



GIVE UP  
THE  
*Ghost*

JENN BURKE



*Give Up the Ghost*

By Jenn Burke

***The bigger they are, the harder they maul.***

Immortal not-ghost Wes Cooper and his vampire partner, Hudson Rojas, have it all—rewarding private investigation work, great friends and, most important, a love that's endured. But ever since Wes sent a demon screaming back to the beyond, his abilities have grown overpowering and overwhelming. He's hiding the fact that he's losing control the best he can, but it's hard to keep anything a secret for long when your partner's a former cop...and especially when your partner's a former cop who wants to move in together.

When all hell literally breaks loose in Toronto and superstrength ghosts are unleashed on Wes and his friends, he and Hudson are thrown into a case unlike any they've seen before. To save the city, Wes needs to harness his new power...and find some answers. But when he gets them, the solution to fix it all could mean losing everything.

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To Matt, who will always be the inspiration for every romance hero I write.

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# Chapter One

I bounced the light rubber ball off the ceiling as I lay stretched out on the couch in the employee area of Caballero Investigations. The key was to toss the ball gently, so it didn't make any indentations in the drywall. Hudson would have kittens if he knew I was amusing myself like this, but these days I needed to fidget. Besides, what he didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

I was telling myself that a lot lately.

"Golem?" My best friend, Lexi Aster, sat cross-legged on my desk, since it was closest to the employee area, her grimoire—a Five Star student notebook—open and balanced on her knees. She'd traded her microbraids for a shorter, natural 'do a couple of months back, and the look suited her.

It was a Thursday evening, and our doors were officially open for another four hours—until midnight. Hudson and Iskander were out doing the investigator thing—because Hudson's shift was only halfway through and Iskander, who started at noon, didn't know what "quitting time" meant—and the rest of us were holding down the fort.

Such as it was.

I thought about Lexi's quiz item for the span of two ball tosses, then shook my head. "Pass."

Evan Fournier, Hudson's apprentice and baby vampire, and another close friend of mine, shifted on his chair. Not out of discomfort, I knew, but because he freaking *loved* this game. Evan was all sparkly-eyed over the paranormal and eager to learn everything. Me, on the other hand?

Meh.

"Okay, so, a golem is basically an animated statue," Evan started. His once pure-blue eyes had slid more toward gray over the past months as his new nature settled in. They sported a permanent gold ring around the iris now. "It can be made out of mud or clay, and have a humanoid form or not. None of them can speak, and they are under the control of the person who created them."

"Origin?"

"Judaism, though there have been stories of non-Jewish witches attempting to create their own. That rarely ends well."

Lexi nodded in approval. “Very good. What’s the score now?”

Evan blushed. “I, uh—”

“Evan twelve, me one,” I supplied, looking back at the ceiling.

“I thought you said you read the book, Wes.”

“I did.” Sort of. Lexi’s reference tome on paranormal creatures from around the world was dry as hell, so I’d skimmed some pages. Or—sections.

All right, I skipped a bunch of chapters. Sue me.

Drilling paranormal knowledge into our heads was necessary—there were a lot of bad things out there, and knowing their weaknesses was definitely a good thing. It was just so damned *boring*.

“Okay, next one.” Lexi’s fuchsia nail trailed down the page of her grimoire. “Oh, here you go: Cernunnos.”

“Oh, that’s Celtic,” Evan said. “Um...he’s the god of fertility, life, wealth, animals—pretty much everything.”

“Underworld.” The word slipped past my lips without permission. I didn’t look at either Lexi or Evan but concentrated on connecting my bouncy ball with the ceiling. Nice and easy.

“Right, the underworld. Other gods associated with it?”

Did she really go there? Really?

“Batara Kala,” I bit out. “Bhaironji. Charun. Gugalanna. Hades. Jabru. Kanaloa.” My ball tosses were turning into throws. Hard ones. Each connection with the ceiling punctuated a name of another underworld deity. “Llao. Mantus. Ningishzida. Motherfucking *Osiris*.”

With the last name, the ball went through the ceiling drywall. Pieces and dust scattered across the couch and the floor, and all over my face. I closed my eyes and swiped a hand over my nose and mouth, dislodging the debris so I could breathe.

