set my sights on reaching that goal as the wolves shadowed my movements, gnashing their ravenous jaws all around me.

As I gained ground, I could make out more detail in the bleak colors. The discoloration was a cave.

The wolves were behind me, but I was closer. I would make it, I told myself; I had to.

Hope spread, infecting my mind and expanding my lungs, blinding me.

Reality, however, sank its filthy teeth into me.

I yelped in agony as the pain shot through me. My legs buckled beneath me, and I collapsed into the desert sand, a hair's breadth from snarling, snapping teeth.

CHAPTER ONE

Charlie, my best friend, was waiting for me in Potions class, which we not-so-fondly called Spills class since liquids were usually involved.

I took my seat next to him and sighed at the blue fumes rising from our cauldron. Opening my book to page 225, I stared at the diagram, read the notes beneath and sighed again.

“Charlie . . .,” I said wearily, still feeling the webs of sleeplessness from the night before, “the fumes are blue.”

Charlie glanced at me wryly. He was happy we had any fumes at all; until then, we hadn’t been able to create any reaction. “They are supposed to be green,” I continued with a yawn.

Charlie pursed his lips, then brightened. “Let’s add yellow!” He grinned at his own brilliance.

I folded my hands over my unsubstantial chest. “Do you see any yellow dye anywhere?” I stared at him skeptically, without my usual humor.

We both knew there wasn’t any dye. You couldn’t fake your way through Spills class—which was why we were both failing. Our former best friend, Sophia, was the only one of us who had any magical talent, and as of six months ago, she would hardly acknowledge my presence—which was terminally linked with Charlie’s—let alone participate in our experiments anymore.

Personally, I blamed myself. Living in my skin, I’m used to the clumsiness and general humiliation-magnetism that I seem to project; it’s a necessary survival skill.

Granted, I probably didn’t *need* my absentee grandmother to add to my infamous reputation, but once word spread about her inappropriate gift of see-through lingerie and dental floss masquerading as underwear, Sophia decided she had had enough.

Heck, I would have severed all ties to me, too, if I could; and if I were being honest, I would have to admit that I’d been expecting such a moment of clarity on her part for *years*.

Charlie, on the other hand, had no such expectations. Charlie was just Charlie—tall, thin, brown-eyed and as fair skinned as they come. Seriously, I think he would burst into flames if anyone let him out in the sun for more than five minutes.

I have dark hair like my grandmother and brother. While mine is curly, theirs is blessedly straight. If I didn’t know I was a witch already, my hair would have been a dead giveaway. No matter what appliance I used, my curls wouldn’t straighten. I can’t tell you how many hours I spent at Sophia’s hands with her many, many hair straighteners—from flat irons to blow driers to big-ass curlers—without a straight strand to show for it.

I have already mentioned the flat-chested thing. It’s not something I like to broadcast. Not that you can’t tell. EVERYONE can tell.

I swear, my boobs are so small, they hardly fill a bra. Okay, I'm not down to an A-cup, at least, but I'm a very, very small B.

But my eyes . . . now, my eyes I actually like. They are big, framed by dark, lush lashes, and they're gray, to boot. Their gray hue shifts slightly towards a bluer or greener tone sometimes, depending on what I wear. Cool, right? And there is absolutely nothing magical about them—regular people have gray, changing eyes, as well. They don't even turn yellow or red or anything strange, like Sophia's do, which I appreciate. I suffer through enough blushes to last me a lifetime without another obvious sign that I'm experiencing humiliating emotions.

Sophia's height is pretty average, if you spend your days around runway models.

I am a true average. No amazon legs for me or that great tan only a true vacation in the Caribbean can get you.

Yep. I could think of a million reasons why Sophia wouldn't want to be my friend. We were so different, sometimes I thought she was keeping us around just to make herself seem even more beautiful by comparison—you know, with me playing the role of the designated plain flat-chested friend. But then Sophia would open her mouth, and I would be reminded why she wasn't as popular as she should have been.

Sophia had a quick—albeit stinging—tongue, and while she generally stuck to the truth, most people still took offense.

Growing up with my brother, I mostly felt at home with her snippy little comments, especially since she usually stuck to snarky and rarely crossed over into mean.

Still, the fumes were blue, and it was moments like this that I wished the rich, beautiful, talented—if somewhat self-involved—Sophia was here.

I could see the thought flash through Charlie's mind as well. His dimples fell when he remembered her—or anything unpleasant, really. She hadn't even said goodbye, and it stung.

I cleared my throat, as well as my mind, and opened the book back to page 225. "We can do this," I insisted, but my voice lacked confidence. "Did you chop the daffodils before inserting the eyes of newt?" I asked, looking down the list.

"Yes . . .," he exhaled.

"Did you stir it six times to the east?" My eyebrows furrowed as I tried to remember.

"Your east or my east?" Charlie asked.

I looked up from the book. "There is only *one* east, Charlie."

"Then . . . yes." He gave me a dopey grin, and the dimples were back.

"How about the honeysuckle?" I asked, trying my best to ignore his foot tapping on the linoleum floor. He was an avid guitar player in a school where music was not a valid life choice.

"Hmm?" he asked, caught up in his own inner rhythm.

"The honeysuckle . . ." I sighed wearily, eying the blue fumes which were developing a distasteful scent. Soon, Ms. Palmer would come to check up on us, and her face would pinch into a perplexed 'what happened to my star pupils' look.

"Nope." Charlie paused his tapping for a moment. "You didn't mention any honeysuckle. Honey, maybe. No suckling of any kind." He winked at me and resumed his tapping.

I rolled my eyes. "Fine. I'll go get it." I didn't know what adding honeysuckle now, so late in the potion, would do to the concoction, but I wasn't going to wait around for Ms. Palmer's disappointment.

I walked, as slowly as I could manage, to the left cabinet and opened it.

Before I could grasp the bottle labeled "honeysuckle", a hand reached from behind me and grabbed it.

I whirled around, careening into someone's chest, and inhaled the sweet, musky familiar aroma of one Nate Harper.

If male models had their own league, then Nate Harper would be their captain.

My eyes fluttered to meet his as my throat choked up, blocking any and all sounds except for a small humiliating 'yelp.' I could feel my burning cheeks expanding their redness down my neck.

As the excruciating seconds wore on, I explored his chiseled chin, his strong, manly, very, very kissable lips, his perfect straight teeth and finally his . . . um . . . well. Baby blues.

By the time my eyes reached his sky blue ones, my mouth was as dry as a desert.

"You didn't want this too, did you?" he asked. His voice rang in my ears, blocking the actual meaning of the words and leaving behind only the shocked realization that Nate Harper was talking directly to me.

I can count the times Nate Harper talked to me on one hand—well, if you didn't include the occasions he came over to talk to Sophia, which I don't. I didn't really speak then, either.

I followed his empty hand as it raked golden hair back from his face.

"Bree?" he asked, as I tried to reel myself in before I made a fool of myself over the simple fact that he knew my name. *Idiot*. Of course he knew my name; we've been taking classes together for four years now. That's when I realized he was still waiting for some kind of verbal response. "Well, if you intend to steal it, I think you'll find you have a fight on your hands." My mouth blurted the words before I could stop myself. *Where had that come from?*

I must have looked as shocked as I felt, because, after a moment, he laughed, his smile broadening into something that should probably be viewed on a 52" plasma.

"Yeah . . . I saw you were having a bit of a problem with the assignment." He leaned against the cabinet, which brought him an inch closer to me.

Sparing a glance over in Charlie's direction, I saw that the blue fumes had turned into a foam which was rapidly taking over our table. Like I said; Spill class.

"I . . . think I'd better go help Charlie . . .," I mumbled and turned to walk back.

He grinned and placed the honeysuckle firmly in my hands. "I think you need this more than I do." With that, he winked at me and returned to his table where perfect green fumes awaited him.

I was flabbergasted; Nate Harper didn't need the honeysuckle . . . his experiment was already *done*. He was just using it as an excuse to talk to *me* . . .



The stupid pen wasn't writing. For whatever reason, it had decided to up and die on me in the middle of my English quiz. This was my karmic retribution for Nate Harper finally noticing me. I glanced back at him, then got lost in the way his fingers drummed on the edge of his test and caught myself.

I didn't have time to moon over Nate Harper. I attempted another jostle, but the pen remained stubbornly inkless.

I had been up all night studying for this test until I tried my hand at a small charm—one that was supposed to get the textbook to read itself aloud. Based on the complexity of the words I had to recite, though, one could have expected the damn thing to reveal the secrets of the universe, or, at the very least, foresee the questions that would be asked on the quiz.

The charm backfired, *naturally*, and the book began to bark so strenuously, it almost bit my arm when I tried to close it.

Even now, eight hours later, I still couldn't get the darn thing to open without getting a paper-cut in return.

I jiggled the pen for the umpteenth time and sighed heavily, resigning myself to the fact that it was just going to be one of those days. Sure, Nate Harper had talked to me—if I hadn't imagined it, which I had to admit was a distinct possibility, especially given the blue fumes and all—perhaps even flirted with me, but at the end of the day, I was still me: the low peg on the academic and social totem pole.

