

# The Sorcerer Heir

by Cinda Williams Chima

## Chapter One: Curve Balls

“Where are you off to, Alicia?” Aunt Millisandra asked as Leesha Middleton sidled past on her way to the door.

“A party,” Leesha said, purposely vague. “I’ll be back late.”

“Is the party here in town?” Aunt Millie asked. “Will there be drinking? Will you be careful?”

This was unusual. Aunt Millie wasn’t a particularly intrusive chaperone, given that she had a very clear memory of what it was like to be young, and a very poor memory of anything that had happened in the past year.

“The party is at Seph McCauley’s house,” Leesha said. “I don’t know about the drinking, but I’m always careful these days.”

Aunt Millisandra looked over the rims of her reading glasses. The glasses weren’t functional—they had no glass in them. Aunt Millie didn’t love the way the glass reflected, but she liked the look otherwise. “You look ravishing, my dear. It must be a very fancy party. I haven’t seen you wear that dress before. And the leather goggles—is that a new fashion?”

“It’s a costume,” Leesha said, brushing at her vampish dress. “For a Halloween party.”

“A *costume*,” Aunt Millie said, emitting a shower of sparks, signifying delight. “Is it really Halloween?” She looked around wildly. “Is it beggars’ night? Should I have candy? Oh, dear.” She brightened. “I did make muffins the other day. Maybe we can—”

“No, Aunt Millie,” Leesha said, batting out the sparks that landed on the settee. “It’s not beggars’ night. No worries. I’ll, ah, bring home candy.” Aunt Millie had many stellar qualities, but she wasn’t much of a cook. The muffins could have stood in as hockey pucks. Leesha had diverted them into the trash almost immediately. Living with a wizard who was a few cards short in her mental deck wasn’t always easy.

Blessedly, Aunt Millie moved on. “What are you supposed to be?”

“I’m a—a sort of Victorian vampire,” Leesha said.

“It’s quite fetching, dear,” Aunt Millie said. “Especially the décolletage. But . . .” She pressed her lips together in disapproval. “You have such lovely jewelry, Alicia; why is it that you always wear that snake pendant?”

Leesha touched the pendant nestled between her breasts. It was a gold snake eating its tail. A talisman against evil. “It’s a reminder to be careful who I partner up with.”

It was also a reminder of the cost of betrayal. She’d betrayed Jack Swift to the White Rose warriormaster Jessamine Longbranch. She’d partnered up with the wizard Warren Barber, whom she hated, and betrayed Jason Haley, whom she loved. Now Jason was dead, cut down by the wizard Claude d’Orsay in a battle between the underguilds and their wizard oppressors.

Nearly two years had passed, but there would be no do-overs.

Fortunately, Aunt Millie again meandered onto a new topic. “It makes sense to be choosy, especially if you plan on biting anyone. Or being bitten. The human mouth is one of the most—”

“Not going to happen,” Leesha said, cheeks burning. “I’m just hanging out with some friends.”

Aunt Millie’s face settled into disappointed lines. “I had hopes,” she said. “You haven’t had a gentleman caller since you misplaced that young man I found for you.”

“I didn’t misplace him,” Leesha said sharply. “I’ve told you. He disappeared while we were out walking in London. Maybe I’m not as charming as I thought.”

“Alicia Ann Middleton, you are the most charming young lady I know. No young man would willingly leave your side.”

Unless he was attacked and dismembered by the walking dead. Leesha shuddered.

*No! I’m not going to think about that. That never happened. Why can’t I develop amnesia like every other victim of trauma?*

“His family hasn’t seen him since either,” Aunt Millie said. “They’ve been terribly persistent. Why, they’ve even made some rather nasty accusations about you, dear. I think they should look closer to home for culprits. London can be a dangerous place, what with all those graveyards and barrows and ley lines.”

Right. Ley lines, Leesha thought. “Let’s not talk about that, Aunt Millie. It doesn’t make sense to dwell on things you can’t do anything about.”

