



Ascendent

A. CROWLEY

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Chapter One

Of Tinctures and Tiffs

Lemon cleaning spray in my left hand and sock on my right, I strode through my mother's shop. I dusted the shelves, polished the bottles, and noticed that I needed to restock the rose toner. I lined up the pomade, straightened the sage, and reminded myself that I needed to order more rose quartz. Another Saturday spent this way, after another first week of school. This was my life, rote as it was.

I pushed my sister's filthy boot covered feet off the forest green Victorian chaise as I walked by to open the heavy, brocade curtains. I was taking in one of the last good days of summer, when I heard a hiss behind me. I turned to give back one of my own. Remus, the tabby who was always occupying my sister's lap, had managed to lift himself up and complain about the sun. Her softly cooing his name along with a good pet sent him right back down; but his usual glare was a little bit stronger.

Bemused, I squatted and set the cleaning supplies back in the cupboard hidden behind the chaise. I peeked over the arm and saw Fig had already put her feet back on, and Remus was still glaring at me. I reached out to scratch under his chin, easy because of my gangly limbs, while simultaneously pushing Fig's feet off again. Remus turned his head away in disdain.

"Oh, c'mon, fatness. How is anyone supposed to shop if they can't see?" The glare was back, along with a rather indignant meow.

“You can’t help it if you’re a creature of the night, can you?” Fig cooed to him. He meowed plaintively, and head-butted her chin. She smushed the beast’s face with hers, while she pulled her legs back up. I reflexively pushed them back down.

“At least take your boots off.” She could meet me halfway.

“No, that’s unsanitary.” I sighed in exasperation and took the cleaning spray back out. If she wasn’t going to leave her feet on the floor, I was going to clean her damn boots. I sprayed at her boots, causing Remus to yowl in a panic and race up Fig to squat on her head. He stared unblinkingly at the bottle in my hand, waiting for the next attack.

“Was that really necessary?” Fig struggled to lift the tons of sensitive cat off of her head. He relaxed and allowed himself to be lifted once he saw that I had put the bottle back.

“Yep.” I rested my chin on the arm, only to see Fig wiping her boots on the chaise. I lowered my head and groaned into the velvet. “I give up.” My words were muffled by the fabric.

“As you should.” There was no hiding her gloating. Not that she tried to.

I rolled my eyes as I pushed up from the floor. She was in the kind of mood where arguing with her would get me absolutely nowhere. I swear, I think she fed off annoying me. Giving up the good fight, I went to unlock the door. I had just flipped the sign from closed to open, when I heard the snick of a silver zippo flicking open and clicking closed. I sent her a pointed look over my shoulder.

“Fig.” I said warningly.

“Sabine?” Overly innocent green eyes peeked through black curls. As though she had absolutely no idea she shouldn’t cast

inside; and absolutely no recollection of where all the myriad burn marks on the chaise had come from.

“The lighter.” She rolled her eyes, flung it down, and went back to petting Remus. Of all the familiars I had seen in my life, he was by far the most ridiculous. A mound of fat and fur on disproportionately skinny legs, with a scar that slashed through his right eye. A souvenir from the fight Fig had saved him from as a kitten. But, he loyally adored her; and that was all I would want. Even if he was a spoiled, prissy, lump.

I settled myself at the counter, getting ready for another long day. Morrigan, my crow, flew down from her shelf and landed on my shoulder as the bell above the door tinkled. She had become my familiar in a significantly less dramatic way than Remus had become Fig’s. She had flown into my room one day, perched herself on my crib, and refused to leave. She had been by my side ever since. She nuzzled the side of my head and I stroked her neck in response.

“Hey, you.” My shoulders stiffened and I slowly raised my eyes up. “Do you have anything that doesn’t smell, like, dirty?” The American dream of blonde, bodily perfection had been created without scientific assistance; and she had marred her perfect face with a sneer just for little old me. And wherever she went, her male carbon copy hulked in the background. Taylor Abrahamson and Elias Ayers, living, breathing embodiment of the American stereotype. My shoulders began to hunch on instinct. I had gotten through all of my many years of school by keeping my head down and not making waves. But, the thought of kowtowing to her here, in my home, made me sick to my stomach. I forced myself to straighten my shoulders.