Honestly, if Monroe Private School for the Study of Witchcraft had been privy to as much as *half* of my magical mishaps and failures in casting even the most rudimentary spells, I believe they would have revoked my admittance.

I raised my hand, ready to ask Mark Thompson, the English teacher, for a pen, when I heard giggles rising behind me.

I didn't need to turn around to see who it was: Annabelle, my roommate, and Erica, my snoopy hall monitor.

"Have you forgotten how to write?" Annabelle whispered from behind me, still giggling.

My face went white with rage.

I should have known. Usually, my roommate concentrated on my clothes and hair (not that you could tell, given the natural beehive I have going on top of my head), but this little prank was right up her alley.

I clenched my teeth and forced my crackling fingers into fists.

I couldn't afford another D, let alone an F, I told myself. The electricity fizzled, unmoved by the 'no-magic in class' rule—"unless otherwise directed by the teacher."

"Here," Annabelle whispered, her laughter dying on her lips as she shoved a pen towards me, "Lighten up;" she coaxed, "you don't want to end up with premature wrinkles, do you?"

"Does it turn to invisible ink after I hand in the quiz?" I asked through gritted teeth.

I knew that Mr. Thompson probably wouldn't have any extra pens lying around; he hadn't the last time I asked a week ago, when my backpack up and sprouted wings during Spells class. I'd had to hunt it down, finally finding it jammed in a tree.

"No . . . but good one. I'll have to remember that for next time."

I wanted to punch her. To zap her, just a little bit. She still thought it was funny. Even after six months of living together, Annabelle still thought I found her little pranks *fun*. That, or she was still seeking vengeance for the time I accidentally electrocuted her cat, Nigel.

I closed my eyes and tried to regulate my breathing.

"Thirty minutes," the teacher warned, snapping me back to attention.



Charlie joined me once I exited English class, and we made our way towards the cafeteria.

"That bad, huh?" he asked once we reached the end of the line.

"Huh?"

"You're not usually this quiet unless something is *really* bad, and since you just left your English quiz, well . . . it doesn't take a genius to add two and two together."

I smiled flatly, deciding to ignore the allegation of what a great big blabbermouth I supposedly was. "That obvious, huh?"

Charlie shrugged and piled food onto both our trays: mine with a single serving of boneless chicken with a hefty salad, his with lasagna.

My smile broadened slightly. I didn't know how I ever would've survived Monroe High if it hadn't been for Charlie.

His nose pinched, as it usually did when he looked at my plate—even though he was the one who had plated it. “I don't know how you survive on that stuff.” He shook his head, adding a second helping of lasagna to his dish.

I pointed at the chocolate cake at the far end. “I save my calories for the important things.”

Charlie shrugged and added our drinks—a caffeinated soda for me and lemonade for him, “Keep telling yourself that, Sport.”

I picked the chocolate cake up and wafted the air above it in his direction. “Close your eyes and let this heavenly scent evoke your senses—” I began, grinning idiotically.

Some jerk muttered behind us, “I'll evoke your senses right now with my fist here if you don't pick up the pace, *moron*.”

I could sense Charlie stiffen, but before this could turn into an ugly fight—ending with us serving detention—I steered him toward a nearby table, secretly wishing I could have shot a bolt at the jerk. What good did having electricity zap out of my hands do me if I couldn't control it?

It was the lamest super power *ever*.

“Don't mind him,” I breathed, inching the lasagna closer to Charlie.

Charlie's lip twitched.

“Charlie?” I asked, flabbergasted at the smile playing on the edges of his lips.

“Oh, I won't,” he said, humor coloring his brown eyes.

“Oh?” I didn't understand what was so funny.

Charlie pinched his fingers together in the international sign for “wait for it.” The jerk began screaming not a moment later, shouting at the top of his lungs that there were eyes in his soup, staring at him.

“You didn't—” I gasped, a shocked smile flittering on my own lips.

Charlie's face filled with boyish charm. “Those extra eyes of newt must have slipped from my pocket somehow.” He grinned.

I opened my mouth to say that Ms. Palmer never gave us any ‘extra’ ingredients but promptly closed it and chewed on my salad.

Yep, I didn't know what I would do without Charlie Cast.

CHAPTER TWO

Mr. Ritter, my Spells teacher, stared at the stagnant air in front of me. Now, when I stare like that, it's usually because I'm one step away from dozing off. By the concentrated look on his face, though, it was obvious I had no such luck.

He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, and then glanced at me, briefly meeting my eyes.

As he walked back to the head of the class, I let out a sigh. *Well, at least he was nice enough not to berate and humiliate me in front of everybody.*

He explained the process again, enunciating the Latin words slowly and carefully—apparently for my benefit. The air between his hands stirred, generating a heat so intense that I could feel the rise in temperature from my seat at the back of the classroom.

I tried again, flummoxed and tongue-tied by the long, complicated words, which, in my opinion, made me sound like a drunken sailor.

A dark pinprick-sized dot appeared in front of me, causing the air around it to stir quickly.

For a moment, I simply stared at it; it looked jarringly similar to another vortex that had formed in my bed while I had been studying for my biology exam the night before, one that had been sent by Miranda—my grandmother and court-appointed guardian.

I half-expected this vortex to spit out another one of Miranda's unwelcome parcels.

The one from last night had made a nuisance of itself by hovering and chiming incessantly until I opened it, if only to keep it from waking my roommate, Annabelle.

I stared, flabbergasted, at the words engraved on its surface:

“Happy Fifteenth Birthday, Brianna!”

I went by Bree these days, but still, this was a first.

Miranda had never remembered a mundane ‘human’ event of mine before. I was stupefied.

After all, this was the same woman who had informed my brother and I six years ago that we were not to bother her unless someone was gravely wounded, dead or incarcerated. She had quickly reconsidered and revised her statement, saying that if we were stupid enough to get caught, we deserved whatever was coming to us. I had been nine years old at the time; my brother, Derek, had been ten.

I remember glancing at the clock on my bedside table; 12:34. Well, technically, she was correct. It had been my birthday for 34 minutes.

Dazed, I ripped into the thick paper, its creamy texture smooth and inviting.

The card replayed an audio segment of my grandmother wishing me a happy birthday in a dull monotone which audibly perked up to announce that on the night of my fifteenth birthday—

meaning tonight—I would be called upon to begin my initiation into “the Order.” No explanations were supplied, except for an address I didn’t recognize.

Ten hours later, I still didn’t know what that cryptic message meant.

I stared dumbly at the dark pinprick. It was moments like this that I wished there was a general ‘undo’ spell, but naturally, there wasn’t. That didn’t mean I didn’t try it anyway, just in case, which left me with untied shoelaces and—more humiliating—an unbuttoned blouse. The dot had progressed to sucking on objects, instead of air. *Wonderful, Bree*, I berated myself.

I scrambled to fasten the buttons on my blouse while simultaneously attempting to keep the little vortex from leaving me shirtless altogether. Apparently, it had developed quite an appetite for starched goods.

An amused voice rose from behind me, gently inquiring whether I needed a hand with that.

Cheeks blazing, I clutched my blouse with one hand as the other pried my hair out of the devilish dot, and turned to retort with some snarky remark, only to find Nate Harper smiling at me.

He pointed at the tiny hole—which had started eating up my notebook—then promptly closed it with a few choice words. The notebook landed on my desk with a distinct ‘thud’, its upper right corner gone.

Once my inept fingers were done hastily fastening my blouse, my hand raised to my unruly, black curly hair. *Like I needed help making it resemble more of a beehive*, I thought, pursing my lips at the place the hole had been.

“You seem displeased,” Nate said, taking the empty seat beside me. His face suddenly paled as he stilled and asked, “Did you, um, need that? Did I just blow some experiment you were working on for extra credit?”

He was still mumbling his apologies when I remembered how to shake my head. Then again, my hair had just been tugged at perniciously. This might be a hallucination brought on by head trauma.

“No,” I said, finally finding my voice, deciding to favor this version of reality, just in case it was, well, real.

“Good.” He exhaled, visibly relieved.

His eyes drifted to my unsubstantial chest, only to catch himself and quickly revert his gaze back to my face. “You, ah, missed a button or two.” Nate’s voice broke, clearly embarrassed.

My head jerked down to find two gaping crevices in my top. My fingers fumbled over them as my face heated for an entirely different reason.

“Not that I was, ah, complaining.” He smiled.

I was *mortified*.

“How did you know?” I found myself asking in an obvious attempt to deflect the issue. “I mean, how did you cast the undo spell?” I clarified, just in case he thought I was referring to him noticing my blouse. Oh good lord.

Nate’s face transformed into a genuine smile. “My little sister, Claire . . .” He shook his head wistfully. “When she was ten she almost caved the house in on itself with one of those little black holes.”