I was sucking in air like I’d run a five-k.

“Wes?” Lexi’s voice was tentative.

“Off-limits,” I managed, my voice strangled by anger. It wasn’t her I was angry at—not really. Or maybe I was, partially. How could she bring that subject up? After a demon had made me use the Crown of Osiris to try to make its stolen body immortal so it could stay in the living plane? After I’d watched the demon shoot my no-longer-ex, Hudson? After...after it had *changed* me.

Not that anyone knew about that.

“It’s important to know—”

“Why?” I demanded, shoving myself up to a sitting position. “Gods aren’t real. They’re legends, nothing more. It’s a dumbass move to waste time on them. Focus on shit we might actually run into in our lives.”

“Gods are real.” She slapped the grimoire shut and hopped off the desk. “Let me get the broom.”

Evan eyed the ceiling. “Hudson’s gonna be pissed.”

My temper flared, pushing hard against my restraint. God, if they stayed, I was going to say something I’d regret. Or worse—they’d witness something I didn’t want them to see. “Out. Both of you.”

Evan’s face crumpled. Every emotion the kid had played across his features like they were a movie screen, and normally I found it endearing. Right now, it was another twist of my fraying nerves.

“Go get a coffee. I’ll clean up.”

Lexi bit her lower lip and looked at me like I was a puzzle she had to solve. “Wes—”

“Fucking go,” I growled.

She slapped the broom into my palm. “Fine. Evan, we’ll let Wes have his hissy fit in peace.”

“Sorry,” Evan said quietly, then followed Lexi out of the office.

And didn’t that layer another level of anger on me? Anger at myself this time, because Evan didn’t deserve to bear any of my temper.

“Fuck!” I threw the broom across the floor. It clattered against the laminate flooring we’d installed after buying the fixer-upper house and converting it into office space.

My last nerve was about to snap.

I marched into the tiny bathroom and closed the door, not bothering to turn on the light. Darkness was good.

With a whimper, I let go. My magic burst out of the too-small mental container I forced it into—the container that used to be perfectly sized. Now it was filled to overflowing all the time, straining and pushing and demanding I acknowledge it. Demanding I use it. But I didn’t need this much magic. I didn’t want it.

It didn’t care.

I slouched forward as relief slammed through me. My muscles relaxed, and warmth flowed through my veins. Letting my magic out felt almost like an orgasm—or maybe it was more like the afterglow, when everything was



loose and relaxed and your brain was high on endorphins. I reluctantly lifted my head to gaze at the mirror and scowled at the pastel blue light emanating from my skin.

A radiance lit my pale skin from within, making it seem as though I had strips of LED lights glowing in my veins. My hair, short on the sides, styled smoothly from a side part on top, and dark blond in normal light, took on a bluish sheen so it looked—weirdly—almost green. But my eyes were the worst. I'd gotten used to how Hudson's and Evan's vampire side showed in their glowing eyes. It had come to mean protection or passion or some other high emotion that let me know that the two men closest to me felt things strongly. I found that reassuring. Mine, though? They glowed with the cold white-blue light of the depths of winter. There was no warmth in them, only the chill of power I didn't fucking want.

Power I hadn't told anyone about.

I let my head droop so my forehead was almost touching the vanity counter. I'd meant to tell everyone right after our big showdown with the demon. But Hudson had been so excited about his retirement from the Toronto PD and setting up our PI firm. And Lexi had been exhausted from the stress of being kidnapped and using her magic to erase electronic evidence of our involvement at the scene so the cops didn't ask too many questions. Then we needed to be there for Evan and his reaction to killing the demon, which was way more important than my gaining a little bit of extra power. Then Hudson was working with Iskander after Isk got out of the hospital, not fully recovered from the vampire attack that had nearly stolen his ability to speak but wanting to get back to work and as eager as Hudson was to open up a joint firm.

Basically, every time I thought about sharing what had happened, something came up, something that made it easy for me to put it off for another day, another week, another month. And suddenly, months had passed and I hadn't said anything, and now I felt like I couldn't. It'd been too long and bringing it up now...it wouldn't serve any purpose. I was dealing. It didn't affect my life.

