

Chapter 1



Temperance glared down at the thumbtack. It rolled away across the muted grey carpet and under a towering bookshelf. Flexing her stinging finger, she dragged the fairy lights across the book display. She tore off strips of masking tape and pressed them across the electric cord. The lights were crooked. They were already sagging down onto the bookshelf below as the tape started to peel away. She thumped it back in place. It would have to do, she was sick of injuring herself on thumbtacks.

Behind her, her father pushed back his thinning blond hair before climbing up to squeeze his tall frame into the front window of the bookshop. He hummed as he propped a snowman up against a stack of books, then stepped back onto a rickety wooden stool, teetered and leapt down.

“Excellent teamwork, just like every other year!” he said, digging into a dilapidated box.

“Well not really, we’re earlier this year than usual,” she muttered.

“You heard Adora’s tarot prediction, the butchers will have a snowman on their canopy by tomorrow!” Pratchett gasped at her. “Haven’s always the first with its decorations!”

Temperance pressed her lips together, wishing she hadn’t mentioned it. She’d never admit to either of her parents but she didn’t believe in her mother’s predictions.

Pratchett returned to his work. He ducked his head back through the cardboard flaps and hauled out more knotted ornaments. The corners of his blue eyes crinkled with delight. Temperance just stared at the jumbled mass. She jerked her thumb at a fake spider-web stuck across the corner of the stockroom door.

“Don’t you think that’s more for Halloween?”

“Not at all,” Pratchett grinned at her. “It’s for Boris! We can put his presents there!”

“Do spiders celebrate Christmas?” Temperance frowned.

“Oh yes!”

She hated when he talked seriously about Boris. He was, by her father’s own serious admission, a ghost spider. The ghostly aspect was convenient, she had to admit. It explained why no one else could see him.

“Have you taken your medication today?”

“Yes,” he muttered.

“Good.”

He avoided her eyes. Instead he stared at his knuckles as if something was scuttling along them. He lifted his fingers to the fake web.

“There now, Boris.”

With a sigh, Temperance reached for her jacket resting on the counter by the till. She bundled her small frame up for the cold weather, tucking her thick brown hair into the folds of her scarf, and tugged it up over her face until only her wide hazel eyes were visible. She inched towards the door. Her father trailed after her.

“Cyprian was in yesterday...”

Temperance stopped and glanced back with a scowl. She didn’t know why but she’d never liked Cyprian. “What did he want?”

“He said that his nephew, Alastair Byron, is coming to stay with him.”

Temperance rolled her eyes. “You’re only excited because you think he’s been on all these wonderful adventures while he’s been travelling abroad. You’re always dreaming of having a life-less-ordinary, but there’s nothing wrong with this one.”

She pointed her finger at her father. “Plus, all his globe-trotting means he obviously doesn’t have a stable job to speak of.”

“Don’t be silly, Temperance! Anyway, I’ve put mistletoe over the door in case he comes while you’re in the shop,” Pratchett wiggled his eyebrows at her.

“Sometimes I wonder what age you really are,” Temperance sighed.

She waved goodbye over her shoulder at her father.

“Ah, young love,” he sighed.

“I don’t even know him!” she said. “I’m warning you, don’t say anything embarrassing!”

“I only want the best for my girl,” he called after her. “You might see him today. He’s transferring to Carwick University. Think of all the adventures you two could have together!”

“Goodbye, Dad.”

Leaving him listing out exotic countries he thought had good adventure prospects, Temperance slipped away. The jingle of the shop’s bell rang out into the early morning air.

The town was quiet. A thin layer of frost covered the windscreens of the cars parked along the road. The metal shutters were still pulled down over the other shop fronts. Temperance nestled down into her scarf and hurried up the deserted street. The lamp lights were starting to turn off as the sun began to rise, casting a hazy glow over Carwick. The only people already at work were her father and the office workers in the town hall. Bright lights shone from the old building. One morning like this was enough to exhaust her for weeks; she didn't envy them their early starts.

Temperance glanced back from the end of the road. Even though it had taken a few hours of work, it had been worth it. Her father was happy and Haven looked very festive with its artificial ivy and cotton wool snow.

As she turned the corner, a horrific sour smell hit her, like the putrid odour of an unwashed body mixed with stale mould. Lurching back with a gasp, she slid on a patch of ice near the gutters. A hand clamped onto her shoulder and stopped her fall. The stench got worse. An acidic wave of vomit-tinged hot breath hit her face. She strained away from it, pressing her sleeve over her nose and stumbling back.

A man was hunched over against the cold; his shredded clothes no protection against the weather. His skin was grey and lined with dirt. A long tangled beard and strands of greasy hair were plastered to his face. His eyes pierced through her and he shuffled closer. Another wave of his foul odour wafted over her. She gagged.

“Bloody hell...”

Temperance coughed and her eyes started to water. She stepped back and put up a hand to ward him off. She hadn't thought he'd heard her, but he growled and stalked forward.

Temperance gritted her teeth, trying to stop from dry heaving. She threw up her fists, remembering what she could from the one self-defence class she'd ever attended.

The man froze.