My face froze as I stared back at the place the vortex had just been. *A black hole? Siphoning off a house? An entire freaking house?*

“Thankfully, I was home at the time to help.” There was a fondness to his voice, and it was clear he cared for his sister. Huh. I guess not *all* big brothers were jerks—and here I thought it was a pre-requisite to land the gig.

I must have guffawed, because a look of confusion colored Nate’s handsome face.

“I was just thinking about how my brother would probably watch from the sidelines and eat popcorn before raising a finger to help the likes of me,” I said by way of explanation.

Nate’s confused expression deepened. “I’m sure—”

I cut him off, launching into one of my Derek stories, if only to dispel his assumption that all families were as compassionate as his apparently was. “I had my first brush with magic when I was eight years old—” Nate’s brow furrowed, and I thought, *Buckle in buddy, we’re not in Kansas anymore*—“when I accidentally turned my tutor into a toad.”

The minute the words were out of my mouth, I wanted to stuff them back in or, at the very least, go back an hour or so and redo this entire exchange.

As it stood, I was too far gone down the rabbit hole to stop now. “Never mind the details of how we got there—” because I suddenly realized that Nate probably wouldn’t understand someone getting that nervous over school—“just that I came home freaked out of my mind. My parents never discussed magic with us, and though the cat—or, I guess, the toad—was out of the bag, they remained tight-lipped about the subject.

I guess having your eight-year-old daughter think she’s going crazy was preferable to . . .” I was steering off course, so I reeled myself in before the crease in Nate’s forehead exploded. Was I *trying* to sabotage myself?

How many times had I looked at Nate Harper, dreaming that one day he would come up to speak with me, and now, when it finally happened, what was I doing? Making sure he not only knew what a big screw-up I was, but what a bunch of loons I came from.

“The point is,” Yes; what *was* my point? “that my darling brother, Derek, saw my reaction and decided the best way to deal with it was to fill my room up with dozens of toads and frogs while I slept, so when I woke up, I—” well, I had been convinced I had turned everyone I knew into toads, but I wasn’t going to say *that*.

“Well, you get the picture,” I concluded, once again worrying about my mental faculties.

Nate remained silent for a long moment, probably mapping his exit strategy, when finally, he said, “Perhaps he was trying to save you from a lifelong fear of amphibians.”

I snorted—not laughed or giggled like some well-bred lady, but outright snorted, complete with the donkey sound that Derek loved to tease, “Oh . . . you’re serious,” I realized, the humor dissipating from my features.

He didn’t answer.

I cocked my head to the side. “And you probably think there’s an excellent excuse that’ll explain my parent’s actions, too, don’t you?”

“Well . . .,” he began, taking my question way too seriously, “Why don’t you ask them? After all, they obviously reconsidered, given that you’re enrolled in a school that studies magic.”

“I doubt séances are as reliable as movies make them seem.” I smiled, trying to relay the info in a light-hearted way.

Noting Nate’s blank look, I clarified. “They’re dead. They died in a car accident when I was nine. And, unlike the ghosts that stalk Monroe’s classrooms and bore us to death with their ‘real-life’ accounts and experiences, *they* haven’t come back.” Sometimes I wondered whether it was a choice, like a multiple question survey that you were given upon dying. Choose door number one for haunting, door two for reincarnation, door three for heaven (I suspect they would be less lenient with all the options if you were headed the other way) and door four for checking out entirely (perhaps after a therapy session that’ll talk you out of it).

“I’m sorry.” Nate seemed horrified.

“It’s okay, I’ve pretty much gotten used to it by now.” I smiled, which from Nate’s expression was only making matters worse, “You know, considering. I’m not a ghoulish or anything.” Did I

really just tell Nate Harper I wasn't a ghou? Was there really such a big chance of him thinking I *was* a ghou that I found it necessary to clarify my status?

"Then who guides you?" He asked out of the blue.

I gestured to the space where the black hole had been, "Obviously, no one." I flashed him another smile.

Nate was taken aback, "I don't think I could go through life without my father's mentoring." He placed his hand on mine, and I just sat there, staring at it, shocked, as he reiterated, "I'm so sorry."

My eyes met his baby blues as my throat tightened. Nate Harper was touching my hand. I couldn't believe it. Sure, he was consoling me—but let's not get wrapped up in the insignificant details here.

Nate straightened in the chair, his hand slipping away from mine as my heart fell. The time had come for him to implement an exit strategy, and who could blame him? I wouldn't want to be seen with a dysfunctional un-mentored orphan like myself, either.

Nate cleared his throat. "Bree, are you, by any chance, going to tonight's initiation?"

"Ye—Yes." I cleared my itchy, treacherous throat.

"Want to go with me?" he asked, eyes twinkling. My body froze from the sheer shock. To be perfectly honest, my fingers were itching to scratch the inner part of my ear to make sure I heard him correctly, so immobility wasn't necessarily the worst-case scenario here.

"Unless you're already going with someone . . . like Charlie Cast, maybe?" he peered into my eyes, and for a moment there I was lost in the sea of his.

I couldn't speak, so I just shook my head, relieved that *something* still worked, while thanking my lucky stars that it wasn't my bolt-y bits.

His face fell.

"No!" I yelled, finding my voice, "I mean, I'm not going with Charlie . . . I'm free . . . I'm—" stopping my idiotic blathering this instant. My mouth clamped shut.

"Good. Then I'll pick you up at eleven-thirty." He grinned and rose to leave.

My knees grew wobbly as my mind registered the fact that I had a date with Nate freaking Harper.



I don't remember the rest of that day; it was all a fuzzy haze filled with cotton-balled hearing and a fluffy undertone to everything else.

The next thing I distinctly remember is staring at my closet later in the evening thinking about what to wear. I didn't exactly know what this "Order" event entailed, and the only people who could answer were Sophia, who was no longer speaking to me, and my roommate Annabelle, who I wished would stop.

As I tentatively held up a sweater for consideration, Annabelle was staring into the mirror. Her head cocked to the side as she said, in a far-away voice, "I think I'm gay . . ." She said it like she was talking about a blouse she wanted to try on to mix up the colors or something—though, given her bright orange hair color, there weren't too many colors she could choose from.

Absently setting my sweater aside, I tried to think of a reason for Annabelle to be talking to me at all, let alone confessing something so personal.

I blinked twice, then shook my head and took the bait. "I think you would *know* whether you're gay or not." I would have been a little choked up if this had been anyone else coming out to me, but this was *Annabelle*, the same girl who had informed me that she had taped a 'kiss for rent' sign

in the boy's dormitory message board, asking for a part-time shareholder for *my* mouth. When I felt something wet press against my lips in the middle of the night, my shrill screaming jolted Annabelle—who was busy haphazardly applying invisible lipstick to my mouth, jaw *and* neck that would become visible the following day—right into the path of one of my nervous hyperactive electricity bolts. Her hair hasn't curled quite the same way since.

She sighed, turned to her side, and patted her belly. “Yep. Gay.” She reconsidered her shirt and tried another one on.

“Well, then,” I said half-heartedly, “by all means, good luck.”

I didn't mean it. After all, my pants were still sticky from her latest prank.

With a sudden lunge across the room, Annabelle grabbed my face with her hands. “You really mean it?” Her green eyes blinked at me.

“No,” I blurted. It was like I was asking to be punished, and I would be, whether I deserved it or not.

Her mouth stretched into a frown, then bulged into a pout, “Take it back.”

“No . . .” I stretched the word out so as not to be misunderstood. If I was going kamikaze, I was going for broke.

Annabelle folded her hands over her bosom—a small C. “Take it back.”

What was going on with everyone today? First, Nate asked me out, and now Annabelle was treating me like her confidant.

“You'll hurt my feelings . . .,” she whined.

My brow furrowed. “*Annabelle* . . . we're *not* friends. You remember that, right? You made sure I knew we weren't months ago when you blogged about my nightgowns, and hammered it in just yesterday by covering almost all of my pants with strawberry jam.”

She waved her hand in front of her face, dismissing my remark. “All water under the bridge.” She gave me a broad smile.

“No, it isn't.” I stood up and pointed at the bottom of my shorts, which were still sticky no matter how many times I ran them through the washing machine. In fact, I worried they were even getting stickier. You would think witches would come up with a better way to deal with dirty clothes, but aside from manifesting new outfits which last about three hours, we haven't.

She guffawed, “I can take care of *that*!” She flicked her wrist which instantly extended into her wand, said a few words in Latin, then whoosh! My pants were dry and . . . *green*?

“They're supposed to be black,” I remarked dryly.

“Oh. Sorry.” She flushed, flicked her wrist, a few more Latin words, and they were black.

“This is only a temporary fix until I amend the spell I cast on your washing powder.” She had the decency to look abashed.

“This doesn't make us friends,” I reminded her. I ran my hands on the soft fabric, wondering whether it would last or go back to being sticky in three hours.

“Of course not. Not . . . yet, anyway.” Annabelle smiled mischievously. “Want to borrow something for your date tonight with Nate?”

I wasn't good with the verbal spells, so none of my clothes looked nice—or expensive, for that matter.

“You, um, know about that?” I asked, trying not to gape. Was I being naïve? Was Nate pulling a prank at my expense?

