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# THE COVEN

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## TRIGGER/CONTENT WARNINGS

*The Coven* is a dark paranormal romance with gothic vibes and a dark academia setting. The male lead in this series is pushy, domineering, and manipulative. He goes beyond my typical morally gray antihero and is in my opinion an actual villain who gets his happily ever after.

Triggers include:

- dubious consent
- forced feeding
- graphic violence
- rough and explicit sexual content
- forced proximity
- betrayal
- references to past abuse and traumatic reactions to triggering stimuli
- knife violence
- graphic depictions of blood
- physical harm inflicted upon the main character
- ritualistic murder

## ALARIC GRAYSON THORNE



In the 329 years since my making, I'd come to appreciate the finer things in life. The beauty of the meticulously cut colored glass in the arched windows and the prisms of light they cast over the dark stone tile of the halls at Hollow's Grove University was only one of those. It was not to be diminished by the tantalizing scent of witch's blood drifting from the messenger escorting me to the Tribunal room.

The Covenant wouldn't wait long for anyone, not even the male they'd appointed as the Headmaster of their precious school. Cobwebs and dust lined the pathway before us, and I turned up my nose at the way the university had fallen into disrepair since I'd last set foot in it fifty years prior.

The witch at my side stopped before the Tribunal gates at the end of the hall. She waved a well-manicured hand over the lock, watching as the iron-and-gold mechanism rotated until it parted. Gears turned slowly, the ripple effect sliding up until the rest of the locks followed suit. The bars latched across the seam where the two doors met finally retreated. The soft click of them opening a signal for the witch to grasp the handle.

"How many generations separate you and George Collins's sister?" I asked, forcing the witch to pinch her lips as she looked over her shoulder at me.

"Nine generations separate *the Covenant* and me," she said with a sneer.

The witches were always so testy when discussing what had become of their leaders, of the two witches who'd commanded them through the centuries.

Susannah Madizza and George Collins were no longer—replaced by the two halves of the Covenant when Charlotte Hecate raised them from their graves.

"A shame," I said with a grin. "Sarah Collins was quite lovely before she died. It is unfortunate she wasn't able to pass that along to her descendants."

The witch's face fell with shock as I stepped through the gate she opened. I turned to the right and moved toward the Tribunal room where the Covenant waited for me. My escort remained at the gates, the good little puppy her great-great-great-*whatever* grandmother had seen fit to raise her to become.

"You're one to talk, you undead bastard!" she called out behind me.

I adjusted the jacket of my suit, straightening the lapel as I grasped both the inner doors of the Tribunal and swiftly pulled them open.

The Covenant sat in the gilded chairs they'd had fashioned centuries ago, skeletal fingers grasping the arms as what had once been Susannah Madizza leaned forward. Her hood shifted to the side, allowing some of the sunlight shining through the kaleidoscope windows at the side of the circular chamber to illuminate what remained of her face.

The flesh had long since rotted from her body, leaving only the gaunt shape of a skeleton to stare back at me. Her neck tipped at an unnatural angle where it had snapped when they hanged her, the slightest slant to the side displaying the manner of her death all those years ago.

Her eye sockets remained empty even as she somehow *saw* me. "Tormenting our children once again, Headmaster Thorne?" she

asked, that eerie, ageless voice stretching between us. She tapped the tip of her finger bone against the arm of her chair in a steady staccato that I felt like a strike to my impatience.

The other half of her magic sat beside her, the masculine equivalent to her feminine.

George Collins had no descendants to his name to be defensive of—not with the prophecy that determined the Coven’s rules, forcing male witches to make the Choice: children or their magic.

He was just as skeletal as Susannah, but his neck curved to the other side. What I could see of his bones revealed deep slash marks etched into them, lingering evidence of the torture he’d sustained in the hours before his death.

“I have to presume you did not summon me here to discuss my manners with your grandniece, Covenant,” I said, gritting my teeth.