That was her new rule, and it seemed to apply to so much of her past. *I used to be so coldhearted and ruthless. What’s happened to me?*

As if she'd overheard Leesha's thoughts, Aunt Millie said, "I'm worried about you, Alicia. You haven't been yourself since you went to London."

I haven't been myself since Jason died, Leesha thought. "I'm fine," she said aloud as she wrapped a black velvet cape around her shoulders. "Don't wait up. I'll be back late."

Trinity, Ohio, was a small town (!) so Leesha walked the few blocks to Seph McCauley's house. The house actually belonged to his mother, the enchanter Linda Downey, but lately his parents, Downey and Leander Hastings, the wizard, had been spending most of their time in Europe. At one time, Leesha would have envied Seph, living on his own, doing as he pleased, but right now she welcomed the distraction of having Aunt Millisandra around. The constant risk of incineration kept her on her toes.

You need something to do, Leesha thought. Something to do besides mope. A quick fling might be just the ticket. Her heart beat faster. Maybe she *would* meet someone at this party. Someone who'd never heard of the pathetic Leesha Middleton. Who wouldn't want to rehash old news or dig up the bodies of the dead.

She needed someone *fresh*.

The McCauley-Downey-Hastings home stood in a lakeside neighborhood of Victorian summer homes, built in an era when the rich birthed cottages like a cat drops kittens. Cars already lined the narrow streets nearly all the way to Aunt Millie's. Leesha heard the party long before she saw it: usually a good sign.

Leesha's former boyfriend, the warrior Jack Swift, was directing people in the foyer. He was co-hosting the party, along with his soul mate and sparring partner, Ellen Stephenson. Jack wore a leather vest, velvet pantaloons, and tights that showed off his warrior build.

"Looking good, Jack," Leesha said, flouncing her skirts, showing her glamoured fangs. Sliding easily into her usual role. "Care to expose your jugular?"

Jack took a step back and raised his weapon for a two-handed sweep—it was a pear-shaped stringed instrument.

Leesha couldn't help laughing. "What are you supposed to be?"

Jack sighed. "I'm a minstrel," he said glumly. "Not my idea."

Leesha could guess whose it was. "*Hmm*. Well, maybe you're a warrior, pretending you're a minstrel," she said. "Maybe that's how you get inside the castle walls."

Jack snorted, but the corners of his mouth twitched. Leesha knew he liked that idea.

She greeted a few Anaweir high school friends who'd either stayed in the area or come home for what promised to be a stellar Halloween party. Scanning the crowd, she saw that it was

mostly people she knew, a handful of non-magical Anaweir mixed in with the younger generation of gifted Weir from all over the world. The gifted belonged to one of the five magical guilds—warriors, wizards, sorcerers, seers, and enchanters. They were like five feuding gangs linked together by their dependence on the Dragonheart, the well of power controlled by Madison Moss, a.k.a. the Dragon. She'd been ruling in absentia for the past two years while attending art school in Chicago.

You could give college a try, Leesha thought. Aunt Millie had been pushing that, as an alternative to a grand tour of Europe or a year at an ashram. But could she really hang out with a bunch of freshmen?

Q: You graduated from high school *when*? What have you been *doing* all this time?

A: Preventing power-hungry wizards from taking over the world. Also, betraying nearly everyone I care about. Losing the only boy I ever loved. You?

Leesha wandered out into the conservatory. Guests in elaborate costumes danced to a wide-ranging playlist. In the makeshift stage area, people were dragging power cords around, setting up for a band. One of them was oddly dressed for a roadie, wearing a vintage frock coat, vest, and cravat.

“Fitch!” Leesha said. “I didn’t know you’d be here. They don’t have parties in Cambridge?”

“Not like this party,” Fitch said, scrambling to his feet from where he’d been fussing with some sort of a connection. They shared an awkward two-handed handshake that evolved into an awkward hug.

