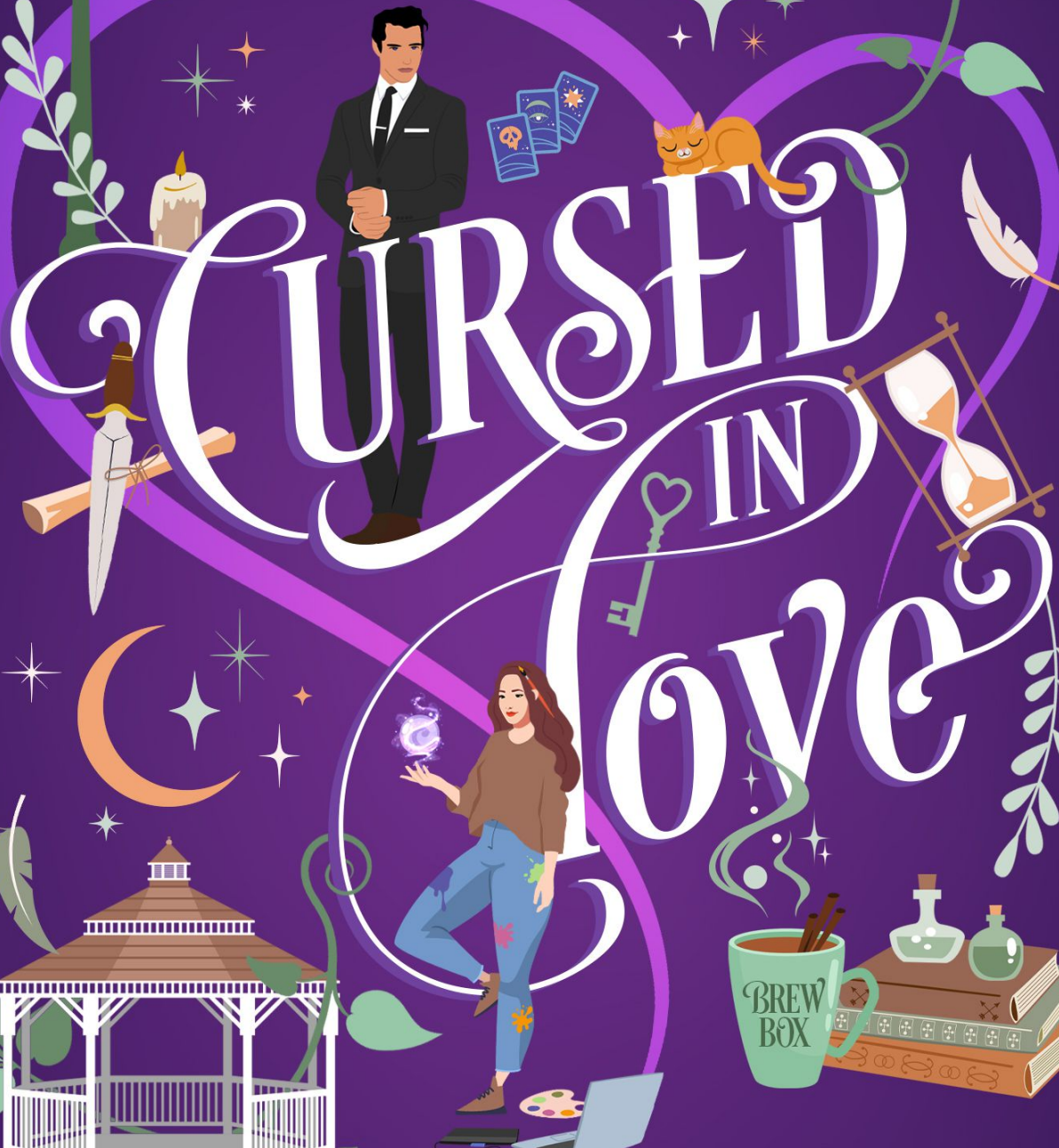


LOVE doesn't get
much more...



FORBIDDEN
than this.