Except I wasn't. And it did. But I was scared. I wasn't sure *what* the crown had done to me, but it couldn't have been good. Not with how I had to release my magic every now and again. But as long as I didn't know, I could... I don't know, pretend. Not face it. Hide, which I was a champ at doing. Beyond those worries, anxiety filled me at the idea of my friends—

and Hudson—reacting poorly. I didn’t want them—and him—to look at me differently. I didn’t want them to back away. I didn’t want them to fear me.

It was easier—better—to keep my mouth shut.

The bell over the front door jangled hard. “Wes!” Evan shouted.

I scrambled to shove my magic back into its little box, and the bathroom grew dark again.

“Wes!”

I opened the door and saw Evan, his fangs partially down and his eyes almost-but-not-quite glowing. “What the hell—”

“There’s weird shit happening at the café.” He grabbed my arm and tugged. “We have to help Lexi!”

Given how used to “weird shit” we all were now, the near panic in Evan’s voice got my heart pumping. My magic nudged its container again, wanting out, but I refused to listen to it.

Whatever was going on, we’d handle it. *Without* the equivalent of a magical grenade launcher.



The Candra Café was one of those treasures you found only after you moved into a new neighborhood. Nothing stood out about it, especially in the winter, which kept it camouflaged from people passing through. But for those of us who were on Argyle Street every day, it was a necessity. Their coffee was always hot and fresh, their sandwiches were generous and cheap, and they had gulab jamun to die for.

As we approached, the sounds of chairs and tables crashing to the floor echoed out onto the street, paired with Lexi shouting. A small group of bystanders hovered near the door—and jerked back when a chair flew out the open doorway to shatter onto the sidewalk. More than one had their cell phone extended above their head, no doubt to try to video what was going on inside, but the café’s picture windows were obscured by foot-tall lettering, posters of local events, and partially drawn blinds.

I shoved through the crowd, Evan trailing behind, and ignored the few shouts of caution as we entered the restaurant. Lexi was backed into the far corner near the counter, waving her arms in a pantomime of throwing something. Suddenly a tiny, dark-purple *thing* shot across the room and

slammed into the wall. Before I could identify what it was, it poofed into a hint of dust and smoke that smelled like...charcoal?

“What the—”

“They’re imps!” Lexi shouted as another three things emerged from the shadows of the hallway leading to the restrooms. They weren’t large—maybe the size of hefty housecats. A swipe of her arm sent them spinning back into the darkness.

“They’re what?” I yelled.

“Imps!” She made a disgusted, growly sound. “Just—hit them until they disappear!”

Something grabbed my pant leg. I looked down into a twisted face with giant bat ears and a snout like a rat’s. Instead of rodent-like teeth, the creature’s purple-black lips were pulled back in a snarl to reveal rows of sharp teeth—tiny, but jagged and deadly. Bony wings extended from its back. Purple-gray skin stretched taut between the bones, with raised bumps here and there. As I watched, one of the bumps burst, exuding a vile, sulfuric odor. With a shout, I shook my leg, but the damn thing held on.

Evan growled, grabbed the thing by the back of the neck, and rammed it into the wall. Like the earlier one, it snuffed out in a puff of dust.

I wanted to ask Lexi where they’d come from, why they were here, but more emerged from behind the counter and rushed us. The next few minutes blurred together as I pulled imps off Evan and he pulled them off me and we proceeded to send them back to wherever they’d come from. I didn’t count how many bodies disintegrated into puffs of smoke, but it felt like it was dozens.

Lexi swiped a hand over her forehead after she banished another imp. “There’s gotta be—” She sucked in a breath. “A portal, a crack, something.”

“To the otherplane?” That didn’t make sense. From Lexi’s teachings over the past few months—plus the books she loaned me—I had a better understanding of the otherplane in relation to everything else. There was the living plane, where life as we knew it existed. Surrounding the living plane was the otherplane, kind of like an ozone layer. It protected the living plane from the beyond and everything that existed in those realms. No one knew what the beyond was—it was what spirits passed into after death, but it was also where demons lived. The otherplane was an impenetrable cushion that

those in the beyond could not breach—at least not without someone summoning them.