“It’s not dirt, it’s vetiver.” I fleetingly felt proud that I managed to keep my voice strong and clear. I decided to bypass that I hadn’t managed to make eye contact, and instead looked

at the space over her shoulder. I guess I couldn't get enough of cherry wood shelves.

"Whatever." She rolled her eyes. "You have to have something better. Go look." She commanded.

"Everything is homemade." I explained. Years of practice kept me civil. "There isn't anything else."

The sneer deepened and she threw the bottle she had been holding on the floor, spraying glass and serum all over the pale oak floors. "No wonder you're such an ugly bitch, you use this dirty shit." She smiled in haughty satisfaction. I looked at the glass and serum puddling around her feet, aghast, but jerked my head up at the shrillest shriek I had ever heard in my life. Morrigan had flown into Taylor's hair, and she was violently batting at my beloved familiar in a panic.

"Morrigan." I called softly. She stopped and stared at me, head cocked to the side. I jerked my head up towards her shelf. She landed on my shoulder instead, and I gave her the side eye for mostly ignoring me. I felt stared at, and peeked out of the corner of my eye to see Ken's, I mean Elias's, eyes flitting between myself and Morrigan in fascination. Great. More ammo to annihilate the freak.

"I'm suing! Your bird attacked me!" I fleetingly wondered how Taylor could maintain such an eardrum piercing decibel.

"Just be glad it was the bird." Fig flicked her zippo open. "I wouldn't be called off so easily." The lighter clicked and burst, illuminating her deranged smirk. I lowered my head and exhaled loudly through my nose. Trust her to make it worse.

"Listen to me you crazy bitch." Now, this was the Taylor I was familiar with, the one beneath the saccharine mask others saw. She jabbed her finger in Fig's direction. Remus tensed,

ready for a fight; while Fig looked barely interested. “You are nothing. And, when I’m done with you, you’ll wish you could go back to being nothing.” Fig gave her an ‘are you stupid?’ look, and went back to her lighter. Remus let out an angry snarl and, with an agility that was belied by his size, leaped off Fig’s lap. Before he could get close, Elias dragged her by the wrist to the door; dropping two twenties and a last look at me on the way. “Let’s just go.” He muttered. The bell jingled happily, a disconnected sound from their departure.

“Maybe your red hair isn’t a lie after all.” Fig piped up.

“What?” What did that have to do with anything?

“You know what those biddies at the coven are always saying.” She waved her arms around dramatically. “Oh, Regan, Fig looks just like you; it’s a shame she wasn’t born an Earth witch too.” There’s no doubt our mother would have preferred that. “Sabine should have been born a Fire witch, all that red hair.” Dramatics done, she flopped back onto the chaise. I laughed and shook my head, unable to imagine Fig with the temperament of an Earth witch. She was Fire, through and through.

“And here I thought you didn’t listen to those old biddies.” I set Morrigan on the counter. “How are your wings?” I lifted each wing and felt through her feathers. She squawked in response and bashfully lowered her head. Like any witch and her familiar, we shared personality traits. Unlike Fig and Remus, neither one of us had explosive tempers; we were just protective. That’s why, If Taylor had hurt her, I was going to rip every single strand of her precious hair from her head.

“So, do you want me to set her on fire?” The question was punctuated by yet another flick. I gave her a stern warning look.

“She’s not worth it.” And I meant it. What had just happened wasn’t beyond anything I wasn’t already used to dealing with, so it didn’t even register enough for me to find it upsetting. However, Fig going to any kind of extreme would.

“Who cares if I get excommunicated? I don’t care what anyone says about hippies; most of the ones we know are dried up old hags.” I chuckled.

“True, and I have no doubt you’d enjoy excommunication. But, it would be beyond using Fire against another, Fig.”

“So?” Failing, as ever, to be objective and see my point.

“So? So, you’d be harming an outsider; and she would have no qualms about trying to press charges.”

“Yeah, because it’s so likely she’d succeed.” Right, forget gas, you can only use magic to set someone on fire.

“That’s not the point, and you know it.” You could die went unspoken, though Fig knew me well enough to know that was my biggest worry. Even though it hadn’t happened in over a century, it didn’t mean it couldn’t. Fire was the hardest element to control, and some witches, if they weren’t careful, ended up being controlled by it. She rolled her eyes and I rolled mine in turn. As much as I loved her, my little sister had always been too hot headed to have any sense.

