

DEMOINGLASS



A HEX HALL NOVEL

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CHAPTER 1



At a normal high school, having class outside on a gorgeous May day is usually pretty awesome. It means sitting in the sunshine, maybe reading some poetry, letting the breeze blow through your hair. . . .

At Hecate Hall, a.k.a. Juvie for Monsters, it meant I was getting thrown in the pond.

My Persecution of Prodigium class was gathered around the scummy water just down the hill from the school. Our teacher, Ms. Vanderlyden—or the Vandy, as we called her—turned to Cal. He was the school’s groundskeeper even though he was only nineteen. The Vandy took a coil of rope from his hands. Cal had been waiting for us at the pond. When he’d seen me, he’d given me a barely perceptible nod, which was the Cal version of waving his hands over his head and yelling, “Hey, Sophie!”

He was definitely the strong and silent type.

“Did you not hear me, Miss Mercer?” the Vandy said, twisting the rope in her fist. “I said come forward.”

“Actually, Ms. Vanderlyden,” I said, trying not to sound as nervous as I felt, “see this?” I gestured to my mass of curly hair. “This is a perm, and I just got it done the other day, so . . . yeah, probably shouldn’t get it wet.”

I heard a few muffled giggles, and next to me, my roommate Jenna muttered, “Nice one.”

When I first came to Hecate, I would’ve been too terrified of the Vandy to talk back to her like that. But by the end of last semester, I’d watched my great-grandmother kill my best frenemy, and the boy I loved had pulled a knife on me.

I was a little tougher now.

Which was something the Vandy apparently did not appreciate. Her scowl deepened as she snapped, “Front and center!”

I muttered a few choice words as I moved through the crowd. When I reached the shore, I kicked off my shoes and socks to stand next to the Vandy in the shallows, grimacing at the slimy mud under my bare feet.

The rope scratched my skin as the Vandy first tied my hands together, then my feet. Once I was all trussed up, she rose, looking satisfied with her handiwork. “Now. Go all the way into the pond.”

“Um . . . how, exactly?”

I was afraid she was going to make me hop out into the water until it was over my head, an image too mortifying to even contemplate. Cal stepped forward, hopefully to come to my rescue.

“I could toss her off the pier, Ms. Vanderlyden.”

Or not.

“Good,” the Vandy said with a brisk nod, like that had been her plan all along. Then Cal leaned down and swept me into his arms.

There were more giggles, and even a few sighs. I knew most girls would give up a vital organ for Cal to hold them, but my face flamed red. I wasn’t sure this was any less embarrassing than flopping out into the pond on my own.

“You weren’t listening to her, were you?” he asked in a low voice.

“No,” I replied. During the part where the Vandy had been explaining why someone was about to go into the pond, I’d been telling Jenna that I had *not* flinched just because some kid had called me “Mercer” yesterday, the way Archer Cross always did. Because I hadn’t. Just like I hadn’t had a dream last night that re-created in vivid detail the one kiss Archer and I had shared last November. Only, in the dream, there was no tattoo on his chest, marking him as a member of L’Occhio di Dio, so there was no reason to stop kissing, and—

“What were you doing?” Cal asked. For a second, I thought he was talking about my dream, and my whole body flushed. Then I realized what he meant.

“Oh, I was, uh, talking to Jenna. You know, making monster small talk.”

I thought I saw that ghost of a smile again, but then he said, “The Vandy said that real witches escaped trial by water by pretending to drown, then freeing themselves with their powers. So she wants you to sink, then save yourself.”

“I think I can manage the sinking part,” I muttered. “The rest . . . not so sure.”

“You’ll be fine,” he said. “And if you’re not up in a few minutes, *I’ll* save you.”

Something fluttered inside my chest, catching me by surprise. I hadn’t felt anything like that since Archer had disappeared. It probably didn’t mean anything. The sun was shining through Cal’s dark blond hair, and his hazel eyes were picking up the light bouncing off the water. Plus, he was carrying me like I didn’t weigh anything. Of course I’d feel butterflies when a guy who looked like that said something so swoon-worthy.