New York Times Bestselling Author
EMILY COLIN

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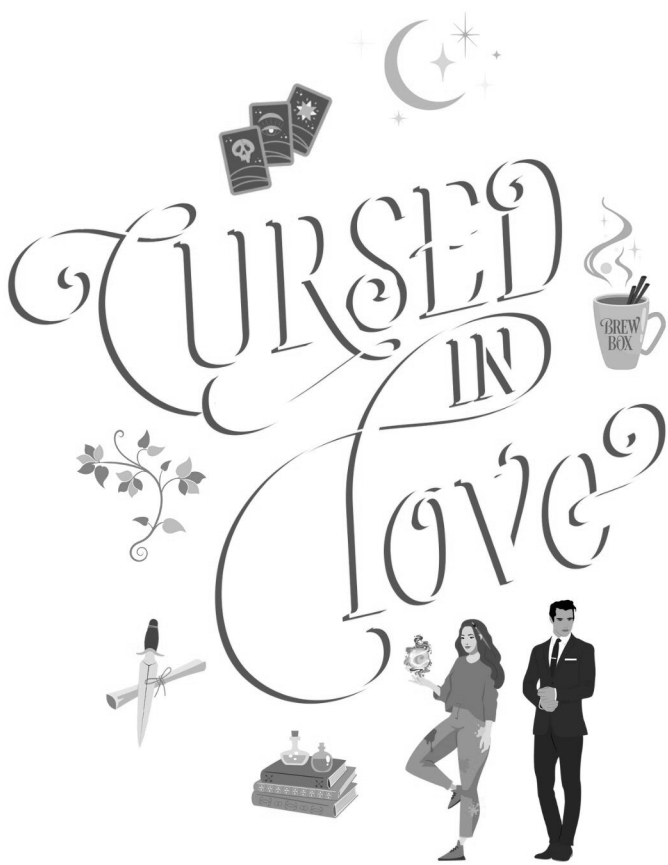
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CURSED
IN
Love

EMILY COLIN



BLACK ORCHID
BOOKS

CHAPTER

One

I DIDN'T WAKE up this morning with the intention of saving a man's life. And a good thing, too, since there's absolutely zero chance that he'll listen to me when I try.

I don't know who the man is. Never seen him before in my life. But I'd lay better than even odds that if I keep walking down Alistair Street, putting one of my purple-flowered Doc Martens in front of the other, soon enough he'll show up. Brown hair, past due for a haircut. Lame graphic tee. Mack Weldon sweatpants, which cost more than I can afford to spend on groceries in a week. Fancy watch advertising that he's slumming it in this outfit, for sure.

I don't know his name. Where he lives. Where he's coming from or where he intends to go. But I know one thing for sure: If I don't manage to intercept him somehow, there's no way in hell he's getting there.

My phone buzzes, and I dig it out of the back pocket of my jeans. It's Charlotte, of course. Who else would it be?

CHARLOTTE

Where are you?

CHARLOTTE

I've been sitting here for ten minutes. I grabbed the best table and now the dude with the Mohawk and the aggro twins are giving me the eye.

CHARLOTTE

Are you alive, Rune? Should I drink your chai latte myself? Pour it in a potted plant? Call the police?

I could pause in pursuit of my quarry to answer her. But what if that makes the difference between the man's life and his death?

He's a stranger with bad fashion sense. I shouldn't care whether he lives or dies. All I know is that I *do*.

I was having such a *nice* morning. My favorite skinny jeans, the ones which even I can admit make my butt look good, were actually clean. My frizzy hair, for once, was behaving. The zit on my chin had disappeared. And I was on time to meet Charlotte at our favorite coffee shop, not running behind like usual. But three steps out the door, and I knew the man was going to die if I didn't stop it. Now here I am, on the 8:00 a.m. train to Doomsville.

I shove my phone back into my pocket with difficulty and resign myself to dealing with Charlotte later. Maybe she was kidding about the potted plant. Although Charlotte is a lawyer. She doesn't make careless threats.

What a horrible waste of my much-needed caffeine.

A moment later, I forget all about my chai latte. Because here I am, at the intersection of Alistair and Caneel. The familiar feeling of inevitability is bearing down on me. I wish this time they would hear me. That they would listen.

They never do.

The light is about to change. I know it like I know my own

name. I don't see him, but he has to be here somehow. He must be.

They always are.

Twenty-one seconds to impact.

"Stop!" I shriek at the top of my lungs. "The—the bus...it's going to lose control...stop!"

Ten heads swivel toward me. Ten people look at me like I'm crazy. A dude pushing a stroller gives me a disgusted glance and steers out of my way, giving me a wide berth. A grandma carrying a bag of apples clutches it to her chest, as if I might lunge at her like a rabid raccoon and snatch it away.

In my mind's eye, I see it: the bag of apples breaking open, scattering all over the sidewalk. The dude with the stroller pausing to help. The grandma stepping into the street to retrieve the fallen fruit, right in the path of the bus. The driver's pale face and wide eyes as he swerves to avoid her, right into the path of—

Seventeen seconds to impact.

I have to save him. I have to stop it. Otherwise I will dream and dream and dream—

I'm running now, pushing my way through the crowd, my breath rasping in my lungs. And here comes the bus, its air brakes squealing as it slows for the still-red light. My head turns left and right, looking for the guy, but he's not here. He's nowhere.