“Bree, honey, *everyone* knows about that.” Annabelle grinned.

I don't think Annabelle had **ever** grinned at me to my face, ever.

I wrung my hands nervously. “Is . . .” I couldn't say it, couldn't ask it. Not out loud, not in front of Annabelle who would only use it as ammunition against me.

“It’s totally for real.” She crossed her heart, as if reading my mind. “I swear.”

My pulse picked up the pace. Not because I was so happy and joyful, but because I was panicked and fretful.

If she was lying, I would be the joke of the school. But then again, that wouldn’t be anything new. I was used to it; being the klutz I was, there were ample opportunities for me to humiliate myself on a daily basis.

Add to that my unique ability to flounder anything magical, and there you have a genuine laughing stock.

But if she was telling the truth, then I must be dreaming. I pinched myself, just to make sure. Maybe it was some kind of wacky birthday present from my grandmother, her idea of a gift—hallucinations.

Annabelle smacked my pinching fingers, “Don’t do that!” she cried. “You’ll hurt yourself, and worse still, you’ll leave marks!” she huffed, as if there were so many other ways you could hurt yourself without leaving marks, and here I was, proving my ignorance once again.

She met my eyes, hand on her hip. “Felix told Tara who told Jason who told Brian who told Jessica who told Teddy who told me what happened in your Potions class today. So you know it’s totally legit.” She nodded decisively. “And, well, Tara is Gary’s girlfriend, who is Nate’s roommate, so you know *she* knows.” Her nose pinched. “You know, I thought Nate was going out with that friend of yours, Sophia . . .”

My gut wrenched, coiling with sharp spasms as a cold sweat trickled on my forehead.

Sophia was dating Nate.

Of course she was.

After all, hadn’t I known this was all a trick?

The Nate Harpers of the world were meant to be with perfect specimens like Sophia Lucas. The fact that Sophia, my former best friend, knew that I had the biggest crush on Nate and still dated him only confirmed how little she cared for me or my feelings.

Annabelle continued, completely unaware of the effect her words had on me, “But I guess he’s not anymore, which is a good thing, because then you can go out with Nate—who is one hell of a kisser,” she eyed me knowingly, “while I engage in a little flirting with the long-legged Sophia!” At that, she clapped her hands together with delight.

“You’re into *Sophia* now?” My mind was still reeling from the possibility of my former best friend going out with the one boy I’d been drooling over for the past four years.

Annabelle stared back at me. “Like, duh! She’s hot!”

“You’ve only been gay for about . . .” I made a show out of looking at my watch-free wrist, “five seconds, and already you’re picking girls—namely, my former BFF?”

“Yep. You’re not the only fast one around here!” She smiled wide.

“*Excuse me?*” I gaped. “I already told you those nighties were from my grandmother, and that—”

Annabelle held up her hand. “What about Charlie?” she asked with a gleam in her eyes.

“What *about* Charlie?” I replied.

She widened her eyes, waiting for my admission, then her face fell flat. “Don’t tell me you’re not playing a little after-hours-hanky-panky in our room when he comes over to *study*. . . !”

I gaped at her; it took me a few moments to collect my jaw from the floor and respond. “Sophia and Charlie have been coming over to my room ever since, like, forever.” Technically, Sophia had been my roommate before Annabelle replaced her, but there was no point admitting as much.

Boys were not supposed to enter a girl's room. They could come pick you up for a study date or a regular date, for that matter, but they only had up to seven minutes to do so (Sophia once told me those could literally be seven minutes in heaven if used correctly).

However, about two years ago, Sophia had produced a flask filled with an anti-detection potion that fooled the detectors and, more importantly, Erica, the hall monitor, who we hated with a vengeance.

I stared blankly at Annabelle.

Annabelle just rolled her eyes. "Fine. It wouldn't matter if you had swum in the Charlie pool anyway." Her eyes sparkled, but she didn't elaborate.

Moving on from our impromptu and very awkward conversation, Annabelle began flicking through her massive wardrobe. She plucked something out and tossed it at me. "Try this on," she said.

Shocked, I stared at the shimmering gray designer evening dress. It was the prettiest thing I had ever seen. I sniffed it, looking for the telltale rose smell which would give it away if it was magically enhanced, but this dress had no after-smell. It was plush and soft and shimmery.

The prettiest thing I had ever held in my hands.

Annabelle had had enough of my awed silence. "What are you waiting for?" she asked, impatient. "Try it on."

I forced myself to stop fawning over the dress. "Why are you being nice to me all of the sudden?" I asked, letting the suspicion I felt leak into my voice.

If I learned anything from Sophia, it was that *nothing* was free; everything had a price, especially favors.

Annabelle stopped tapping her foot and exhaled audibly before answering. "For one thing, you've been invited to initiate into the Order."

"So?" I asked, not seeing her point.

Annabelle stared at me as if astonished that I didn't know the answer to this one. "Not everyone can be a member of the Order, Bree. You have to have magic in your blood—heavy magic—to be considered, even for one of the crappy covens."

Well, that ruled me out. My parents were definitely **not** magical. Except for referring to my accidental brush with trans-species mutation as 'the incident,' there was no further mention of magic in our house.

I remember that in the aftermath, my grandmother, Miranda, paid us a rare visit.

I recall gaping at her, because she didn't resemble any of my friend's grandmothers. I had a hard time reconciling the fact that my mom was calling her 'mother' when she looked so young.

They got into a big argument after Miranda insisted that I be sent to a 'fitting boarding school' where they knew how to deal with my 'outbursts.' At the time, I feared they were talking about some mental institution. In retrospect, I guess I wasn't that far off. I mean, where else could you find someone to salt your toothpaste, spell your bras to increase by two cups, and reduce your underwear a size, like Annabelle did for me?

"And even then, you need connections to be eligible." Annabelle continued.

Now *that* made more sense; my grandmother could turn any social event into a political function, schmoozing the crowds until their purse strings loosened and her various charities received substantial donations.

If you had asked me, I would have sworn that woman cared more for her charities than she ever did about my brother and I, but perhaps I had been mistaken. Maybe she was trying to help me by getting me initiated into one of the covens; even if it ended up being a crappy one.

"I guess I underestimated you." She shrugged as if this was a minor clerical error rather than the unabashed badgering that she'd been putting me through for three months now.

I waited for her to continue. When she didn't, I prompted, "You said 'for one thing,' implying there was a second thing . . ."

"Oh, right," she replied, a little rattled. "And the fact that Nate is willing to date you. That, in and of itself, means you're worthy of my attention."

"It's not your *attention* I've been lacking," I replied dryly.

She ignored me. Annabelle was good at ignoring things that didn't suit her.

"If your life was a book," she announced magnanimously, "then Nate Harper asking you out would be the first chapter."

I stared at her. This date, while exciting and Cinderella-esque to the tenth degree, was *so* not my first chapter.

Seeming to sense my indignation, Annabelle silenced me with, "Zip it." She gestured with her hand over her mouth in a zipper motion. "Whatever happened before was in the past. We're moving on," she declared.

I was too baffled to respond.

"So? The dress? Do you like it?" she asked in a huff.

I nodded slowly, trying to decide whether I wanted to be accepted into a club—or an Order, or whatever they called themselves—that Annabelle would consider desirable.

Surely anything Annabelle considered worthy should repel me, right?

Then I remembered Nate's eyes and his gorgeous smile—and I got a little lost, to tell you the truth.

"Are you a member?" I asked, looking up to meet her green eyes while still mesmerized by the thought of Nate's baby blues.

"Of course I am, silly," she giggled. "I've been a card-toting member for four months now. I joined when Sophia did, though we aren't in the same coven. I'm in Taurus, you know, one of the Earth covens. We pride ourselves on our reliability, love of luxury, patience and impulsiveness. Sophia joined one of the haughty Air covens—though all the Air covens think pretty highly of themselves, if you know what I mean. Now, I *want* to say she's in Libra, because they're so charming and social—*though underneath it all you know they're just lonely*—but I'm not certain." She cocked her head to the side. "Didn't she tell you?"

My stomach sank even lower. Sophia, evidently, had been keeping quite a few secrets, going back to beyond when I still considered us friends less than six months ago.

"Do you know how long she and Nate dated?" I asked, my mind reeling, scrambling to gather more information before Annabelle discovered I was a fraud and returned to being my personal prankster.

Annabelle turned her face to the ceiling, "Um . . . at least five months, maybe six . . . she was with him at her initiation, so that means at least seven . . ."

I felt my heart drop to my feet.

Sophia, my then best friend, had been dating my dream guy, and she didn't even tell me about it? I wanted nothing more than to make the familiar walk down the hallway, take a right and knock on Sophia's yellow door to demand answers.

But I knew I wouldn't be welcome.

CHAPTER THREE

I was still processing the fact that Annabelle was being nice to me and that, against all better judgment, I was letting her. She had been adamant that she should be the only one to handle my make-up and hair for the initiation. Since I barely know how to apply eyeliner without turning my face into a zebra crossing, I let her.