My kind were not meant to be subservient to any, but the magic that kept us bound to the flesh of our Vessels made us reliant on the witches if we ever wanted to be freed from the bodies that trapped us.

We’d thought it a blessing to never need to possess a new form, to have a body that could hold us for an eternity.

We’d thought wrong.

“We have decided to reopen the university,” George said, speaking before his female counterpart could interject. “We all need fresh blood. The attention we suffered as a result of that day has long since faded from memory.”

“As much as I, too, would appreciate new blood to feed upon, I have to urge caution in opening our walls once more. Rumors will spread the moment we announce our reopening,” I said, looking between the two skeletons staring at me.

“Two generations of witches have been left to learn their magic in the privacy of their home,” Susannah said, rising from her throne. Her black cloak wrapped around her and hid her bones from view as she stepped down the dais stairs. “The time has

come for them to be properly educated. We will only open our doors to twelve new students from outside Crystal Hollow every year, and we have personally selected those who will join us based on the power we've detected. There will be no formal announcement." She held out a list, her messy cursive writing displaying the names of those she'd selected.

"What assurance do we have that we will not suffer a repeat of last time?" I asked, thinking only of the safety of my kind. While we were difficult to kill, some of us had been harmed in the massacre that had occurred fifty years prior, where someone had hunted down thirteen students of Hollow's Grove and a Vessel over the course of a week.

"If we do not open our doors once again, the witches will have no one left to breed with. If we die out, so will your kind. Do not forget that you require the blood of our people to sustain you, Alaric," Susannah said, turning her back on me and making her way to the throne that waited for her.

I gritted my teeth, forcing my body into the shallowest of bows. "As if you would ever allow me to forget such a thing," I said, crumpling the list in my hand. "Although perhaps you should focus more on the reason the population of witches has been dwindling faster than we anticipated. I wonder why that might be, Covenant?"

I turned my back on them without waiting for a response to the games we played, the muscle in my cheek jumping when they couldn't see it.

*Fucking witches.*

## WILLOW



*Two months later*

Whispered words called to me, lingering just out of reach. I couldn't make out more than the hushed sound of the dead, couldn't grasp the words they tried to speak to me.

Not even for the woman lying in the casket in front of me could I grab hold of the magic that was not yet mine in truth. If I kept my eyes closed long enough, maybe I would convince myself that the last week had been a dream. A phantom of a nightmare, a figment of my worst imagination, the very day I'd been raised for.

And the one I wanted nothing more than to escape.

The whispers at my back existed within a bubble, separate from the faint hum of my mother's voice, as if I'd managed to separate myself from the living in my attempt to hear her. Even as all the people who'd murmured behind my mother's back waited for their turn to say goodbye to the woman they would never understand, I couldn't force myself to pry my eyes open.

I stood with my feet shoulder width apart, a habit my father had ingrained in me all my life. Ready for anything, for a hunter to attack at any time—or something even worse. The tile beneath my shoes was unnatural, the separation it caused keeping me from touching the one thing that made my soul feel whole.

The dirt beneath my feet.

“Low,” a small voice said.

A hand slipped into mine, much smaller fingers intertwining in a pattern that we knew well. Ash stood at my side even after saying my name, giving me the chance to compose myself. To stop the force threatening to consume me. We’d kept my brother protected from the knowledge of what we were for his own safety, for what would await him if he ever discovered his magic and brought the Coven down on us.

I should have been the one to be strong for him. After all, it wasn’t only *my* mother who lay rotting in a casket for all to see, but his as well.

I forced my eyes open, staring at the pictures of our mother and our family. Smiling faces stared out at the crowd, looking deceptively human. As if we belonged here, when the only home we’d ever truly had wouldn’t have embraced us if they’d known what we were.

Humans had only so much capacity for understanding in their hearts. They tended to shy away from actual witchcraft, if the trials that had nearly wiped out my ancestors were any indication.

A single, slow look down to my mother’s face made me grimace, remembering why I’d closed my eyes to fight back my irritation.