But imps didn't live in the otherplane. I would know—I visited there often enough. The otherplane was empty, except for the occasional ghost stuck there on their way to the forever that awaited them.

So a portal to what? The beyond? That had to be what she was saying. “That’s not possible.”

“Says the man who fought a demon last spring.”

“A demon who was summoned and possessed a living body.” I kicked an imp into the wall, and noticed there was another wave approaching. Shit. “This isn’t the same!”

“No, I know.” Lexi’s hazel eyes were tired and serious. “This is worse.”

“Worse?” These things were annoying and—shit, ow—had sharp teeth, but I didn’t see how they were worse than a demon committing multiple murders with the intent to gather together a super powerful magical artifact so it could gain immortality and wreak havoc on the living plane without worrying its host body would decompose around it.

“Open portal,” Evan said. He sounded way less breathless than Lexi and me. One look told me why—he was in full-on vamp mode, eyes glowing gold, fangs extended, and hands sporting deadly claws. His words weren’t as crisp and clear as usual, since it was tough to talk around those pointy teeth. “With the demon that possessed Julia, whatever portal was opened to summon it had been long closed. So it was the only thing that came through.”

Oh. Oh crap. I got it. “So these imps are crawling through now, but in a few minutes...”

“It might not be only imps,” Lexi confirmed.

“What kinds of things are we talking about?”

“Hellhounds, ghouls, demons, you name it.”

That did not sound like fun. At all. “Yeah. Let’s close it. Good idea.”

Lexi slammed another three imps into nothingness. “It’s kinda hard to concentrate when I’m being swarmed.”

Evan and I could make a small dent in the imps rushing us, but we couldn’t vanquish more than one or two at a time, unlike Lexi. And even then, about one in three of her attempts to fend off the creatures failed—I suspected because she was using her magic for personal gain, which made it unreliable. Unless I unleashed my magic...

I balked at the idea. My gut told me that would be like bringing a nuclear bomb to a gunfight. A flare of magic might get rid of the imps, but what if I hurt Evan and Lexi? What if there were more waves waiting to push through? How many times could I do that and succeed? No—it was best to let Lexi handle it. But that didn't mean I couldn't help.

As more imps swarmed from the back room, I fought them on autopilot and opened the mental box of magic a crack. Allowing only a thin thread to extend outward was so hard—the bulk of my magic thrust against my restraint, wanting out fully. A headache bloomed between my temples at the effort, but I ignored it. I directed the magic toward Lexi, softly, slowly, so she wouldn't realize she was getting a boost. God, it would have been so much easier if I'd just told her—told everyone—about this, but even as I had the thought, even as I recognized the foolishness of keeping my secret, I knew that even after this fight was done I wouldn't confess.

It had been too long. There'd be too many questions, and most of my answers were stupid, so no. Best to keep my mouth shut.

When my magic intertwined into Lexi's, her demeanor changed. I don't know if she was aware of it, but I saw it. Her tired, rounded shoulders straightened. Her casting movements went from lackluster to determined and strong. In moments, she'd cleared most of this wave of imps.

"Finally," she said.

I jerked my chin at Evan and we moved to flank her. A few more imps trickled into the café, but we dispatched them easily. Lexi's hands drew symbols in the air, symbols that glowed briefly to my vision. I couldn't recall seeing that before, but then, I could count on one hand the number of times I'd seen Lexi cast serious, involved magic, and have fingers left over. Until last spring, that hadn't been the type of life we led.

Thirty seconds passed without more imps. Then a whole minute. Two. Lexi blew out a breath. "It's closed—sort of."

"Sort of?" Evan echoed.

"The best I could do was patch it." She grimaced. "I hope it holds."

I let a bit more magic flow into her, then cut it off before closing the box. I felt none the worse for wear after sharing some of my power—other than the headache from restraining it—which would be frightening if I let myself think about it.

So I didn't.