He lifted his chin, sniffing the air. A strangled whine erupted from his throat. The hair on the back of Temperance's neck stood up. With no warning, he loped back down the road and disappeared.

Temperance dropped her arms and rearranged her scarf, her fingers came away wet. When she brought them closer, she saw blood. She whipped the scarf off and threw it away in a panic. There was no telling what she could have caught from him. Her heart-spiced up as she struggled to scrub her hands with a tissue. Biting her lip, she glanced down the way he had disappeared.

She wondered how badly hurt he was. Maybe that was why he had approached her; to get help. She could only hope that he would find it somewhere else. Taking a deep breath, she hitched up her bag and hurried away.

Chapter 2



The university campus was mostly deserted. A flock of birds pecking at the frozen ground scattered into flight when Temperance entered the square. There was only one other student nearby; he was cycling slowly ahead towards the sports hall. In front of the main buildings was a bronze statue of the college's founder with his stone wig covered in bird droppings. A few of the younger lecturers wandered past it with their leather briefcases, still lost in an early morning stupor.

Temperance strolled to the side of the square towards the administration offices. She already knew when she reached for the thick door knob, that they were closed. The grubby windows, half-blocked by stacks of paperwork, were dark. She jiggled the handle, before sagging back with a heavy sigh.

Her mother had signed her up for a class she wanted to drop. It started next term and she was dreading it. The bag hanging from her shoulder slipped to the ground. She pulled it back up with a dramatic huff.

She'd have to come back later.

To fill the time until they opened, she walked out of the courtyard through the large gatehouse to the twenty-four hour shop. The shop was small and grimy. It had a glass door with a loose pane that rattled when it opened and the filthy windows looked as if they'd been wiped with a dirty rag. A girl with red hair was flicking through a magazine at the old stained counter. There was a small fretwork tattoo at the base of her neck.

"Morning Temperance." She gave a lazy salute without looking up. "You're in early."

"Morning."

Temperance tried to discreetly catch a glimpse of the girl's employee badge. She came in almost every day and could never remember her name. The moment for asking it had long passed. Now, she just had to try and avoid using it.

She stopped at the coffee stand. A short man was setting it up. He looked up at her, then flicked the machine on with a grunt. After a few minutes she had her hands around a warm plastic cup. She handed over the exact amount as a handful of coins. The man snorted, spilling the coins out on the table to count them. Temperance hovered near his shoulder, waiting for him to finish. With a sigh, he waved her off.

“See you again,” the girl at the counter murmured as Temperance left.

Her stroll back to the front square was uneventful. She slumped onto a cold bench near the statue. Something inside her bag rattled, she squeezed her eyes shut with a sigh. She shuffled up on the bench, digging into her bag.

Her eyes darted around as she dug out the plastic pillbox and tapped out two white tablets. She gulped them down with a swig of coffee. There was a rustle of leaves in a flowerbed beside her. She stuffed the box into her pocket.

“Hello dear!”

An old woman was in the bushes, waving a soil-caked trowel at her. Clumps of dirt tumbled off of it to land on her tartan jacket, while stray leaves snagged in her wiry grey hair.

“Professor Corliss.” Temperance smiled in greeting.

The woman was obscured and caught in place by an overgrown hedge but her eyes were darting around in excitement. “I have some interesting specimens for our class later.”

Temperance nodded politely.

That was another course her mother had signed her up for; plant toxicology. Adora had gotten swept up in the name, imagining potions, poisons and magic. Once she realised it was more scientific than that she had lost interest, but Temperance had been stuck doing it.

She wouldn't let it happen again.

Someone dropped down into the seat beside her. She spilled her drink, shuffling away. She wiped at the splash mark and glared at the two empty benches across from her.

“Are you Temperance Levinthal?”

She glanced up. A dark-haired man she'd never met before was staring at her. His striking eyes were black. She blinked; he was very handsome with strong features and a shadow of stubble along his jaw. He shifted his elbows onto his knees and leaned forward. His fitted leather jacket creaked.

Temperance cleared her throat. “Yes?”

“I'm Alastair Byron.” He shot her a smile.

Temperance sat back and took a sip of coffee, staring openly at him. People didn't just sit down and talk to her. It took her a second to notice his outstretched hand before she reached forward and shook it. His skin was warm next to her cold fingers. He had a strong grip. His palms were calloused, rough.

"We've never met," she muttered.

"Your father gave Cyprian a picture. There were instructions on the back to give it to me."

Temperance pursed her lips. She could only imagine what Pratchett had written. She gulped down the rest of her coffee.

Alastair studied her. "You're not surprised. Did someone tell you I was coming?"

"Pratchett." She tossed the empty cup into the bin.

"Would you like another drink?"

Temperance stretched out her cold arms. "No thanks. I'm just waiting for the administration offices to open. I can't afford to miss them again. I want to drop a class."

"What class?" Alastair produced a crumpled page from his pocket.

"Ancient magic and myths." She blushed, it was embarrassing to even say it.

"I'm in that one. You don't believe in magic? Vampires and werewolves?" he asked with a curious frown. "I thought it was popular these days."