“Will’s here, too,” Fitch said. “He drove up from Columbus for this. I think he’s in the kitchen. Jack put him to work, too.”

Will Childers and Harmon Fitch were wary of Leesha—and who could blame them? She’d sold off their lifelong friend Jack to magical traffickers. Then there was that kidnapping incident in the UK. But they’d fought on the same side in the Battle of Trinity, and they were keenly aware of Leesha’s losses in that war.

Fitch retrieved a top hat from the edge of the stage and clapped it on his head. It was probably a costume, but then again it could have been Fitch being himself.

“I love your suit,” Leesha said, playing it safe. “Where did you find that?”

“Thrift shop in Boston,” Fitch said. “East-coast thrift is top of the line.” He looked her up and down. “You look nice,” he said.

“Nice?” Leesha raised an eyebrow.

He recovered quickly. “I meant, you look devastatingly gorgeous.”

“That’s better,” Leesha said. “Are you just here for the weekend?”

Pain flickered across his face. “No, I’m here indefinitely. I’m taking a break from school.”

“Taking a break?” Leesha cocked her head. “Now? Aren’t you a sophomore? Isn’t it the middle of the semester?”

“It is,” Fitch said, “but my mom’s in the hospital again, and my sibs require their older brother’s firm hand and wise counsel right now.” Fitch was the oldest of six kids. His mother had an autoimmune disorder and had been in and out of the hospital for years. It made it hard for her to support the family; they always lived hand-to-mouth.

Leesha put her hand on his arm. “That really sucks.” She could guess how brutally hard it must be for Fitch to step away from a full-ride scholarship to Harvard.

“It’s fine,” Fitch said. “I’ll go back eventually. I’m back working in IT for Trinity College, and they’ve arranged for me to continue my research and take a few classes.” He stuffed his hands into his pockets. “I thought maybe you’d have left Trinity for someplace a little more exciting by now.”

“I’m helping Aunt Millie with some things. That’s enough excitement for me these days.” She scanned the crowd. “Did Rosie come back for the party, too?”

“No.” After a beat or two, he added, “We broke up.”

“Oh.” Way to put your foot in it, Leesha thought. She cleared her throat. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

Fitch shrugged. “She’s spending next year at an alternative school in Nepal. She wanted me to apply with her, and when I said no, she said I was choosing to be part of the problem. Things just escalated from there. Or deteriorated, depending on your viewpoint.”

A young girl dressed as a black cat rocketed around the corner carrying a massive roll of duct tape. “Fitch? I’ve got the cord taped down all along the wall. Is there any—” She broke off when she saw Leesha. “Oh! Hi, Leesha.”

“Hey, Grace,” Leesha said, grinning. “Great costume.”

“You think so?” Grace wrapped her tail around her wrist. “It’s just something I came up with from stuff I had around.”

“Those are the best kinds of costumes,” Leesha said. She gave her skirts a twitch. “This is actually my old prom dress.”

“They let you wear *that* for prom?” Grace exclaimed, then laughed when she saw that Leesha was kidding.

Leesha couldn't help liking Madison Moss's often-grouchy little sister—maybe because her mood so often mirrored Leesha's. Madison had uprooted twelve-year-old Grace from Nowheresville, Ohio, and brought her up to Trinity to go to school. Then parked her with their cousin and gone off to art school in Chicago. No wonder Grace felt out of place and abandoned.

Kind of like Leesha herself.

Jack walked past, carrying an amplifier, followed by Ellen, leading some strangers through the crowd, onto the terrace. They were all carrying musical equipment, so Leesha guessed this must be Fault Tolerant, the band Ellen had been raving about since she'd seen them at a club in downtown Cleveland.

The band members were all students at Gabriel Mandrake's "special school" for magical mutants (the PC term was *savant*). Originally members of the mainline magical guilds, they'd survived a mass poisoning at a commune in Brazil that had altered their Weirstones in unique and sometimes dangerous ways. Maybe that's what made their music so exciting. Leesha was looking forward to hearing them.

