
Prologue

Lydia Comier reached over and checked the time, 3:17 a.m. as usual. Every morning like clockwork her eyes popped open at 3:17 a.m., it started when she was ten years old, hours before she had heard the singing in the woods for the first time. It was also the first day she noticed excitedly that the mark on her wrist pulsed and glowed like her great grandmother Cloella's and cousin Mila's did. It was also the first time her mother, Tilli Comier, called her evil and slapped her for being disobedient.

In the beginning she would lie in bed staring at the ceiling for hours trying to force herself back to sleep. When it kept happening, no matter what she did, she decided to use the time wisely and began to secretly study and practice ancestral magic with her cousin, something her mother and Aunt Belle would never allow.

After she graduated from college and moved to Mississippi, to be closer to Mila, she felt as if all of her dreams were coming true. Almost like she received a clean slate by leaving all of the stares and whispers from her family and about her family in Forsyth County Georgia where they belonged.

Unfortunately, it didn't take long for the whispers to follow her and surface in Jackson and trouble soon followed.

As if their 'gift' wasn't strange enough, one thing the cousins found out early on was the more of 'them' from the family there were, the stronger the power and ignoring it just wasn't something the cousins had been able to do, even if they had wanted to.

Even without their mothers and grandmother's disapproving mutters and stares and occasional tosses of holy water, they had been careful and practiced in private but not one of them was surprised when they were found out and all hell broke loose.

It all started because their nosy, overly religious landlord took it upon herself to save their souls when she found out they didn't attend church. Even going so far as to start poking around in their apartment claiming to have heard water running. She saw their office with the altar lined with crystals and colored candles, the small tabletop greenhouse of herbs and their book of ancestors and panicked.

By the time they got home that evening she had the entire block in an uproar calling them Satan worshipers and witches. One deranged old man had demanded to know where they were holding his dead wife's soul. The crazy part was, she had passed a year before they even moved there!

So much for her dreams of a normal life and love someday. In a matter of hours she found herself right back in the middle of the crazy life she was born into and never asked to be a part of.

After that, every strange and inexplicable, seemingly supernatural thing was blamed on her and Mila. Mila eventually lost her job as a first-grade teacher because of it. While they were busy fighting their new neighbors' attacks neither one of them realized that real danger had come to Jackson to find them until it was too late and Mila gave her life to stop it.

LYDIA STOPPED TYPING and looked over her shoulder suddenly as a feeling of dread and sadness began to swirl around her, sucking the cool air-conditioned air from her office. The smell of red clay dirt, wet from torrential rain filled the room, along with the sound of whistling wind.

“No, no, no! Please not here!” Lydia sat back in her chair, gripping the sides tightly and began to chant, her eyes shut tight, while the room around her rocked and swayed.

She felt the surge of both the unknown and familiar begin to wrap around her like strangling vines, turning her office chair into her prison.

She could hear her cousin Mila’s voice whispering in her ear, “Don’t fear it, Lydia, you know what to do! Control it! Control it before it begins to control you!”

Taking a deep cleansing breath she chanted louder and her thoughts cleared, first came a spell of calm, then one for sight and understanding.

Slowly her breathing began to return to normal, she felt herself becoming still while the feeling of chaos ripped through her office.

She opened her eyes and was staring into the face of her beautiful cousin, Mila.

Her eyes were the color of honey and amber, her face was round, expressive and kind. Her hair was cut in a stylish short bob, she was dressed in a stylish pantsuit in her favorite shade of violet, the pantsuit they had buried her in.

“Why are you here, Mila?” Lydia asked, sounding calmer than she actually felt, immediately remembering her cousin’s promise the day she died.

Her office sounded like the eye of a hurricane hovered over it, she stared out and saw with no surprise that her other colleagues on the floor were unaffected by it.

“Silly question considering the last time we talked, I told you I would always be with you but only come to you for one reason and one reason only.” Mila touched the mark on the inside of her wrist which was pulsating with dim light.