When she swirled my seat around, I actually gaped at my reflection.

I took in the tumbling dark locks framing my face while the rest of my hair was nestled inside some sort of bow woven into my hair from behind, then concentrated on my smoky eyes and shiny lips.

The dark mascara and shimmering eye shadows Annabelle had used highlighted my gray eyes and made them seem huge—but in a good way.

I turned my head from side to side, appreciating the delicate pink hue of my cheeks.

“This . . . this is amazing,” I gasped, my hand hovering over my face.

Annabelle quickly slapped my hand away, lest I mess her work.

“Of course it is,” Annabelle said with a note of satisfaction. I blinked at my image, awestruck. Sophia had tried to beautify me numerous times in the past, but I had never looked *this* good. Between my faulty tear ducts and problematic hair, I had been fairly certain I was make-over-proof.

There was a light knock on the door. My heart pounded in my chest;

I wasn’t ready. I wasn’t dressed yet . . . I hadn’t picked out shoes . . .

I . . .

“Are you decent in there?” Charlie’s familiar voice chimed.

I sighed with relief, eyeing the clock on my nightstand. It was only eleven. I still had half an hour to go before Nate was supposed to come pick me up.

“Come in.” I smiled.

Charlie gaped at me when he entered the room, “What happened to you?” he asked, looking genuinely upset.

I had expected various reactions, but trepidation wasn’t one of them. Was this another one of Annabelle’s spells, where I thought I looked one way, but in reality I resembled an old hag?

I tried discreetly to smell myself; from what I gathered, Annabelle had used only light magic for my makeover, so it shouldn’t leave any residual scent—*unless* this was another practical joke and I was covered in boils that only I couldn’t see.

I sniffed and relaxed. I had gotten pretty good at detecting one of Annabelle's spells on my person. In fact, it had become one of my morning routines—making sure my pants weren't transparent or my shoes didn't morph into fluffy slippers once I crossed the doorframe.

"Annabelle helped me," I muttered weakly. Even to my own ears, that sounded strange. Charlie barely glanced in Annabelle's direction. She was muttering something to herself, apparently pissed that even after our 'bonding time' I had still chosen to use her full name instead of her preferred abbreviation, 'Anna.'

I stared back at the mirror. From what I could detect, nothing was wrong. I looked darn good, if I did say so myself.

"I thought you two hated each other," Charlie whispered through closed lips.

"Oh, please . . . that was *so* yesterday." Annabelle exhaled in exasperation.

"You don't look like yourself." Charlie glared at me, his voice laced with dismay.

I thought of several pithy remarks I could retaliate with, but chose to rise above. "I like it," I decided.

He plopped himself on my bed and began leafing through a book he took from the nightstand.

"So you're going to join the Order?" he asked, not looking at me.

"Yep," I said, surprised he knew about it. For a secret society, it wasn't doing a good job keeping things quiet.

"You're going with Nate Harper." It was a statement, not a question, so I declined to respond.

"Charlie . . . is everything okay?" I asked. My voice was weak, noting the harshness in Charlie's voice.

His eyes flashed to mine, caught for a second, then returned to the book. He shook his head. "After tonight . . . everything will change," he remarked ominously.

I snorted nervously, "Way to be dark, Charlie."

Annabelle made a show out of packing her toiletries and going off into the bathroom.

"I'm serious," he said, finally looking me straight in the eyes. "You'll never be the same." His tone was wretched, as if he was already rehearsing the obituary he would write about me in the paper.

"What are you talking about?" I asked. My stomach fluttered; well, it wouldn't be *my life* if there wasn't a catch, now would it? I swear, sometimes I think I attract unfortunate—sometimes even disastrous—events like a magnet.

It was only to be expected; I just assumed that the catch had something to do with Nate, not the initiation itself . . .

What was I getting myself into this time?

"Look at you. You're already changing," he snapped, gesturing to my face.

"What? *This*? This is make-up backed up by a few charms. I'm a *girl*. That's what girls do. They slap on some mascara and eye shadow. Stop being such a drama queen," I retorted defensively.

He shook his head slowly. "First it's the make-up, then the guys . . . I saw this happening with my sister."

I lolled my head to the side, then let it do a half-circle, feeling an "ah-ha" moment. "I'm not your sister, Charlie." I felt like kicking myself. Of course he would think of Zoe.

Charlie's sister Zoe had gotten addicted to Grace when she became a full-fledged witch.

Though I didn't have any personal experience with Grace, I knew it helped magic users access their powers and that it could be addictive; like everything else in life, moderation is key, and abuse is a possibility. Zoe got too deep too fast, and she'd been pretty much zonked out ever since. There were stronger substances out there—ones I was certain my brother had experimented with—but I had no idea whether Zoe had tried them.

He stood up, his eyes narrowing. "I know that."

“I’m sorry . . . ,” I sighed, feeling remorseful, which led to feeling bad about being excited in the first place, which, ultimately, was quickly replaced with resentment.

I deserved to feel nervous and anxious in a good butterflies-in-your-stomach kind of way. I squared my jaw. “I want you to be happy for me.” My eyes were moist from my Zoe memories, which were dark and prickly and had no available space in my happy place. “I’m going on my first date tonight.” I stared at him pointedly. “I’m going to be initiated into the Order.” Not that I had any idea what that entailed, per se, but at the moment I was decidedly proud of it. Besides, I was intrigued to find out, and this Zoe thing was messing with my head.

“You mean, you’re going to the *first* trials tonight. They don’t initiate you into the Order that quickly. This is only the first phase.”

I wanted to ask him to elaborate, to explain what he meant, but my mind was still reeling from the prospect of undergoing *trials* . . . I was lousy with anything even remotely test-like, which meant—my heart fell. It meant that my Cinderella story would be even briefer than I initially imagined. My shoulders slumped.

Charlie grumbled a bit, then frowned and turned away. “Fine. Join a coven” He sighed heavily. “Just promise me you’ll stay you, okay?” His eyes had that puppy-dog-please-take-me-seriously look that I always had a problem denying, so I nodded.

Charlie smiled for the first time all night.

“So . . . what do you really think?” I asked, gesturing at my face.

“Whore of Babylon,” Charlie replied with a grin.

“Bane of my existence,” I retorted, somewhat lamely.

“I need to change now,” I noted, looking at the clock.

“Into an old hag?” He chuckled but stood to leave. “Here,” he said, thrusting something into my hands.

“What is it?” I asked, looking down to the small box clumsily wrapped in a blue paper.

“Happy Birthday, witch.” He gave me a small smile.

“Thanks . . . ,” I mumbled, tearing the wrapping paper, feeling disjointed and embarrassed.

I hadn’t thought anyone would remember; the fact that my grandmother had still amazed me.

Inside, I found a small turquoise box. Nestled within it was a silver necklace with a black pendant. When I turned it in my fingers, it glistened, and I could see tiny black shards of light within it.

“It’s beautiful,” I gasped quietly.

Charlie shrugged and walked to the door.

“Thank you,” I repeated, at a loss. “Charlie?” I asked, fastening it to my neck.

“Umm?” he responded, his hand clutching the door handle.

“What happens at the trials?” My voice was a little more tender than usual, betraying my frayed nerves.

Charlie didn’t face me. Instead, he opened the door, poised to leave. “You’ll see. It’s not something I can explain.”

“So . . . you’ve been?” I asked, feeling even more betrayed than I had by Sophia.

He nodded curtly and stepped out of the room, closing the door after him.



The next knock on the door was Nate’s, and my, did he look scrumptious. His hair was tussled, sexy; reminiscent of long leisurely walks with the wind in your hair and the beach at your heels.

He was so perfect all the time, so elegant and proper, that it felt good that at least one part of him was imperfect. I could picture him hesitating a moment before knocking on my door, running a hand through his hair and messing it up, the only evidence to betray his nerves.

His light tan accentuated his cool blue eyes, and I sank a little deeper into them, managing to mask a small moan with a cough. I blinked, suddenly aware that he was staring right back at me.

My cheeks flushed crimson. Mortified at being caught staring, I lowered my eyes to his white collar, suddenly uncertain where to park my eyes without subjecting myself to further humiliation.

“Good enough to eat,” Annabelle whispered in my ear, which only caused the blush to spread, no longer limited to my cheeks.

Annabelle had returned to the room after Charlie left and had changed into a tight green mini dress that accentuated her bosom and showed off her legs.

The dress caught her eyes, made them greener somehow, just as the gray shimmering dress I was wearing made my eyes pop.

For whatever suicidal reason, I raised my face to his, meeting his quaffed smile with a lopsided grin of my own, one I couldn’t erase from my features no matter how hard I tried.

“Wow,” Nate declared in response, making my knees wobbly.

“*Thanks?*” I’d meant for it to come out as a statement rather than a question, but Nate was too busy whistling to notice.

He had me spin around (I took the time to re-arrange my legs into working condition), and when I faced him again, his eyes were a sparkling excited blue, and his dimples had deepened. What is it about dimples that got me all hot and bothered?