A head of long, braided black hair slowly emerged from behind the counter, next to the cash register, followed by a pair of wide mahogany eyes. Bhavana, the café's owner, looked around, skimming over the damage, before landing on us. "Is it over?" she asked, her voice shaky and her lilting accent thicker than I'd ever heard it.

"They're gone," Evan assured her with a gentle smile. He was back to looking human, which showed how far he'd come in the past few months. It used to take him a lot longer to put his vamp away.

"I—I—" She rose farther, gaining her feet, but she didn't stop scanning her surroundings. "I heard scrabbling in the kitchen, and—I've never seen rats like that. Or that many. All swarming..." Fully standing now, she looked at me with a strange expression. Hopefulness? "They were rats, right?"

I shared a glance with Lexi, then turned back to Bhavana. In the distance, sirens wailed. "Yes, of course. Are you all right?"

She nodded. "I—Yes. Rats should not act like that."

Lexi stepped forward too, holding out a hand in encouragement. Bhavana took it and let Lexi lead her around the counter and toward the front entrance. "It was the cold snap," she said. "It drove them into your café."

"Rats like warmth," Evan added.

"Yes—they do," Bhavana said with conviction. "Indeed they do. Rats."

She continued forward, her steps less than steady, and Lexi kept her balanced. Behind them, I took a minute to survey the damage to the café. Tables were overturned, as were chairs, and there was dust—imp remains—everywhere. Everything appeared to be fixable, but it would take some work to put to rights.

"You think she'll convince herself it was rats?" Evan murmured.

"I don't think her brain will give her a choice."

"Fair enough." He let out a sigh. "The health department is going to shut her down, isn't it?"

"Shit, I hadn't even thought of that." I scrubbed a hand over my face. "It's not fair she's going to be punished for something that isn't true."

"Somehow I don't think they'll change their minds if we tell them it was imps and not rats that trashed it."

"No," I agreed. "But we're investigators. So...let's investigate."

## Chapter Two

*Let's investigate.* Simple. Direct. Easy.

Except I'd forgotten about the wet blanket known as Hudson Rojas.

"No," he said, his arms crossed. The fabric of his long-sleeved, eggplant-colored Henley bunched across his biceps. He was tall—way taller than my five-seven frame—and broad, muscular, barrel-chested. His dark brown hair was more silver than not these days, and long enough for gentle waves to tease his collar. His everyday appearance was intimidating, but when he let his vamp out and flashed his fangs, he could be downright scary.

Not to me, though. Never to me. Just looking at him made my blood sing.

Usually. Right now, though, it was starting to boil.

"What do you mean, no?" I demanded. I cast a glance at Lexi and Iskander for support, but their attention was conveniently occupied by other important things in the office. Like the coffeemaker. And a wall. "Look at the big picture. Those imps got through somehow."

"Wes has a point," Lexi interjected. At Hudson's glare, she shrugged. "Just saying. We should find out how they ended up here."

"We're not the paranormal police," Hudson countered. "And do you think the cops or health inspectors or whatever are going to let some random investigators wander through the scene?"

"You're not a random investigator," I said. "You used to be one of them."

"Not the point."

"Okay, so...we could sell our services to Bhavana. I'm sure she'd like to know—"

"What? How the nonexistent rats entered her café?" Hudson scoffed.

I squinted at him. "You don't want to investigate because it's a paranormal thing."

Iskander let out a soft groan. "Oh, here we go."

"No, that's not why, and you damn well know it," Hudson growled.

"We're investigators, not exterminators. How the hell are you going to sell our services to Bhavana?"

"I could—could—" I waved a hand in the air. "I'd make something up!"

"Good business practice. Start out by lying to your client. Excellent."

My magic, reacting to my temper, pounded in my head to the time of my increased heartbeat and I let out a frustrated noise. “You always have an excuse.”

“An excuse for what?”

“Not taking on the cases that seem a little weird.”

“The cases that ‘seem a little weird—’” he made air quotes “—are weird because they’re not legit cases.”

“You don’t know that.”

“C’mon. Give me some credit for knowing people and knowing when their stories are bullshit. I was a cop for nearly forty years.”

“I’ve got to side with Hud on this,” Iskander said. His voice was raspy and just above a whisper, thanks to the scar on his throat.