“You can’t be serious, Mila! There is just no way!” Lydia stood up covering her own wrist by pulling her shirt sleeve down over it, her heart pounding in fear.

Mila sighed and reached out taking Lydia’s hand exposing her wrist. “How long has it been doing this, Lyd?” An orange light swirled and pulsated under her skin in time with her heartbeat, she noticed it a month ago but chose to ignore what it could possibly mean.

Lydia snatched her hand away, shaking her head, refusing to believe what her cousin was trying to tell her was true.

“But you died, Mila. You died to protect us, so how? How can—” Lydia stopped before she said it out loud.

“I don’t know, Lyd, but now is not the time to hash all of that out. All I do know is you need to pull your head out of your ass and stop acting like this isn’t happening because it is!”

“Mila, obviously you were wrong! It didn’t work! Now you want me to risk my life, like you did, for nothing? Momma and Aunt Belle were right, we should have left this shit alone! It’s nothing but evil, Mila!” Lydia snapped, pacing back and forth, all she wanted was a normal life, was that too much to ask for? Shit! Obviously, it was because here she was *at work* trying her damndest not to freak out at the fact she was having a conversation with her dead best friend and cousin.

Mila’s eyes flashed angrily. “Our mothers leaving ‘this shit’ alone is how we ended up here in the first damn place! They told us to ignore and turn our back on it, called it evil, said it was from the devil, that we were inviting the bad spirits in when, in reality, practicing and understanding it is what was keeping them out! Grandma Lynn instilled fear in our mothers by dragging them to that crazy cult of a church to stomp it out

just like they tried to do to us but it didn't work. This doesn't just go away Lydia and if you ignore it, it will grow wild and take over, just like it did with Grandma Lynn and Aunt Tilli."

"My mom died because she overdosed on muscle relaxers, Mila not because of this!"

Lydia began to shake all over, trying to push the memory of her mother screaming, pacing back and forth, pulling at her hair, begging for 'them' to forgive her the night before she died.

"Lyd stop! You and I know why she took all those pills, because she was running from it and it wouldn't let her! Now I need you to stop running! I warned you this might happen, I told you if it happened it would be the only reason I would come to you and look at me. I am here, your cousin who has been dead for over five years is standing in your office talking to you like I just breezed in for a friendly visit. What does that tell you?" Mila asked her loudly, pointing at the swirl on her wrist.

"Oh my God!" Lydia stopped pacing and began using her breathing technique to calm down. This could not be happening, this was not supposed to happen!

Mila joined hands with her and together they formed a shield of golden light around Lydia.

"He's not coming, Lyd, he's here. He's here and he's after you, if you die, the power our ancestors cultivated, grew and died for, dies too. We can't let that happen, if it does then it was all for nothing, I died for nothing."

Lydia felt calmer and stronger in the shield but still panicked and unsettled at the same time.

"Mila, I'm not as disciplined as you or as strong as you, I never was, I can't do this by myself, you're not here with me every day," Lydia admitted fearfully as she watched Mila step out of the shield and begin to fade away.

"You are, Lyd, stronger even, you just have to open yourself up to it and embrace it. And I never left you, Cuzzo and I

never will, none of us have.” Mila turned her back to Lydia and joined the group of people who were now standing in Lydia’s office.

All of her ancestors smiled at her encouragingly giving her a surge of newfound strength, the mark on her wrist pulsed harder and glowed brighter than she ever thought it could.

“But I don’t even know where to begin, what do I do first?” Lydia asked, trying her best to quiet her troubled mind, the voices of self-doubt screamed telling her she couldn’t do this.

“Study, so you’re ready and stay alert, he’s out there looking and he will find you sooner rather than later,” Mila answered, sounding farther away.

“And when he gets here?” Lydia asked, tears rolling down her face as they faded away, she needed Mila to stay, she needed them all to stay, she was so tired of being all alone!

“You fight and you win. You will win, Lydia, we are here with you always,” Mila whispered in her ear as the winds in her office died down and completely disappeared.