"I hate all that fantasy stuff. It's more my mother's thing." Temperance gave a dismissive wave. "You know, mother spirits, earth goddesses, goat sacrifices, that sort of thing."

"Goat sacrifices?"

"I'm joking," she said in a dry voice. "I'm not very good at small talk."

Alastair coughed and looked down. He folded away the timetable.

Temperance sighed and tried again. "You're moving here for good?"

"I'm thinking about it," he inhaled, his broad shoulders lifting. He settled back and folded his arms. "This is a trial. No one was supposed to know yet."

"You can't keep a secret in Carwick. Any news is gossip."

"Is that right?" Alastair smirked.

Temperance shrugged. She felt him watching as she got up to check the administration office doors. They were still shut tight. She collapsed back onto the bench. It was freezing.

Alastair continued to stare at her. She struggled to say something. His eyes dropped to her open collar, she put a hand up to touch it.

He cleared his throat. "Stay in the class, Temperance, we can study together."

She bit her lip and swallowed. "Maybe."

“Good,” he said, assuming she had agreed. Staring at him, she felt her heart sink. She didn’t know what to say. He pressed his hands to his knees, about to stand up. “Then -”

A door slammed behind them.

Two men emerged from a side office that was connected to the main façade of the university’s gatehouse, which was a tall imposing stone archway, hundreds of years old. The two of them were in the middle of an argument. Temperance easily recognised Cyprian Rothwell.

The other man had a trim beard and was dressed in a three-piece suit with a cane to match. He loomed over the much shorter Cyprian with a threatening expression.

“Sebastian Bloodworth,” Temperance whispered. “What’s he doing here?”

“The mayor?” Alastair asked, turning around.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “How’d you know that?”

“I have been here before.” He pressed his knuckles against the bench until they were white. His eyes were riveted on the men.

Cyprian shook his head. Sebastian slammed his walking stick into the ground. Its capped silver end struck against the cobblestones. There was a tiny blue flare, like a match lighting. The stone beneath them seemed to tremble for a moment.

Temperance gasped. “Did you see...? Did you feel that?”

Her hand flexed, almost diving for her pills. Without thinking she grabbed Alastair’s arm instead. She jerked back with a yelp, receiving a sharp electric shock from his sleeve.

“No. I didn’t feel or see anything,” Alastair glared at her. His eyes seemed to gleam for a moment.

Temperance blinked; her imagination again. She drew away from him.

“Sorry.” She rubbed her hand with a frown, hoping she wasn’t ending up like her father. She glanced back at the two men. “I wonder why...”

Sebastian turned, like he knew they were there. Temperance sucked in a sharp breath. She met his cold eyes. It felt like she was pinned in place, being examined like a lab specimen.

The mayor said something. Cyprian glanced over at her. He strolled towards them while Sebastian disappeared through the main archway. She watched his approach. As usual, Cyprian was immaculately dressed, like a prim and proper country gentleman; however the image was ruined by his stocky build and unkempt shaggy hair.

When her father’s friend reached them, he wore a forced smile. He was still very pale. Temperance leaned back and crossed her arms.

“Is everything all right, Cyprian?” Alastair asked.

He stood up. Temperance hadn't realised how tall he was. She watched their exchange. It was like a silent conversation was passing between them. Cyprian shot his nephew a warning frown.

"Of course," he replied.

Her unexplained dislike of the man rose up. He was a good friend to her father. It was his only redeeming quality. She bent to pick up her bag, feeling a little hemmed in.

"Temperance, how have you been? I'm sure you were delighted to hear about our Alastair's return." The older man struggled to try and put an arm around Alastair's shoulders. Failing to reach, he hung his arm in an awkward way almost like he was climbing him.

"I'm having a welcome dinner for him, I want you to come and stay the night. You can use the spare room." He gave his nephew a sharp pat on the back.

Alastair's expression darkened, he didn't seem too pleased by the idea. Neither was Temperance. She trawled through her ready-made excuses to find an appropriate one.

She eyed Professor Corliss who was still digging in the cold soil.

"I don't..."

"Ah!" Cyprian wagged his finger at her. "I don't want to hear no. Alastair needs new friends in Carwick. And your father insisted you be his first! It's a chance to escape your house tonight. Pratchett says it will be packed, isn't there a get-together?"

Temperance cringed.

Her parents were having friends over for a winter solstice gathering. She didn't think she could face another one of her mother's versions of a Wiccan party. It would be crowded with menopausal women dancing naked around plastic cauldrons on the hill behind their house.

She sighed. "It's true. I wouldn't mind missing the jangling crystals and saggy bits this year."

Cyprian hesitated then gave a sharp laugh. He slapped Alastair on the shoulder again, more forceful this time. "Good. It's settled, see you tonight!"

He marched away. Alastair turned to follow him. He glanced over at her. "You're so sweet and delicate looking. It's a surprise you talk like that."

Temperance blushed, she pulled at her sleeve. "Yes, well..."

There was a flash of amusement in Alastair's dark eyes. "I'll see you later."

He strode forward, catching up with his uncle in a few long steps.