What the actual fuck.

In desperation, I double back toward Grandma and grab for the bag of apples. If I can stop them from falling, from rolling into the road, then maybe I can save him.

But when my fingers close around the bag, she resists. Not that I blame her. "Get off me!" she shrieks. "Let go!"

"I'm trying to *help* you," I hiss, yanking the apples free. I know good and well that if I don't get there in time, if I don't stop this, she'll blame herself. She'll work herself into a guilt-induced heart attack, right around the corner in Senior Hot Yoga two days from now.

But Hot Yoga Grandma isn't listening. She's howling. And *here*

comes the doomed try-hard in his lame AF tee and overpriced sweatpants. His \$200 sneakers pound the pavement as he races toward me in an effort to wrest Grandma—or, more accurately, Grandma’s apples—from my clutches. Way to show up, dude. Douche canoe to the rescue.

Thirteen seconds.

The guy’s yelling at me now, something about *assault* and *thief* and *what the hell is your problem*. But I’m not listening because here goes the light, changing from red to green. *Fight me for the apples, dude*, I think as I watch the bus begin to turn the corner. *Call me all the names you want. At least that way, you’re not dead.*

I tug at the bag of Granny Smiths. The guy tugs back. For a moment, I actually think I might have thwarted fate.

But no. Because the bag rips straight down the middle and there go the apples, bursting free and tumbling onto the sidewalk.

I *hate* times like these, when I show up to save the day and wind up causing the damn problem myself. Am I the chicken? Am I the egg? Where is the beginning and the end in the Ouroboros of the curse that is Rune Whitlock’s life?

I don’t have time to contemplate this, though, because...

Ten seconds.

Here goes Hot Yoga Grandma, chasing after her apples, right into the road. Seriously, what pie could be worth risking your life? Does she not see the bus? How could anyone miss it?

Everyone is screaming now, a chorus of *No* and *Watch out* and *The bus the bus the bus*. Where were these people eleven seconds ago?

With a doomed sense of *déjà vu*, I look up and see the bus driver’s terrified, pallid face. He’s screaming, too, though I can’t hear him. He’s convinced he’s going to hit Grandma, which he isn’t. Who he’s going to hit is—

I turn, my body moving as if through molasses, to grab for the dude who brought me here to begin with. To stop him. But he’s not there. He’s freaking gone.

Seven seconds.

I scan the crowd, searching desperately for him. People are stepping on the stupid apples. The air smells like cider and my mouth tastes like metal and my heart is threatening to burst through my chest—

There he is. Striding into the road, putting himself between Grandma and the bus, one hand up like a crossing guard. Like he can stop the bus with sheer force of will, as if he's Magneto or something. Or like he's an overprivileged dude who's gotten everything he's ever wanted, just by showing up.

Like he's about to die.

Goddamn it. I really liked these jeans.

With three seconds to go, I shove through the crowd, get a running start, and launch myself through the air into the street, right at Overpriced Sweatpants. I body-slam him in a move worthy of WWE, knocking him out of the path of the bus with inches to spare.

Two seconds.

The world whirls. The guy swears at me. The bus squeaks by, so close I get a faceful of exhaust and start to choke.

One.

We land hard, with me somehow on the bottom, taking the brunt of the impact. My jeans are *ruined*, torn at the butt and both knees. From the way it feels, I'm pretty sure I'm lying in a puddle of fresh-squeezed apple juice. Overpriced Sweatpants is stretched full-length on top of me, crushing me into the asphalt. I can smell his expensive, citrusy cologne.

If we were in a rom-com, this would be the moment that I looked up into his panicked, crystalline blue eyes and realized I'd just met the love of my life. Time would stop as we gazed at each other. Cue awkward dialogue, hot sex, misunderstandings, and, of course, my happily ever after.

But this isn't *The Wedding Planner*, I'm not a female version of Matthew McConaughey, and he's sure as hell not J-Lo. Not with this fashion sense.

Overpriced Sweatpants glares down at me, clearly furious.

There's a red scrape on his cheek and not a hint of my happy ending in his infuriated eyes. I wait for him to thank me for saving him, or at least to apologize for ruining my jeans. I entertain the notion that perhaps he'll even offer to buy me a new pair.

"What's your name?" he says instead, his chest heaving against mine.

"Rune," I offer, equally out of breath. "Rune Whitlock."

The dude whose life I just saved bares his teeth at me, like he's preparing to take a bite. "Well, Rune Whitlock," he says, "you're under arrest."