“Is she always such a bitch to you?” I shrugged. I had one year of high school left, what did it matter now? She leaned back and pet Remus absentmindedly.

“Why don’t you make a hole for her to fall in? No one could ever link that back to you.” She was wide eyed with excitement at what she, undoubtedly, considered a genius plan. I slumped on the counter and groaned into the wood in frustration. I honestly believed brick walls were less immovable.

“Are you sure I can’t set her on fire?”

“Fig!” I growled and threw my hands up, which caused Morrigan to fly away with an indignant squawk. “Just go practice your casting.”

“I don’t want to.” She had, uncoincidentally, dug her heels into the couch and crossed her arms defiantly.

“Now.” I pointed to the back room. She needed to practice anyway; her sixteenth birthday would get here sooner than she thought, and her casting had to be perfect. It wasn’t an over exaggeration to say the Daughters of Cerridwen, our Elders, had impossible standards. Though, my mother was bound to be gentler on Fig than she was on me. Call it a gut feeling. She hopped off the chaise and stomped to the back; mocking me as she went. Remus wound himself between her legs, and I wondered, not for the first time, how she managed to never trip. The door slammed behind her and I heaved a deep sigh. I slumped against the counter and rubbed the pressure point between my eyes; simultaneously wishing for this day to be over and already dreading the next.

Chapter Two

Of Routine and Resignation

“Do you have everything you need for school?” My mother asked, solely directing the question at Fig. It was moments like these where I wanted to stand up, push the dishes aside, and scream ‘I’m your daughter too! See me!’. Even then, I doubt she would pay attention.

“Yeah. Do you?” Fig asked me. She always tried to make up for our mother. There was no hiding the guilt she felt when I was ignored, and the anger when I wasn’t. I nodded, and she intentionally bumped her knee with mine, as opposed to the unplanned bumping that occurred from both of us shoving our legs under the tiny table, and lifted the right corner of her mouth at me. She had always found it impossible to fake a smile, but I appreciated the effort she took for me nonetheless.

“How was the store today?” Our mother asked her. Fig looked at me, waiting for direction. I minutely shook my head. I could handle invisibility today more than I could handle ire. Regardless of the situation, I would be at fault. I was always at fault and was always found lacking.

“We’re out of rose quartz.” I mumbled. My mother briefly glanced at me, then turned back to Fig.

“Fine.” After all these years, I still hadn’t become immune to the hurt. My one lifeline to assuaging it was to leave the minute I graduated. But, it still didn’t change the fact that I looked like my father and I suffered for it.

“And the stock of toner is low.” I added. My voice was always quiet, flat and lacking emotion, and my head was always

downturned. I hated that my immediate response to her was to be complacent and deferential. As though that would inspire her to love me.

“Pick and dry more sage too.” She ordered and I nodded. Old habits die hard. Hard, slowly, and painfully. The silence that followed was broken by Faolan, my mother’s wolf hound mutt, when he threw his head back and howled; then proceeded to look straight at me. I was always uneasy when he did. His frigid blue eyes made his stare as cold as my mother’s, and his attention had never boded well for me. He had been a barnacle the day my dad left. The phone ringing broke our stare down.

My mother pushed away from the table, and opened the ornate sliding door separating the kitchen and the store. She made a point of closing it behind her, and I stared at the carved and lacquered cherry wood until my eyes lost focus. I minutely shook my head and, having since lost my appetite, picked up my plate and hers. I slumped at the sink after the few steps to the counter, while Fig tossed her plate on it. I placed my hand on it, before the mini earthquake she created sent all the other dishes flying.

“Don’t worry about it.” Fig’s cocked her head and narrowed her eyes while she studied me. It was a face I was more than familiar with; one she made when she was concerned about my wellbeing and she knew I would brush her off. It had been making almost daily appearances lately.

“I’m not worrying.” I tried to keep my voice light, even though my mind was racing with the worst possibilities, but I must have failed. Her frown deepened and a crease formed between her eyebrows.

“Yes, you are.” A simple sentence, but everything about it screamed ‘you can’t fool me’.

“I’m not.” I insisted.