“Shall we go?” he asked, holding out his hand.

I nodded and took his hand in mine, noticing for the first time his dark designer tux and the gold watch that highlighted his blond hair.

The sensation of touching his hand sent a jolt of electricity down my spine, simultaneously warming my back and setting it on edge.

My knees grew wobbly again, giving me second thoughts about the five-inch heels Annabelle had forced me into. I would have trouble walking in them on a good day, so on a day as emotionally charged as this, I would probably land flat on my ass within the first three minutes.

To my surprise, Nate steadied me. “Easy there,” he whispered, as if I was a skittish horse that needed soothing. I didn’t mind; not too much, anyway.

Annabelle’s date—a guy named Toby—came to pick her up behind us.

She giggled, probably forgetting her sudden interest in girls in favor of Toby’s dark locks.

I was about to ask where we were going, since I had no idea where that might be, when I realized we were heading for the roof.

There, awaiting us, were two black brooms, their bristles a dark yellow, aged to perfection. They looked expensive—not that I had seen many brooms in my life, but I bet they cost a fortune. I had a dusty old broom hanging in my closet that didn’t even approach these magnificent objects.

It was my grandmother’s dusty old broom, still in mint condition. Never been used; not by me, anyway.

I opened my mouth to protest, but Nate placed his finger on my mouth, silencing me. “I’m flying us,” he declared with his charming smile.

Once again, my mouth opened to protest. I had never been on a broom before in my life, and I wasn’t going to hop on some boy’s broom just because he was my date.

“I . . .” I began, but before I could go further he replaced his fingers with his mouth.

It was so sudden and so unexpected, I promptly shut up.

His lips were so . . . soft.

I never imagined lips could feel so soft, so . . . sensual and light at the same time.

A girl dreams about what her first kiss will be like—fantasizes about it, even.

It's no wonder so many Hollywood films are dedicated to it . . . well, '80s flicks, anyway.

And don't get me wrong, kissing Nate Harper was way up my bucket list, right below getting out of this school and establishing myself as a professional of some kind (the details still needed a little ironing out).

I just hadn't pictured it happening this way.

Before I could lose myself in my first kiss, it was over.

His lips were off mine and moving, producing sounds and annotations, though I could hardly concentrate on his words through my daze.

My first kiss. My finger hesitantly raised to my lips, touching my mouth tentatively, lingering where Nate Harper's lips had been only a moment ago.

I felt a twinge of disappointment. I mean, that was it? The kiss I would forever remember till the day I die?

Where were the fireworks? The butterflies?

Instead, all I got was the sinking sensation of disappointment and unmet expectations.

It's not like I felt *nothing*. I'm not dead. It just wasn't what I expected, that's all.

He leaned into me, so close, so intimate. The only thing I could hear was my own rapid heartbeat.

Here we go, I re-assured myself. Now we're talking. I allowed the smile I felt crawl up my lips and sink deeper into my cheek, fluttered my eyelashes briefly and looked up into his amazing blues.

"Trust me," he whispered in my ear, his breath hot on my cheek.

I could feel my cheeks flaming again, ruining my poise.

There was no dodging his words now; not when he was so close to me.

My fingers could easily press themselves against his cheek, or nestle in his hair.

The possibilities made me dizzy.

His words echoed in my mind, played themselves back as my breath hitched in anticipation.

Nothing happened; that is, besides my traitor legs which began to follow him as he walked away.

Before I knew what was happening, I was embracing Nate Harper's back, my hands stretched across his chest, my head leaning on his back as we flew up and off the roof.



The first thing I heard was the wind whistling in my ears as it gushed past and through me.

I cowered my head into Nate's back, the soaring sensation alien and unpleasant.

I had never so much as held my head out of a moving vehicle, and I wasn't going to start now without even a buckle to afford me some illusion of safety.

My cheek nestled against the fabric of his soft black tux stretched over his rock-hard body.

I closed my eyes, trying to dislodge the panicked feeling blocking my throat.

Being on a broomstick with nothing to hold onto but another mass of blood and bone, hurtling through the air, rushing past treetops and mansions—it all made my stomach turn.

Oh, now my stomach was doing flip-flops. Great . . .

Heights have always been my Achilles heel.

Had I known flying was involved, I probably would have preferred to stay home and fight with Nigel, Annabelle's cat and familiar who visited once a year.

Ever since my parents' crash, any moving vehicle posed a problem, especially ones that whooshed through the air accompanied by the gut-wrenching sounds of wind billowing in your ear.

I opened my eyes as I tried to convince myself it couldn't be as bad as I imagined, that I was blowing everything out of proportion.

I wasn't.

It was as bad as I had thought. Worse, even, given the speed at which Nate felt comfortable flying.

I could feel the magic build up inside me, untempered, ready to lash out indiscriminately. Before long, I would be stranded on a piece of wood with a toad as my guide; I just knew it.

Suddenly, we were hurtling towards the ground, and a strangled scream escaped my throat.

I could hear Nate chuckling, feel his ribs move underneath my gripping hands.

I would have slapped him, but I was too busy clutching onto him for dear life.

The clearing in the trees would be fast upon us at this speed. I couldn't watch. I shut my eyes, but the image of the vast arena littered with what looked like people haunted me.

In my panic, a zap of magic jolted from my hands directly into Nate's back.

He lost his balance, and we spiraled in mid-air.

Thankfully, he regained control, muttered something under his breath, and landed us relatively safely on the clearing next to a ruffled valet who was doing his best to seem unmoved by our sudden appearance.

Nate dusted himself off, then plucked my rigid body off the broom.

I felt like a cardboard cutout of myself.

Next thing I knew, Nate's hand was gently stroking my cheek, raising my chin so our eyes could meet.

Was he going to yell at me for electrocuting him? My pulse danced wickedly in my chest.

His fingers left my face and rubbed the end of one of my curls, which, oddly enough, seemed to have stayed in place.

"Did I tell you how lovely you look tonight?" he asked with a husky lilt to his voice.

Oh, my. My head grew fuzzy again, and I couldn't seem to find the words to respond, or to reprimand him on his reckless flying, which I had been planning to do.

That is, until he'd started being all charming and flattering me and all.

His fingers dropped to my own and clasped them. Another spark of electricity shot through me—at least this time Nate didn't seem to feel it.

I followed him past the gated entrance into the clearing beyond, noting how fancy everyone was dressed, the mingle of colors distracting me momentarily from my panic.

The babble of noises engulfed us. Nate offered welcoming remarks to various people, but his walking was deliberate, purposeful.

He wasn't lingering about, waiting.

Instead, he brought me to the entrance of a building.

With its gray stones and wooden gates, it looked like a medieval castle.

Nate knocked three times, and a small lady appeared. "Name?" she asked, peering at the both of us.

"Brianna Flint," Nate answered for me.

"What's wrong? Cat got your tongue?" the small woman asked me, then chuckled to herself. Her face darkened when we didn't laugh with her. "Well, come on in, then."

We took a step forward, but her bony hand shot out before her. "*Just* the initiate." Her words were laden with authority.

Nate bowed, and I felt terror gripping me, bolting my feet to the sand beneath me.

My hand gripped his as hard as I could. He let out a tiny yelp, which caused me to unhinge and relax my muscles for less than a second, but that was enough.

The little woman pulled at me, and before I knew what was happening, the gate was closing behind me, and Nate's handsome face was gone.



Adrenaline pumped through my veins, making me more aware of my surroundings.

I could see boys and girls of various races and ages, all dressed in white billowy gowns.

"Come!" the little woman ordered, nudging me towards a small room to the left.

Someone else pulled a white fabric over my head and down towards my feet.

"There!" the small woman exhaled. "Much better." She smiled at me with a cat-like grin and pushed me towards the line between a calm boy and a middle-aged woman who seemed a bit out of place, just like me.

Still in line fifteen minutes later, my nerves were beginning to get the better of me.

The last thing I wanted was to transform some poor unsuspecting bystander into another toad.

I was trying to breathe deeply, use meditative techniques, when the woman standing behind me tapped my shoulder gently. "You a witch?" she asked, then promptly continued without waiting for a response. "I'm looking forward to becoming a witch; always wanted to take that up, I did, but never quite got around to it I suppose. How about you?"

Her tone was friendly, her Southern accent betraying her roots.

"Not much of one, I'm afraid," I admitted with a shrug.

"Name's Lydia." She grinned toothily at me, shoving her hand in my face.

"Brianna," I replied, "but everyone calls me Bree."

Lydia nodded thoughtfully. "Do you think there'll be chanting, Bree? Very witch-y thing to do, chanting. Standing around and waiting doesn't seem all that occult to me . . .," she huffed, then her eyes blazed with a new theory. "Do you think they'll ask us to dance around naked *while* chanting? That would certainly add credence to the entire affair, don't you think?"

God, I hope not . . . I wasn't ready for naked anything, let alone prancing around in my birthday suit jammed next to . . . other people's exposed body parts.

My hands involuntarily zapped, which was especially unfortunate since I was rubbing my necklace at that moment.