Leesha drifted closer, watching them set up, and realized that she recognized one of the band members, a tall, broad-shouldered boy with ink-black hair and smoldering blue eyes. A smoking-hot guy, in fact, and she had an excellent memory for that breed. She'd seen him at the sword-fighting demonstration at the Medieval Faire in Trinity. He'd fought Jack and Ellen both at once. He'd lost, but he hadn't embarrassed himself—not at all. In fact, Leesha thought, I'd rather watch him lose than watch a lot of other guys win.

What was his name?

"Jonah!" the drummer called over to him. "I thought you said you sent me the set list!" She peered at a tablet computer mounted next to her kit.

"I did," he called back. "I can send it again if you want."

Jonah. That was it. Jonah Kinlock.

Leesha couldn't say exactly what made him so engaging. He hadn't spent much time on his look: his timeworn T-shirt fit like a second skin and was tucked into battered jeans, the kind that start out indigo blue and then fade to a soft cornflower as they shrink to fit. Over the T-shirt, he wore a flannel shirt with the sleeves half-rolled, black leather gloves and worn sneakers.

Maybe it was the way he moved, the way he chewed on his lower lip while he adjusted the tuning on his guitar, the interplay of light and shadow created by the planes of his face. There was something savage and elemental and feral in him. The fact that he was a savant only added to the intrigue.

I always go for the dangerous boys, Leesha thought.

“You’re staring,” Fitch said, nearly in her ear. “And you’re not the only one.”

Leesha whipped around to face him, and saw that Grace was fixed on Jonah, too, studying him with her usual intensity.

“I’ve met him before,” Leesha said. “At the Medieval Faire in Trinity.” She paused, but Fitch said nothing, just looked from Leesha to Jonah with an unreadable expression. “Well,” Leesha said, briskly, “I’m going to go see if Will needs help in the kitchen.” Not that she knew anything about cooking, but she was good at bossing people around.

It turned out there were too many bosses in the kitchen already. When Leesha walked in, Will was busy at the sink. He was making a salad big enough to feed a small army, while pretending to ignore the raised voices leaking from the dining room next door. It was Seph McCauley and his parents.

Leesha greeted Will, slid in beside him, and picked up a paring knife, her ears wide open.

“Seph, you know we’re in favor of normalizing relations among the magical guilds,” Linda Downey was saying, “but your father and I think it’s risky to bring all of these elements together at this particular time.”

“If not now, when?” Seph said. Though she didn’t have the visual, Leesha knew he was wearing his trademark stubborn scowl, so much like his father’s. “Anyway, it’s a little late to be second-guessing me. I sent out the invitations a month ago.”

“That was before the council meeting. You heard young DeVries,” Leander Hastings said. “He blames you and Madison for his sister’s death, and for all of the other Weir killings. He threatened you.”

“I understand that,” Seph said. “But we’re in the Sanctuary, and here of all places it should be safe.”

“Since when has the Sanctuary been safe?” Downey’s voice was low and strained. “You know better than that.”

“You can’t expect me to hide from him,” Seph said, “especially since I had nothing to do with his sister’s death.”

“You do know that his father was the deadliest assassin in the Black Rose,” Hastings said. “The Sanctuary’s not much protection, if the boy takes after his father. DeVries Senior never limited himself to magical weapons. He used whatever seemed most suitable to the circumstances: poison, firearms, blades, strangulation, killing charms . . .”

“Maybe Senior’s back as a vengeful ghost,” Seph said. “Maybe he’s the one behind all the murders.”

“We’re also getting an earful about the Montessori kidnapping,” Downey said. “It seems that many of the parents of the children involved believe that Gabriel Mandrake’s students had something to do with it.”

They were referring to a recent incident in which a group of gifted Trinity preschoolers on a field trip had somehow ended up trapped atop a lift bridge in industrial Cleveland. The children claimed they’d been attacked by zombies. Since the bridge was close to the Anchorage, Mandrake’s school that served savants, some parents blamed the attack on “Mandrake’s Monsters.” As co-chair of the Interguild Council committee investigating the Montessori incident, Leesha had been getting an earful herself.