“I know you think that dog of hers,” she made a face at him over her shoulder, “foretells your doom; but it’s just you overthinking it. Besides, what’s the worst that could happen?”

“Finn is visiting for Mabon.” My mother announced.

“Never mind, my mistake.” She muttered.

“He plans to stay until your eighteenth birthday.” I turned on the hot water and filled the sink with soap. “He will be announcing his intentions to marry you, when you’re ready.” When you’re ready; code for the minute you graduate. I kept a death grip on the sponge, and vigorously began washing a plate; in anticipation of what I knew, without a doubt, would come out of her mouth next.

“I expect you to say yes.” There it was. It didn’t matter that I was a year away from graduating and Finn was only a year older than me, meaning both of us were way too young to even be thinking about getting married, my coven and his coven had always known his feelings for me. Announcing an engagement was just a formality, a way to lock it down. A way to make sure I didn’t find somebody else. My mother made sure that I was well aware my lack of reciprocation didn’t matter. Marriages within any coven happened very rarely, mainly because guys were rarely in one, and it would be selfish of me to jeopardize that. Besides, he understood my life, and wouldn’t leave me because of it. Look at what happened with my father. So, I should thank my stars for bringing me so much luck. Because I was so very lucky. Lucky, lucky, lucky. All of this rhetoric had been shoved down my throat until I could regurgitate it verbatim.

“Everyone will be so happy.” So, remember, what you want doesn’t really matter. Of the many ways I paid for my father’s

sins, this was the worst. It wasn't as though Finn wasn't a good person. He was my friend and I did love him; but, I knew I would never be in love with him. It wasn't even marriage itself that was the problem, it was the robbery of my choice.

"Why does she have to?" Fig was already riled up; I hoped this would be the one occasion she stormed off, as opposed to her tendency to explode and make things twenty times worse.

"It's for the good of the Coven." I don't think I had ever heard her speak down to Fig before.

"So, it doesn't matter that it's not any good for her?" She countered.

"I would prefer you didn't discuss matters you don't understand." The condescension that was usually reserved for me dripped off her voice. Unsurprisingly, this was the one and only topic that would cause her to treat Fig almost as well as me. I heard Fig's boot slam against the cabinet door.

"I understand plenty." She muttered. The back door slammed behind her. My mother exhaled loudly through her nose, an idiosyncrasy I had inherited.

"You will say yes." She commanded. I nodded, dutiful daughter that I am. Spineless and self-loathing.

"Good." The clack of paws against the wood followed her. I looked at my hands, wrinkled, dripping, and shaking, and felt utterly helpless. In the back of my mind, I knew this had always been my fate; but now that it was here I felt trapped. Had it really only been a few hours ago that I felt my life was rote, and would never change? I would give anything to go back to that, no matter how futile I knew it to be. Our fate was our fate, and there was no fighting the tide it rode on.

Chapter Three

Of Shifting and Staring

“Tay Tay!” I dropped my head in my locker and rolled my eyes. Just one more year and I’d never have to hear those squeals again. “Ohmygod, what happened to your hair?”

“The freak.” I felt five pairs of squinted eyes on me, which was much more effective in a group as opposed to singularly. I grabbed my English book and rested my head against the shelf. Just one more year and I wouldn’t have to hear exceedingly clever insults ever again. Just one more year; and no more plaid polyester, hunched shoulders, and wishing for it to be over. Just one more year and I’ll be married. My mantra of ‘one more year’ came to a screeching halt. I think I oversold myself on high school finally ending.

“What did she do?” Whichever one it was sounded like she was afraid to ask.

“She set birds on me because I wanted to buy something from that dirty shop her mother owns.” Taylor sounded as though she was on the brink of tears, liar.

“Ohmygod, are you okay?” This one sounded horrified.

“No.” Sniffle, sniffle. “I don’t even know what I did.” She was full on wailing now. “I thought I’d be nice and give them money, because they are so poor, and then her crazy bitch sister threatened me.”

“No!” A perfect chorus for a rapt audience.

“I don’t know what would have happened if Elias hadn’t been with me. Right, baby?” Her voice was sugary, syrupy

sweet. “Elias?” Still nothing. “Elias!” She screeched. I didn’t know if I should be offended that attitude wasn’t only for me.