The woman babbled on, oblivious to my discomfort. "It's getting a wee bit chilly, though, with the breeze and everything. I wouldn't fancy catching a cold while prancing around . . . though learning to *inflict* someone with one does have a nice ring to it, don't you think?" She cocked her head in my direction, then fell silent; "You don't look so good," she noted, then waved to one of the handlers (as I'd heard them being called), who took me aside for a quick 'freshening up.'

Turns out, 'freshening up' meant downing a mild anti-depressant with a tumbler of vodka.

"I thought you weren't supposed to mix alcohol with prescription drugs," I exclaimed, just the tiniest bit horrified. "And, well . . . I'm a minor and shouldn't really—"

But before I could complete the sentence, the pill was down my throat, chased quickly by the vodka.

Within mere minutes, I felt calmer. A bit hazy around the edges and wobbly on my five-inch heels, but less electrified.

After almost knocking over the person who had drugged me—a gangly young man with wire-rimmed glasses and red hair—I was returned to the line.

My feet seemed to stumble strangely beneath me, and placing one foot in front of another seemed suddenly a greater challenge than I recalled it being before.

Lydia caught me in her arms before I could knock someone else down, and I batted my eyelashes at her thankfully with a little nod of my head, though, in hindsight that hadn't been my best decision, since the sudden movement made me nauseous.

As I distantly heard her chastising the red-haired young man, I leaned my head on her shoulder and sniffed her hair.

Lydia had a marvelous scent, a combination of orange and cinnamon.

In my drugged confusion, I was about to try and taste one of her locks of hair when I decided against the idea. Not because eating hair sounded wrong at the time, but because I was distracted by a sudden yet urgent need to pee.

Most of my discomfort waned when the line began moving.

My legs shuffled underneath me in a steady fashion, peeking in and out under the white burlap bag that had been forced on me.

I laughed as my legs disappeared beneath my dress only to reappear a moment later as hands seized me on both sides, causing my feet to float above the floor.

I realized that Lydia and the red-haired guy who had given me the pill were carrying me away from the line. What did that mean? Had I failed *already*?

The thought dissipated, dissolving into the ether, once my vibrating hand began to glow slightly and I got caught up in its pretty colors.

Even in my inebriated condition, I regretted taking the pill, though in all fairness, this was exactly the way I'd thought I would enter the magic society: humiliated and nauseous.

I felt a slight burning sensation in my foot, and my left shoe simply buckled. When I regained vision and the haze was becoming more manageable, I saw the heel—which had been irritating me—had turned into rubber.

I would have wobbled and fallen had I not been strapped in between the handler and Lydia.

No one noticed my heel. I guess something about a girl being dragged by a middle-aged woman and a handler was enough of a distraction.

Lydia, who was the only one who had noticed my shoe mishap, clucked her tongue and said, "I never liked heels myself. Always wear flats, I say. Closer to the ground that way, you are. Closer to nature." She wiggled her eyebrows. "Can't say I can manifest shoes for ya, love," she sighed, "unless you don't mind risking having your legs turned into cucumbers . . ." She frowned, but then her eyes lit up.

I could *see* the light emanating from her eyes in green-yellow spurts.

"But I know who can . . ." She smiled, then pushed us along, nudging other people ahead of us out of her way. The handler stopped advancing with us, clearly unhappy with our behavior.

Lydia pushed me out of his hands and continued barreling forward.

"Sorry . . . excuse me . . . we have a bit of an emergency, don't ya people see that?" she huffed. She broke the line and opened one of the side doors with her boot before coming to a halt in front of a serious looking old man sitting behind a massive desk.

The desk was moving, swaying to the beat I could hear through the walls.

"Neville." Lydia demanded attention with her tone.

The man looked up from his papers with exaggerated boredom.

"This is Bree. She needs shoes, Neville." She nodded curtly.

Neville stared me up and down, then dismissed me.

"She needs to be in line, Lydia," he deemed.

“Shoes, first—with a side of sobriety,” she insisted. Her voice had a severe don’t-mess-with-me undertone. Clearly she had interacted with this “Neville” before.

Neville sighed and flicked his finger and was about to press an ominous red button when Lydia said, “Remember the green hamster, Neville.”

At that bewildering statement, Neville re-considered, his finger moving away from the button.

“Okay,” he replied dryly, “but then we’re even.”

Lydia nodded.

Before I knew what was happening, a cloud of blue smoke engulfed me, and I felt like myself again. My shoes had changed into the most comfortable pair I had ever slid into—and they did wonderful things for my calves.

“Thank you,” I mumbled, feeling a little shaken.

Neville dismissed us with a flick of the wrist, and I found myself clutching Lydia’s hand as we walked out of his office.

“How do you know him?” I asked, realizing as I said it that I didn’t know Lydia, either.

She was about to answer, but the red-haired handler yanked me away and ushered me into the quickly moving line. I could see Lydia was being escorted into another line.

The handler was keeping a close eye on me now.

I tried to tell him I needed to follow Lydia, but my line was exiting the grounds in a swarm, and there was no way back.

CHAPTER FOUR

The night air welcomed me with its light chill. I breathed in its crispness and took in my surroundings.

We were walking on a levitated platform toward a row of hooded figures dressed in black.

I could hear drums beating, their rhythm entering my limbs, pumping in my blood and quickening my pulse.

There was an urgency to the vibrations I felt beneath my feet and in my eardrums. Something primal.

One of the hooded figures stepped closer to us, and we were each given an unlit candle.

Mine was creamy white and quite broad, its scent musky.

I was surprised to find it oddly comforting.

I looked up as another podium was raised before us, and then the chanting began—just as Lydia had hoped.

By the new podium were three figures dressed in red cloaks and holding hands in a circle. Glowing in the air between them was a white fire with no apparent base. It simply lingered in the air.

After a moment, the white fire blazed bright, and our candles flickered to life.

There were gasps in our midst, but I found this type of thing typical and a tad boring. Candles? Really?

A second-grader could make a candle light itself. Heck, even I could master *that*.

The three red-cloaked figures began rising in the air with no apparent assistance from a broom or carpet. They turned to face us, opening to a row as the middle figure began speaking.

“On the third moon cycle of each season, we welcome into our midst the chosen ones,” a man’s voice boomed.

Me? A chosen one? Really?

Chosen for what, was my next question.

“We have hand-picked you all to come before us here tonight to initiate the worthy to join our ranks,” a woman’s voice blasted beside him.

Initiate the worthy? Did he mean the trials Charlie had mentioned? My stomach dropped.

I didn’t fare well in tests of any kind

“There will be five phases you must pass before you can become one of us,” the third person said, though I could not make out the gender.

“For the first,” the man boasted, “you must pass through fire.”

Um . . . excuse me. Human flesh here, party of one . . . no fire-protective gear in my bag (though, surprisingly, at home I had quite the variety—a necessary expense given my tendency to zap when nervous) . . . no bag whatsoever, come to think of it.

I tapped the red-haired handler on the shoulder.

He swiveled his head around and glared at me. His finger was planted firmly over his mouth, motioning for me to be silent.

“But . . . ,” I stammered, as a growing need brought itself to my attention. “Um . . . where are the bathrooms?” I asked, wanting a moment alone to clear my mind and think if I really wanted to join this group.

After all, I didn’t know anything about them, and I didn’t really jell with all the wiccans in my school anyway, and these folks were most likely related to them, so they were guilty by association, right?

There was no need for any fire trials for me to comprehend that

“Try not to die,” the handler whispered, then turned his head around to face the three.

What? *Die*? When did that become part of the curriculum? I didn’t come here to die



Within the span of my next blink, my environment changed. I was no longer on the podium, but in a very white hall.

The only thing barring me from the door—the only exit in sight—was a roaring bonfire.

The fire flickered, rising with each consecutive second that went by, sucking out what little air there was in the room.

I was all alone.

This had to be some sort of illusion, I decided.

There is no fire, I repeated over and over in my head, hoping the thought would distract me from the rising heat stroking every pore on my skin.

The fire began licking my white burlap get-up, which made me dance to get away. Then I remembered I still had to pee, which made things even more uncomfortable.

The last thing you want is to think about peeing where no bathrooms can be found.

My fire-is-getting-me dance was quickly replaced by the overwhelming urge to do the peepee dance.

Of course, *this* was what I would think of when facing imminent death.

I was prancing around, trying to hold it in, when the fire exploded upwards, and I lost control of my bladder.

Before I could react in any appropriate amount of shame, the fire extinguished as if touched by an unseen hand.

As I wiggled forward, hoping that only a trace amount of pee had filtered out (but knowing better), water erupted from all sides, soaking me to the bone as a pleasant voice informed me that I had passed the first test and would now be refreshed from the Fire trial.

Soapy froth covered me from head to toe, and I was watered down again from all sides. “No fire damage will be traced on your skin or clothes after this process,” the pleasant voice reassured me.

I hoped all other traces would be eradicated as well. With any luck, there were no hidden cameras in this place to broadcast my yellow transgression.

