

# A VERY WITCHY YULETIDE



D. LIEBER



## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

Let me take you aside for a moment before you begin. While I am attached to all of my work, this story holds a particularly special place for me.

As someone who is Pagan and visually impaired, I have been pressured to share those aspects of my life in my writing for many years. People want to know what it's like. I understand. I found, to my surprise, that sharing those very personal experiences is much more difficult than I thought it would be. It puts me in a very vulnerable place.

The confrontations my characters experience in regards to their religion and Evergreen's visual impairment are all situations I have experienced in my own life. However, I did take some artistic license in regards to exact situation to better fit the story. This is by no means my autobiography. In fact, Evergreen responds

to many of these confrontations in a completely different way than I did myself.

I would also like to say that my experiences do not necessarily reflect the experiences of the people who are part of the same minorities as myself. I do not speak for all Pagans everywhere. My experiences with my own blindness do not necessarily reflect the experiences of the entire blind community. Both of those things are very personal and are experienced in a myriad of ways. These are but some of the situations I've dealt with in my personal life.

Thank you for taking the time to read this little note. I do hope sharing this story, and thus some of my personal experiences, will let you see the world from a slightly different angle.

Your support is much appreciated, as always.

D. Lieber

## CHAPTER 1



Evergreen took a deep breath and tapped the submit button, sending her sparse résumé off to another company that wasn't likely to hire her. Placing her tablet on the coffee table before her, she ignored the building anxiety in her chest.

She grabbed her tea from the table, the fabric of her sweatshirt protecting her fingers from getting burned by the hot ceramic. Tucking her legs under her on the couch, she looked out at the bright, snowy morning. The snow dusted the naked tree limbs of the woods outside her apartment window, and little icicles glistened in morning sunshine.

Muir sat tall on the windowsill, his striped tail twitching as he squinted at some busy, morning birds.

Evergreen's apartment was unusually quiet this morning, her roommate having gone home for the holidays. Most of the building was quiet in fact, due to the amount of college residents. It was the pleasant silence of solitude where she could just sit, drink tea, and watch her cat.

The stillness was broken with a loud chiming melody. She jumped when her cellphone rang, hissing as hot tea seeped into the cloth of her sweatshirt and pajama pants.

She put the cup back on the table and answered the phone without seeing who was calling.

“Hello?” she said, clicking her tongue at having made a mess.

“What’s wrong?” her mom asked.

“Nothing. I just spilled some tea.”

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. What’s up?”

“Well, I know you said you weren’t going to come home for break because you wanted to look for jobs, but I’m calling to ask you to reconsider.”

Evergreen frowned. “I know I’ve always come home for Yule before, but I only have one semester left until I graduate. Between helping with preparations and taking care of the guests, it’s just too busy there.”

“I know, but I really think coming home would be good for you. I can tell you’re stressed. You still have an entire semester to look for jobs, and being around family would help you relax.”

Evergreen hesitated.

“And I called to tell you we’re doing something special this year,” her mom added.

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“Well, as it’s been a while since we’ve all gotten together, your dad and I talked with the old coven, and everyone has decided to come for a visit.”

Evergreen’s heart jumped. “Everyone...? Do you even have space for everyone?”

“Well, not everyone. I doubt Charlie will come. We don’t have any retreats scheduled, so we can make room, even if you kids have to put sleeping bags on the floor.”

“You’re *really* convincing me,” Evergreen answered, rolling her eyes.

“Oh, stop. It’s been so long since we’ve all been together. It won’t be the same if you aren’t there. Won’t it be nice to see everybody?”

Her answering silence was heavy. *Yes, it would be nice to see everyone*, Evergreen thought. It had been a long time since the old coven had all been in the same place. What with life being as it is, the families had moved away one by one.

A Yuletide with everyone there sparked joyful memories. So many sabbats happily celebrating the seasons. Of course she wanted that nostalgic feeling again. But things were different now. She was different. Evergreen bit her lip and twisted the end of one sleeve between her hands. *Can I even handle it?* she wondered.

“Is...is he...?” she started to ask.

“Yes,” her mother answered. “Sawyer will be here, too.”

Evergreen’s chest tightened, and warmth spread through her. “I don’t know, Mom...” she murmured.

Her mom’s voice softened into that soothing tone only mothers can manage. “You’ll be all right,” she promised. “It has been what? Almost five years since you last saw him? You’re a different woman now. Think of all you’ve seen, experienced, accomplished. Surely you aren’t still carrying a torch for him, are you? After all this time, how many boys have you dated since then?”

“A few.”

“And you did just fine with them. Don’t let an old crush get in the way of us having a happy Yule.”

“You’re right.” Evergreen nodded curtly and straightened her spine. “It was just a silly schoolgirl crush. It’s not like he ever even noticed. And I’ve had good relationships since then, even if they didn’t turn out. I’m not the same insecure girl who used to watch him. And you know what? He’s probably not the same either. He’s probably nothing like the boy I knew.”

“That’s right,” her mom encouraged. “It will just be old friends getting together for the holiday,” she promised.

Evergreen smiled. “That sounds nice.”

“So you’ll come?”

“Yeah, just let me pack my bags and get Muir in his carrier. I’ll be there by dinnertime.”

Her mom let out a soft squeak. “I’m so happy you reconsidered. Be careful. Okay? I’ll see you later.”

“I will. Love you, Mom.”

“I love you, too.”

After hanging up the phone, Evergreen sat for a moment. Anxiety swirled in her gut, but she squashed it down. *I can do this. No problem*, she thought.