“Then we find out that Mandrake’s students are going to be here, too,” Hastings said.

“Not all of them,” Seph retorted. “Maybe five? I think we have them outnumbered.” After a pause (just about now he would be rolling his eyes), Seph continued. “I’m not discounting your concerns, but I don’t think we should defer to a bunch of bigots with a lynch-mob mentality.”

“They are concerned parents,” Downey countered. “Though I admit, some of them are bigots.”

“And *they’re* not invited,” Seph said. “This is *our* party. Madison and I think it’s time we bring the guilds together in a meaningful way. It’s one thing to have an armed standoff. It’s another to actually normalize relations. We also need to stop stigmatizing savants as monsters and acknowledge the fact that what happened at Thorn Hill was not their fault.”

“We agree,” Hastings said, “and you know it.”

“If you agree, then you should be supporting what we’re doing,” Seph said. “The only way to change opinions is to encourage contact between us and them. Anyway, are you suggesting we uninvite our guests? How d’you think *that* would be received?”

“*I’ll* uninvite DeVries,” Hastings said, in that voice that could knock a person flat. “You don’t have to be involved.”

“This always happens,” Seph growled. “Neither of you are on the council anymore, but whenever you’re here, people start bypassing the council and going directly to you. It makes it really hard for Madison and me to do our jobs.”

“What’s making it difficult is that Madison is in Chicago more than she’s here,” Hastings said. “All of that power brings with it obligations—obligations that she is not meeting.”

This was followed by a long, charged silence. Then Seph spoke. “Maddie never asked for this responsibility. She shouldn’t need to be here, wielding a club to get people to behave. We’re working things out in our own way.”

“Yes, but you must understand that—” Hastings began, but Seph cut in.

“My point is, you can’t ride in here and take over whenever you happen to be in the country. Either run this thing or don’t.” The swinging door between the kitchen and the dining room banged open. Seph froze in the doorway when he saw Leesha and Will, then he strode on past them and into the hall.

Whoa, Leesha thought, meeting Will’s eyes. Go, Seph.

“He’s right, you know,” Downey said, her voice carrying from the other room. “If we’re going to live in England, we’re going to have to stop second-guessing him.”

“You don’t think a bit of counsel would—”

“You don’t offer counsel, Lee,” Downey said. “You have a rather unfortunate habit of bulldozing over people. When it comes to our son, you have just run into your first brick wall. Now let’s go out and say our good-byes before we completely ruin this party.”

Leesha and Will looked at each other, stowed the salad in the refrigerator, and fled.

By now, the dancing had started, though the band wasn’t yet on stage. Nothing ventured, Leesha thought, and looked for Jonah. She found him out on the terrace with a tall girl dressed like a thirties club singer, down to the lacy gloves, finger waves, and red gardenia. A girl Leesha didn’t recognize.

Something about the intimate way they stood, leaning on the wall, heads together, talking, almost convinced Leesha not to interrupt.

But not quite. She wasn’t one to step back from a challenge. Nothing ventured, she repeated. “Jonah?” she said. “It’s Jonah, isn’t it? Remember me? Leesha Middleton? We met at the Medieval Faire.”

Jonah turned away from the wall, and his gaze flicked over her, piercing her skin like icicles. “Right. Good to see you again,” he said, as if it really wasn’t.

Leesha’s head immediately emptied. Finally, she asked, “Where’s your costume?”

“I’m with the band.”

“I am, too,” the girl said when Jonah didn’t introduce her. “I’m Emma Lee.”

“Ah,” Leesha said. “So you’re not . . . actually . . . together?”

Emma and Jonah looked at each other. “No,” they said simultaneously.

“Wow,” Leesha said, not sure she believed it. “I can sure tell you’re used to harmonizing.”