Her lipstick was wrong. The color was far too red and brazen for my mother, who preferred to blend into the background. It was readily apparent that the person who’d been responsible for preparing her for her services hadn’t known her at all, covering the laugh lines she’d valued as a result of her happy, full life, free of the Coven that would have dragged her back to Crystal Hollow kicking and screaming.

It was bad enough she’d need to be buried according to human customs—her remains trapped in a box in the earth that kept her from the elements—unless my father upheld his end of the bargain. He was meant to sneak into the cemetery in the middle of the night while the grave was still fresh, lay her to her

final rest on top of the casket, and bury her all over again so that she could find peace.

I reached forward quickly, grasping the amulet she wore around her throat and pulling until the chain snapped. The amulet tore free as the whispering idiots behind me gasped in shock, but Ash was unbothered when I finally looked down to where he stood at my side.

His brown eyes were a perfect reflection of what I would have seen if my mother opened hers, so different from mine with our different fathers. He had the same deep mahogany hair that was so dark it was almost black, its warmth shimmering slightly in the too-bright lights of the funeral home.

“Let’s get out of here,” I said, nodding my head toward the entrance to the parlor. Ash nodded faintly, casting one last sparing look for our mother.

We both knew what came next. She’d given me very clear instructions on what to do with Ash when she finally succumbed to the illness that plagued her body, taking her from us bit by bit.

Ash released my hand, leading the way through the pews and carving his way toward the exit. He held his head high in a way that nearly made me smirk, his ferocity so reminiscent of Mom’s. I repressed it as the people around me whispered of the death that followed us, of the fact that everyone who seemed to grow too close to my brother and me ended up in an early grave.

Magic had a way of burning through a witch’s surroundings if they didn’t satisfy it with use, and then eventually it would turn on the witch herself if ignored for too long.

As it had with my mother.

Mud covered the white tiles on the floor as we approached the exit, lingering on the bottom of the shoes of those who’d entered to bid farewell to my mother, Flora Madizza.

It was fitting in a way, I supposed. Soon enough, Flora would return to the earth from which she came. She would be placed

into the dirt when my father fulfilled her last request. Finally, she would be at home in the place that gave her peace, her power absorbed back into the nature that called to us.

A hand wrapped around my forearm as I walked toward the exit, following behind my brother as he hurried to escape the stifling, suffocating oppression of being in a room with so many who didn't like us. He might not have understood the fear so many had of us, but he saw it no less.

My head snapped to the side, glaring at the man who grabbed me. His fingers tightened on my arm for a moment before he swallowed.

"It's customary for you to remain so that the town may pay their respects and offer you condolences," he said, watching as my eyes trailed down his chest and to the hand that touched me without permission.

He removed it slowly, feigning ease, as if he'd only released me because he was good and ready. I flicked my eyes back up to his, smiling crookedly when he flinched from the eye contact with what he probably deemed to be a demon. I'd seen the eerie stare every time I looked in the mirror. The amber of one eye was natural enough, if not paired with the faint violet of my left eye. Most assumed it was an odd shade of blue, unusual but not unheard-of. It was only in close proximity that people realized the truth.

A gift from my father's lineage—a trait that had faded away centuries prior.

"When have I ever cared for your *customs*, Mr. Whitlock?" I asked, pulling my loose gray cardigan tighter around myself as the wave of his distrust washed over me. I turned to face where my brother waited at the exit, pursing my lips as I took the first step toward him.

They would do what they wanted with my mother's body from here, and I would continue to exact her wishes as she'd requested. Ash pressed into my side when I reached him, then tugged open the door to allow him to walk through. I cast a lone glance back

toward my mother's casket, knowing that soon there would be no turning back.

Without my mother's wards, the destiny my parents had chosen would come for me whether I wanted it or not.



Get your things," I said, swallowing past the surge of emotion that seemed to clog my throat. The humans in town often called it a frog in the throat because of the hoarseness. I'd never understood the analogy, instead feeling as if it were grave dirt coming to claim me from the inside.