After dumping what was left of her now cold tea into the sink, she went and scooped up Muir. She stood at the window, the morning sun bright but distant as it hit her face. Holding Muir like a baby, she kissed him on his little forehead. “Come on, Muir. Let’s get ready, eh? I’m going to pack your favorite toy and treats. I’ll make sure to put your warm, fuzzy blanket in your carrier. You better behave yourself. No fighting with Larkspur and no

attacking the Yule tree. I'm going to put your special Yule collar on you. We've got to make you all handsome to see everyone. We're going home, Muir."

## CHAPTER 2



Sawyer could feel his cellphone silently vibrating in the pocket of his jeans, but he just let it ring as he concentrated on bottle-feeding the baby bat, which was wrapped in a towel in the crook of his arm.

“There’s a good girl,” he murmured to the little creature as she hungrily sucked on the bottle. “Good job,” he praised.

After putting the pup back with her siblings, he washed his hands and pulled his phone from his pocket. He’d missed a call from his mom.

As he headed to the breakroom, he held and pressed the two on his screen. While the speed-dial connected, he poured himself some coffee from the communal pot.

“Why didn’t you answer?” his mom asked once she’d picked up.

“I’m at work, Mom. What’s up?”

“I thought you had the day off.”

“Well...they were short-handed.”

His mom clicked her tongue. “Aren’t they always?”

“Come on, Mom. Don’t be like that. The animals need to be taken care of.”

“Are you still going to be able to come home for Yule?”

“Yeah, no problem. It was only today they needed extra help.”

“Well, that’s all right then.”

“Did you need something? Or did you just call to chat?”

“There’s been a change of plans.”

Sawyer frowned into his coffee. He didn’t like when his mom got that conspiratorial tone in her voice. But he waited for her to continue.

“Ria called. She and Wes invited everyone to come and stay with them for the holiday. I told them we would both be there.”

Sawyer froze, his heart pounding hard in his chest. But he didn’t speak; he’d always relied on silence to hide his emotions in situations such as this.

“Eeva will be there,” his mom continued, hitting the exact point he both longed to know and dreaded to hear. “Ria tells me she’s close to graduating with her Bachelor’s. Did you know she goes to the college near you?”

Sawyer cleared his throat. “No, I didn’t know,” he lied.

His mind flashed with images from his youth: Eeva all in white at Imbolc, Eeva dancing around the Maypole at Beltaine, Eeva sitting with her back to a tree and her nose buried in a book. He’d never been brave enough to tell her how he’d felt. Animals and plants were much more his speed. The trees didn’t care if you stumbled over your words.

Had she been sad when he’d gone so far away to

school? He'd always wondered. But she'd never called or texted. She'd never messaged him on social media. She'd never even emailed. It's not as if she hadn't known how to find him if she'd wanted to. He remembered the last time he'd seen her. She sat on the steps of his porch, her elbows on her knees and her head in her hands as she stared at the oak tree in his front yard. She'd only looked at him for a moment as he called his goodbyes before her parents and his mom had embraced him, wishing him well on his way to the freshman dorms three states over.

"Sawyer, are you listening to me?" his mom shouted into his ear, drawing him from his memories.

"I'm sorry. What did you say?"

She sighed dramatically. "I said Ria told me she's single right now."

His chest squeezed. "So?" he managed.

"You can't fool your mom, mister. I know how you've always felt about her."

"That was a long time ago."

She blew a raspberry into the phone. "Uh-huh and those perfectly nice girls you dated in college? Shelby and Michelle and what was her name?"

"Krystal," he supplied.

"Right, and Krystal. What was wrong with them? I didn't push you at the time because I knew the problem."

His face flushed, dreading what she was about to say.

"They weren't Eeva. That's what," she finished. "And now you have the chance, and all you can say to me is 'so?' as if it all has nothing to do with you?"

"What do you want me to do, Mom?" Sawyer snapped. His stomach clenched in immediate regret.

“You’re not the same scared little boy anymore, Sawyer. You’ve done a lot since you went away. You graduated college and got a job doing what you love. I’ve seen you grow into a good and confident man. But as wonderful as you are, son, you can’t expect everything to just come to you like a stray cat you’ve coaxed into trusting you. Sometimes, you do have to put in a little bit of effort and go after what you want. Show her who you are. Tell her how you feel.”

“It *has* been a long time. And you’re right, I’ve changed a lot. But don’t you think she’s changed, too? She’s probably nothing like the Eeva I knew.”

“Well, there’s only one way to find out. Are you going to let that uncertainty get in the way? Come to the gathering. You don’t have to do anything right off. Spend some time together; see how you both have changed. Maybe you’ll find you like her even more now.”

“You know what? You’re right. There’s no pressure after all this time. Maybe I’ll find I like her more, and I’ll finally have the courage to tell her. But it’s also possible I won’t like her at all anymore, and I can finally move on. This is a good idea.”

He could hear the smile in his mom’s voice when she responded. “Excellent. So, after work you’ll come home? Then, you can spend the night here, and we can go there tomorrow morning.”

Sawyer nodded. “Sounds good.”

“Wonderful. Love you bunches.”

“Love you, too, Mom. Bye.”

After his phone beeped in his ear, Sawyer stood in the relative silence of the wildlife refuge’s breakroom, the

only sounds the humming of the refrigerator and the distant chirps, squeaks, and squawks of the animals in their care. Closing his eyes, he let out a long sigh to steady his nerves. *I can do this. No problem*, he thought.