“Congratulations,” the voice boomed with pride. “Your score qualifies you for the second phase.”

“Huh?” I asked no one in particular. It was obvious the voice was a recording of some kind. Nevertheless, an explanation quickly followed. “Your score ranks in fifth place out of one hundred eighty three applicants due to swiftness of action.”

The sound of air dryers blasted any other opportunity for communication.

As quickly as I had left, I was back at the platform. This time my gown was a light shade of reddened yellow, like wisps of fire, and everything was clean and dry.

I turned around to see other figures popping up from nowhere. There were a lot fewer of them now, I realized.

“Congratulations to all of you for successfully completing the Fire challenge. Next, you will face Earth.”



I found myself in the middle of the desert, with only the sun to keep me company.

I blinked at the harsh sun and the dry air, which moved around flecks of dirt from one expanse of nothingness to another.

My sweat trailed down my forehead and along my cheek, then joined the salty mass collecting below my non-existent chest, trickling down my abdomen and into my shoes.

Heels, however comfortable, are still not appropriate attire for the desert. I cursed Annabelle for the umpteenth time for dressing me for a cocktail party and Charlie for not forcing me to stay home. Cuffing me to the bed if necessary.

I plopped myself down on the ground. This was useless.

I had been walking for the better part of an hour, and nothing had changed.

Not the sand, not the air, and most definitely not the blazing sun.

I decided to remain sitting, since I couldn't think of anything better. I couldn't fathom what the Order was testing for; was I expected to show my curious explorative side and walk some more, or sit and meditate, thereby demonstrating my inner peace and oneness with nature?

Neither bore any resemblance to the truth—at least as far as I was concerned; I felt sticky and tangy. Honestly, *odors* were being emitted. Coming into these trials, I'd wondered whether I would be one of those people who discover things about themselves that they had never imagined—but this was a bit much, even for me.

The sun rapidly lowered, which I initially thought was a good thing. Never in my life had I welcomed the darkness with such fervor.

I should have known better, because with the darkness came the cold.

If I thought heat was bad, *this* temperature was giving me a lesson I wouldn't easily forget.

I quickly dressed into the gray gown, now a yellow brown-splattered gray, then wiggled into the reddened yellow sack I had been given.

I huddled, folding into myself as the temperature lowered and I began to shiver uncontrollably.

I wished my hands would zap again just so the bursts of electricity would offer some solace from the sub-zero environment.

Then, when I thought it couldn't possibly get any worse, it did.

I heard sounds in the distance, and not friendly we-know-you-want-to-go-home-now-so-here's-your-ride type of sounds.

Oh, no.

This howling was of the “I'm hungry and you are the only edible thing around” variety.

Before I could think of what to do, a pack of wolves was hurtling towards me.

I ran. It was instinctual, a gut reaction.

My feet stumbled, practically knocking into one another, and before I could gain ground, the wolves were right alongside me, yapping their jaws, glaring their very pointy teeth.

I bit back a yelp and almost tripped over one of the wolves. In the last second, I managed to keep myself upright, but my momentum was gone.

After reasoning with them didn't yield any results, I managed—to my utter astonishment—to generate a bolt of electricity and direct it at the ravenous beasts.

I jerked into a sprint, eyeing an opening in their ranks.

Hope spread through me like wildfire as I noticed a cave in the distance. A second after that, reality bit its filthy teeth into me.

I staggered to the ground, my feet caving under me. Snarling, snapping jaws suddenly filled my line of sight. Terrified, I scrambled backwards, simultaneously trying to shake the wolf off my leg without success. His brown teeth were locked onto my calf, deepening their grip with each passing moment.

I began to crawl, yanking him with me and away from his friends. Blood smeared the sand beneath us, marking our unsteady path even more clearly than my stifled yelps had. As if nature—and the Order—didn't give the wolves enough of an advantage.

My hands jerked, lightning jolting out of them and straight into the wolf's snout. He whimpered and let go of my leg. I let out a muffled scream and used my elbows and torso to prop my body upright, balancing precariously on my healthy leg. My wounded one dragged, scraping the sand beneath me.

Before I could rejoice, another wolf leapt at me. I swatted my arms, but since he wasn't a bug, it barely hindered him.

I stumbled, limping forward, hoping that whatever I would meet in the dark cave would be better than the fate that awaited me with the pack.

Lightning continued to spasm out of me in jerks and bolts. I tried my best not to set my clothes on fire, or myself, for that matter.

Another wolf howled upon contact. I wasn't even looking where I was aiming, which wasn't the best strategy in a fight. Instead, I focused on the cave—my supposed salvation.

I stumbled forward into the cave, favoring my unbitten leg. I found some rocks and began tossing them behind me since the sporadic lightning bolts weren't deterring them, then whipped around to rush forward, deeper into the cave, still tossing stones towards the wolves.

My legs wobbled, and I could feel the blood trickling down my calf. Pain began to sear into my conscious mind, feeling as if its volume had been amped.

This was no time to indulge in the pain, but even as I thought this, my body began settling into its surroundings.

After all, the ground felt soft beneath my legs, welcoming and warm—so different from the cold, solid surface outside. I began sinking into it with every additional step as the darkness engulfed me until I couldn't see anymore.

But I could hear.

Not the wolves. Something else . . . something that had wings . . .

A swarm of bats darted at me, their wings flapping, attacking me from all sides.

They were in my hair, at my feet, batting against my hands.

My heart was pounding so fast, and I felt like I couldn't catch a breath.

Their little teeth began gnawing at me as their tiny claws and wings continued to batter me.

In my panic, jolts of lightning flashed from my hands.

A small amount of the bats distanced themselves momentarily, then returned to their places once the light show had stopped.

I screamed and tried to fight them off, but there were too many of them and only one of me. More frantic lightning shot out of me, this time landing at my feet, which didn't help much. That's when I noticed it was becoming harder to step (not that I could take a regular stride while fighting the bats . . .); something was definitely keeping me in place. Comprehension dawned; *quicksand*. Weren't the wolves and the bats enough? They had to add quicksand to the mix? It was becoming harder to move, though. My hands were flashing as bolts erupted haphazardly, mimicking the panic and frenzied terror I was feeling at each escalating danger. I swayed as a ferocious bat began to peck my cheek, and not in a good way—though I doubt, given the circumstances, any peck would have been welcomed. I slung my arms about, hitting tiny furry bodies and hurtling them into the cave walls. Another bat nipped my ear, and I squirmed, trying to jostle the one nestled between my curls. Another skimmed my cleavage, which pushed me to my boiling point. With an aggravated cry, I lunged forward, ready for a full-on blowout with the winged creatures, only to find myself skidding and sliding, head first, deeper into the cave. The quicksand had transformed into *glass*! I hadn't realized how many jolts I'd been unintentionally sending at the sand—since I had been aiming for the bats—but I was smiling like a lunatic anyway. I slid past the furry bats from Hell—some of them still flapping their wings, one of them still in my hair, but most of them off of me. The make-shift glass slide was taking me deeper into the cave, and my speed was picking up. I tried to change my position (while digging around for the bat in my hair) and to slow myself when I bumped my head into a door. My first thought was, who would put a door in the middle of a cave? Then I remembered that this was no ordinary cave. I tried to perch myself on my elbow only to fall flat on my face, again. Using the heels of my hands to stabilize my body, I scrambled to my feet. My hands trembled, and I gave up on standing erect. I stretched, heaving, sweat clinging to my body like that asinine bat in my hair, to grapple the doorknob. As the door opened and I was transferred back to the real world to be cleaned, I lost consciousness.



When I opened my eyes, I noticed that I had been perched upright in a hallway across from one of the purification pods. A disembodied voice congratulated me on completing my second trial, somehow aware that I had regained consciousness. My throat went dry as my eyes searched for cameras, paranoia surging throughout my system. These people were crazy; there was no other explanation for what I had just been through. I swerved away from the pods; sure, it would be nice to be clean, but that's how they got you—with the pristine, warm showers and scented soap. Before you knew what was going on, they would try to kill you again. In the back of my mind I wondered why they needed to clean you in between the attempts on your life, but I wasn't about to try to understand their crazy. I just wanted out. Once I found my way out into the open air, I saw the hooded figures had reconvened.

One of them was speaking, and I could hear him clearly, as if he was standing right beside me, drowning out my thoughts. “Your next testing phase will commence within the next few days.”

A chill passed through me.

I steeled myself. *No. Nope. Not gonna happen, buddy*, I decided.

“The third trial is set by the coven which has shown interest in you, based on your scores, rank and lineage.

If you pass, the elemental trials will follow throughout the next few months, according to the full moon”

My ears buzzed as the announcer’s voice began chanting from inside my skull. My body was still shaking off the numbness in my muscles and the contrasting heat in my limbs.

I had to find a way out of here. The cold air was biting, sinking into my skin, clawing at me from beneath my clothes.

The announcer’s voice joined the crowd in chant, and the magic began to swell around me.

LINKS

This is the end of the sample.

We hope you've enjoyed it.

Out of Sync will be released on the 23rd of October 2014.

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