Hudson gave him a small smile. “Thanks, Isk.”

It was stupid, but Iskander backing Hudson over me didn’t feel great. He’d been a client of my thief-for-hire business—and then my kinda-maybe friend—first. But he and Hudson had gotten close while working together to open the firm. They had a shared experience, after all, both being investigators—Hudson an ex-cop, Isk a PI. Investigating stuff took a certain personality, one I didn’t have. Most of the time, when I tried to put two and two together, I came up with five. My conclusions had my own brand of logic behind them, one that made sense to me and no one else. But that was okay—that wasn’t my main contribution to this business venture. I was the covert surveillance guy, seeing as I could turn into a ghost.

But Iskander and Hudson? They were the fitting-puzzle-pieces-together guys. They thought alike. Watching them bounce ideas off each other as they were trying to figure something out was like watching brothers bicker on their way to a common goal.

And yeah, I was jealous.

I wished Evan had stuck around instead of going on a date. As much as Lexi liked helping us out now and again, she wasn’t a full-time employee of the firm—she liked being a nurse too much—and she wasn’t invested enough in the business to take my side, but Evan? He would’ve.

Probably.

Okay, maybe. He had a bit of hero worship going on with Hudson.

“So we’re not pursuing anything with Bhavana,” Hudson declared, as if that hadn’t been clear.



“Got it,” Lexi said. “I’m going to research how the tear might have happened, though. Those imps weren’t summoned.” At my blank look, she continued, “When a witch does a summoning, one of the most important parts of the spell is closing the rift behind whatever you summoned. Leaving it open takes a hell of a lot of energy—a constant drain—and it’s dangerous. As *fuck*.”

“Because anything could wander through,” I said.

“Exactly. No witch in their right mind would create a crack to the beyond and leave it.”

“*Right mind* might be the operative phrase here,” Iskander pointed out.

I had to agree. Summoning anything seemed to be the wheelhouse of someone who was a little unhinged.

“True,” Lexi admitted. “But here’s the kicker—I didn’t sense any casting at Bhavana’s. Recent or otherwise.”

I frowned. “What are you saying? It was random?”

“Maybe? That’s why I need to research.”

I decided Lexi sounding uncertain about a magical event was my new least favorite thing.

\* \* \*

Lexi headed home to dive into research, and Iskander, Hudson, and I spent the rest of the night planning out the next steps on our active cases. By the time Hudson and I left the office at two, I was ready for some downtime. My magic throbbed in my head like an oddly placed toothache. If I were into anthropomorphizing things, I’d say it was angry at being teased with freedom and usage earlier only for me to contain it again. It made me edgy and crabby, so when Hudson pulled up to his house, I couldn’t hold in my annoyance.

“You could’ve asked.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw his jaw tighten as he guided his monstrous red muscle car into the detached garage at the back of his property. “If you’d admit you already lived here—”

“Except I *don’t*.”

He let out his grumble-sigh-hitching breath, his *can’t react don’t react* noise. “You’re raring for a fight tonight, aren’t you?” he growled as he wrenched the gearshift into Park.

“No,” I sputtered, even as my temper crowed *Yes!*

His only response was to slam his door. I scrambled out of the car to catch up. Instead of using the code-locked secret tunnel from his garage to his house, Hudson traversed the short stretch of driveway to the kitchen door. He’d once told me that he’d dug the tunnel to avoid the gaze of nosy neighbors, but at a few minutes past two in the morning, there was no one awake to witness him arriving home and it was dark as pitch, which meant he didn’t have to cover his skin to protect it from his allergic reaction to UV rays.

As I closed the kitchen door behind me, he tossed his keys on the small table tucked into the corner where we ate breakfast most evenings, and turned to face me. He looked tired—but there was a spark of irritation in his gaze. “I’m not gonna ask again.”

I retrieved his keys and hung them up on the rack beside the kitchen door—their usual spot. Hudson was meticulous about everything having a place, so the fact that he hadn’t hung them up there to start with was a sign he was pissed. “I know.”