Brilliant, Leesha thought. Entirely smooth.

“How about you?” Emma asked. “What are you supposed to be?” The sound of the South in her voice was unmistakable. As was the snark.

Leesha pursed her lips. “I’m a Victorian steampunk vampire, of course. Some people don’t approve of cross-dressing, but—”

“Cross-dressing?” Emma did a double take, a look of disbelief on her face.

“You know,” Leesha went on, “wizards cross-dressing as vampires. *Some people* think it’s really kinky.” Leesha grinned at Emma, and Emma, somewhat reluctantly, grinned back. Her smile disappeared when Leesha turned back to Jonah. “Want to dance?”

“No, thanks,” Jonah said. “Like I said, I’m working.”

Leesha’s brain was saying, Shut up! Cut your losses and retreat. But her mouth somehow said, “You’re not working now.”

“I’m not dancing either.” Jonah turned his back and looked out at the lake.

Leesha stared at his back for a moment, then said, “Fine. No problem,” and turned and walked away, cheeks burning.

This isn’t like you, she thought, this absolutely isn’t like you. You’re the one who says no, not the other way around.

Well. Until Jason. Jason had said no to her, which she’d totally deserved. And then he’d never had another chance to say yes. Tears blurred her eyes, and she stumbled forward, heading for the powder room. But instead, of course, she ran smack into Harmon Fitch. The lower half of him, at least.

He gripped her elbows to keep her upright. Odd. She was suddenly conscious of the fact that his fingers had no sting to them. No sting at all. Somehow, that was a good thing.

Fitch read her blotchy face, she knew he must have, but he said nothing about it. Instead, he said, “Hey, glad I ran into you, ha-ha. Do you want to dance?”

“What?” Leesha said, like he was speaking Japanese.

“Dance,” Fitch repeated. “You know, shuffle around the dance floor, figuring out where to put your chin, music playing the whole time? I didn’t get in much dancing in Cambridge.”

“You want to dance with *me*?” Leesha squinted at him, trying to guess his agenda.

“Look, I know there’s a big height difference, but I think we can overcome that long enough to get through one dance,” Fitch said.

He saw me get the stiff-arm, Leesha thought, mortified. He's being kind. And yet, Leesha decided, she would much rather dance than leave the field humiliated.

"I'd be delighted," Leesha said.

They circled the floor in silence for a few minutes. Then Fitch said, "I missed this, you know," he said.

"Dancing with me? And here I thought this was the very first time," Leesha said. It was, and they both knew it.

"No," Fitch said. "I mean being here, where it's happening. I mean the constant adrenaline, the high stakes. Saving the world, sticking up for democracy, and all that. I guess I sort of got used to living on the edge."

"Living on the edge?" Leesha forced a smile. "That'd be me, going to Harvard. No, I think I'd rather live as far away from edges as I can get."

Fitch grimaced, his cheeks pinking with embarrassment. "That was a stupid thing to say to you, and I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize," Leesha said. "You've moved on. Everybody has. I've had two years of boredom, and I kind of like it."

"Still," Fitch persisted, "considering the way it was before, with wizards pushing everyone around, isn't it better? Even though I wasn't a major player, I felt like what we were doing mattered."

"Yes," she said. "It's better." She had to think so—otherwise Jason had died in vain. "But don't diss what you're doing. That's what's important. Going to college, living your life, becoming the educated kind of genius that can make a real difference. Those are the people who save the world. Blowing things up, setting things on fire . . . that's overrated."

His eyes narrowed, focused on her. He seemed to be debating whether to say anything more. "You've changed, since—since everything."

"I'm a late bloomer," Leesha said, recalling that she'd once compared Fitch to a cockroach. Why were *those* the memories that came back to her?

Still, as they danced, Leesha felt her pain and humiliation dwindle. Sometimes life throws you curve balls. As with evil, you never know when you'll be blindsided by kindness. Maybe it was a pity dance, but she'd take it.