"I don't want to go," Ash pleaded, staring up at me as I swung the front door closed behind me. It closed easily, so at odds with the way the wood swelled in the humidity of summer, making it difficult to squeeze into the frame. I spun, giving Ash my back as I clicked the dead bolt into place and drew the chain across the gap that let in far too much of the unseasonable air.

September wasn't usually so cold, even in our little town in the mountains of Vermont.

I kicked off the black flats I'd worn for Mom's service, nudging them to the side as I turned back to face my brother. Even with Mom gone, even knowing that soon enough this house would sit empty and forgotten, I couldn't bring myself to disobey her rules.

Rules that she no longer cared for.

Tears stung my eyes as I bent forward, touching my mouth to Ash's forehead. I felt him sigh beneath the touch, his gaze holding mine when I pulled back.

"You know we can't stay here," I explained, wrapping an arm around his shoulder. I tugged him out of the cramped entryway, heading toward the stairwell at the entrance to the living room.

He shrugged me off, rounding on me with his face twisted into a scowl. "Why not? Why won't you tell me where you're going?"

I closed my eyes, knowing that the secrecy my mother had sworn me to was for his own protection. I just wished I could make him understand, that he could see just how little I cared for the duty they'd given me.

If I'd had it my way, destiny could kiss my ass.

"I'll tell you when you're older. I promise," I explained, heading for the stairwell.

I placed my hand on the old walnut railing and glanced up toward my bedroom as I took the first step. The urge to bury myself beneath the blankets was all-consuming; to hide away from the world, from the responsibilities and the expectations pressing down on me.

"You've been saying that for years! When?"

I ran my hands over my face, moving down from the step and squatting in front of Ash. "When you're sixteen, I'll tell you everything. I promise."

"Why not now?" he asked, his bottom lip trembling.

Our mother had never meant to have another child, not after the reality of what I was and what that would mean for those closest to me. The least we could do was protect him with everything we had—even if it meant abandoning him to people he barely knew in the process.

Living with his father's family was far better than dying alongside me in this stupid, foolish duty that I couldn't seem to escape.

"I wouldn't leave you if I had a choice. Please believe that," I said, taking his hands in mine. I squeezed them tightly, and I knew from the tears pooling in his eyes that he did. All his life, he'd been my entire world. He'd been the one my mother used to motivate me to practice the magic that felt so distant at first.

The promise of protecting him was all I needed to know to believe that it was worth it.

"So come with me," he said, sinking his teeth into his bottom lip. "My dad will take care of you until you find a new job. You know he will."

He would. Ash's father wasn't like my own. He was human, good and patient, loving and warm. He was everything a father should have been, and it was only due to our mother's need for secrecy that he hadn't been able to spend more time with his son. In contrast, my witch father had been allowed to spend far too much time with me, molding me into the perfect instrument for revenge through whatever means necessary. There was no affection between us, no warmth or love.

I was nothing but a means to an end to the man who had sired me for one purpose only.

But Ash's father couldn't protect me against what was coming, and worse yet, he couldn't protect Ash from the danger of being at my side when it did.

"It isn't that easy, Bug," I said, the term of endearment I hadn't used in months rolling off my tongue. It was the name Mom called him, but her illness had taken her ability to speak in the end.

Using it without her had seemed wrong.

Mom's coat seemed to sway on the rack as if a phantom breeze passed through the house, sending a chill up my spine. A reminder of how impossible it would be for me to go with them when they came. As the last remaining Madizza witch, my place at Hollow's Grove was assured if they wanted to continue Susanah's bloodline.

"It could be. Just promise me. Promise me that no matter where we go, we'll go together," he said, burrowing further into my chest. I pulled him tighter, swallowing past the burn in my throat and resisting the urge to snifle.

I did the one thing I'd sworn never to do.

"I promise, Bug," I said, squeezing him tighter.

I lied.