“Thanks,” I said. Over his shoulder, I saw my mom watching us from the front porch of what had been Cal’s cabin. She’d been staying there for the past six months while we waited for my dad to come get me and take

me to Council Headquarters in London.

Six months later, and we were still waiting.

Mom frowned, and I wanted to give her a thumbs-up to let her know I was okay. All I could manage was raising my bound hands in her general direction, clocking Cal on the chin as I did so. “Sorry.”

“No problem. Must be weird for you, having your mom here.”

“Weird for me, weird for her, probably weird for you since you had to give up your swinging bachelor pad.”

“Mrs. Casnoff let me install my heart-shaped Jacuzzi in my new dorm room.”

“Cal,” I said with mock astonishment, “did you just make a joke?”

“Maybe,” he replied. We’d reached the end of the pier. I looked down at the water and tried not to shudder.

“I’ll be pretending, of course, but do you have any advice on how I’m supposed to not drown?” I asked Cal.

“Don’t breathe in any water.”

“Oh, thanks, that’s super helpful.”

Cal shifted me in his arms, and I tensed. Just before he tossed me into the pond, he leaned in and whispered, “Good luck.”

And then I hit the water.

I can’t say what my first thought was as I sunk below the surface, because it was mostly a string of four-letter

words. The water was way too cold for a pond in Georgia in May, and I could feel the chill sinking all the way into my bones. Plus my chest started burning almost immediately, and I sunk all the way to the bottom, landing in the slimy mud.

Okay, Sophie, I thought. Don't panic.

Then I glanced over to my right, and through the murky water, made out a skull grinning back at me.

I panicked. My first impulse was a human one, and I bent my body, trying to tear at the ropes across my ankles with my bound hands. I quickly realized this was profoundly stupid, and tried to calm down and concentrate on my powers.

Ropes off, I thought, imagining the bindings slithering off me. I could feel them give a little, but not enough. Part of the problem was that my magic came up from the ground (or something beneath the ground, a fact I tried not to think about too often) and it was hard to get my feet on the ground while I was trying not to drown.

ROPES OFF, I thought again, stronger this time.

The ropes snapped violently, unraveling until they were nothing more than a big ball of floating twine. If I hadn't been holding my breath, I would have sighed. Instead, I untangled myself from what was left of the ropes, and made to kick for the surface.

I swam up about a foot, and then something jerked me back to the bottom.

My eyes went to my ankle, half expecting to see a skeletal hand grabbing me, but there was nothing. My chest was on fire now, and my eyes were stinging. I pumped with my arms and legs, trying to swim up, but it was like I was being held underwater even though nothing was holding me.

Real panic set in as black spots danced before my eyes. I had to breathe. I kicked again, but just bobbed in place. Now the black spots were bigger, and the pressure in my chest was agonizing. I wondered how long I'd been down here, and if Cal was going to make good on that promise to save me anytime soon.

I suddenly surged upward, gasping when I broke the surface, the air burning as it rushed into my chest; but I wasn't done yet. I kept flying until I was completely out of the water, landing on the pier in a heap.

I winced as my elbow connected painfully with the wood. I knew my skirt was probably hiked up too high on my thighs, but I couldn't bring myself to care. I just took a second to enjoy breathing. Eventually, I stopped gulping air and started to breathe normally again.

I sat up and pushed my wet hair out of eyes. Cal was standing a few feet away. I glared at him. "Awesome job with the saving."

Then I realized Cal wasn't looking at me, but up toward the head of the pier.

I followed his gaze and saw a slender, dark-haired man. He was standing very still, watching me.

Suddenly, it was hard to breathe all over again.

I rose to my feet on shaky legs, tugging my soaked clothes back into place.

"Are you all right?" the man called out, his face clearly worried. His voice was more powerful than I would've expected from such a slight man, and he had a soft British accent.

"I'm fine," I said, but the black spots were back in front of my eyes, and my knees seemed too wobbly to hold me. The last thing I saw before I fainted was my father walking toward me as I crashed back to the pier.