“Yeah.” He sounded like he hadn’t been listening, which probably wasn’t unusual. She repeats herself often, if what she’s said to me over the years is any indication. I’m sure she would have berated him further for not falling all over her; but, mercifully, the bell interrupted.

“Ohmygod, do you think the freak cursed her?” One of the sycophants said in what I’m assuming was intended to be a conspiratorial whisper.

“Yeah.” That assumption was a bit of a stretch, considering they would have been quieter if they had been using megaphones. I slammed my locker door shut and channeled my inner Fig, shooting them my best smile and strove to make eye contact. They huddled closer together in response. It was unfortunate the only weapon in my arsenal was also one of my biggest insecurities. My heterochromia, or my witch eyes as they were so cleverly called, was one of the things I had been bullied the most mercilessly about all through school. But, it had still been worse when I was younger. I had been avoided and no one looked me in the eye for fear of being cursed. Now, I was just the requisite creepy, weird loner. Playing into the stereotype of the evil eye, I narrowed my right eye, my mother’s green, and leaned towards them.

“Freak!” They shrieked in unison, and ran off. Four ponytails bounced out of my line of vision and I chuckled. I stopped short in front of the English door, already regretting that I acknowledged them. Pitiful attempts at teenage rebellion wouldn’t change anything.

“Why were you staring at the freak?” Taylor was accusatory and I was blindsided. Since when was I deemed worth staring at? I mean, aside from the car crash kind of way.

“I wasn’t.” His answer sounded like it came from a script he had performed many, many times.

“Yes, you were. I was talking about her and her crazy bitch sister, and you were staring at her.” She insisted.

“I wasn’t.” Irritation seeped into his voice.

“You embarrassed me. Everyone saw that you were staring at her.” She was fighting him every step of the way in righteous indignation.

“I wasn’t fucking staring at her.” This was the first time, in all the years we had been in school together, that I actually saw Elias get even the slightest bit angry. I was shocked, which was surprising in and of itself. Despite not spending much, any really, of my time considering him, he never struck me as an angry person. I realized I had been staring at them in what I hoped was disbelief. I might have just looked deranged though. But, who knew Taylor even thought I was worth arguing about? I definitely didn’t. Her expression morphed so quickly that if I had blinked I would have missed it. She grabbed Elias’ belt buckle and pulled herself up.

“You’re right. Why would you? I mean, it’s not like there’s anything to look at.” Her voice was back to being sweet enough to make my teeth hurt. I feel like her sentiment wouldn’t have fallen flat, if he hadn’t been doing exactly what she had accused him of. I hadn’t noticed during the fray yesterday, but he wasn’t looking at me like the freak in the sideshow; as any other person in town who saw my interaction with Morrigan would have. I was a puzzle to be solved, a riddle to be answered. I was out of my depth and extremely uncomfortable. Unfortunately, for

anyone who crossed her path today, Taylor caught on quickly that neither one of us was paying her any attention. She released his belt buckle and narrowed her eyes at me.

“Don’t think this means he doesn’t think you’re a freak.” Her words had long since lost any meaning for me, as any insult does after over a decade. This time especially. She had probably just used me as an excuse to fight with him, that seemed more plausible than anything else. It didn’t matter anyway.

The second bell rang, breaking me out of my fog. I burst through the door and ran to my preferred seat in the corner by the windows, berating myself all the way. Not ten seconds before their arrival, I had wanted to keep my head down and do my time; same as any year. Because I knew now, more than ever, that none of this would continue to matter once it ended. So, what the hell was I doing having a staring contest with the king of the school?

I dutifully opened my book and zoned out, reminding myself to do a tarot reading when I got home. I had been too shaken, too stuck in my head to do a proper one last night. And, as much I as I told myself I was overthinking as always, the feeling that the indiscriminate tide would take more than just my independence wouldn’t leave me. A screech of a chair moving against the hardwood sent me ramrod straight and clutching my heart. I looked to my right and saw Elias stifling a grin.

“What are you doing?” I asked his elbow. I was confused. He may have been a jock, but he was smart and studious. Presumably. In all of the AP classes we were in, he always sat up front. But, it could have just been for appearances, I don’t know. He gestured to the board and I read the directions scrawled across it:

A. Crowley

Prepare a scene from a Shakespeare play of your choice.

“We’re partners.” I can’t catch a break, can I?