“‘Cause I’ve asked you to move in three times already and—”

“I know. I’m—I’m not ready.” I *couldn’t*. Not with my secrets hanging between us. And yeah, I knew that theoretically, that was an easy problem to solve, but...

“Bullshit.” Instantly, his demeanor softened. “No, not bullshit. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

Crap. Conciliatory, understanding Hudson was so much harder to resist than annoyed, pissed-off Hudson.

“I know you’re still having nightmares, Wes.”

Fuck.

“What you went through—”

“What we went through.”

Gentle fingers nudged my chin until I met his gaze. Despite the temper riling me up, the sight of his warm, golden-brown eyes soothed me. They were as familiar now as my own reflection. “What *you* went through,” he said softly. “Yeah, it wasn’t a picnic for me, either, but I’ve had training on how to deal with traumatic events.”

“That doesn’t make you better—”

“God, that’s *not* what I meant.” He cupped my neck and cheek to hold me still, pressed his forehead to mine, and took a couple of slow breaths.

Despite myself, I waited for him to continue. “You’re hurting. That’s normal, and natural, and completely understandable. PTSD is nothing to be ashamed of.”

I hadn’t been formally diagnosed, so Hudson was a bit off base using the term, but even I could admit I exhibited some classic signs of the disorder—recurring nightmares being chief among them. Thing was, I couldn’t even be mad at Hudson for his armchair psychoanalysis, since he was right—he’d been trained to deal with traumatic events, and beyond that, he’d lived through his share and come out the other side a productive member of society. And a vampire, but that wasn’t the point.

Or maybe it was.

He’d been turned against his will while undercover and lost nine months of his life to bloodlust. He’d overcome so many hurdles—the horrors his sire inflicted on him, the obstacles to returning to his beloved job, adapting to being a vampire cop. But he’d made his life work. He tried to tell me his life was better now that I was back in it, and the majority of the time, I believed him.

Except when he looked at me with tired, sad eyes because he knew I was hurting and didn’t know how to help. I’d gone through my own transformative events and I could see the parallels between Hudson’s turning and my own...whatever it was. But I couldn’t bridge that gap.

If I told him, he’d know. If he knew, everything would change. I felt that deep in my gut, and I’d felt it for so long now, I couldn’t figure out if it was instincts guiding me or fear lying to me.

We’d made promises. Vows to give this thing between us a real try. But we’d done that before too, and it had all fallen apart. It could again, because of my stupid magic, and then what?

Goddamn it, Wes.

“I don’t want to fight,” I said quietly.

Hudson let out a soft chuckle that was more air than sound. “Me neither.” His hand pressed against my skin, and I welcomed the pressure. It grounded me. “But I’m here for you when you want to talk, okay? And I lied—I’m gonna ask again.” I took in a breath to protest, but he cut me off. “Shh, not tonight. But I’m going to ask you to move in until you say yes. Because I know you will, eventually.”

And that’s what I was afraid of. If I moved in with Hudson, if he found out the truth...this relationship we were trying again might die.

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## Chapter Three

Lexi picked me up in front of Hudson's house for a shopping trip the next afternoon. I could drive, but I preferred to avoid it whenever possible. Unlike Hudson, I didn't drool over cars or get some weird satisfaction out of the sound of big engines at high revs. Or going fast. He was welcome to his monster muscle car. Even Lexi's Mini Cooper was a little too peppy for my taste.

As I got in, Lexi turned down the radio and said, "Change of plans."

"Are we running away together?"

"Idiot," she scoffed lovingly, checking her mirrors before pulling away from the curb. The wheels spun for a second as they sought traction on the slushy asphalt, then the car jerked forward. "No. I like my neck without holes in it, thanks."

"So what's up?"

"I got a call from Kee on my way over. You remember Kee?"

I put on my best old man voice, quavery and soft. "Yes, dearie. I believe so."

She chuckled. "Stop it. There's been weird stuff happening at the youth home."

The youth home was Aurora House, an LGBTQIA shelter for homeless teens that had opened this past fall. Lexi had met Kee, the home's coordinator, through a charity event a few years back, and when Kee was looking for volunteers to help make Aurora House a reality, Lexi had been only too happy to volunteer the two of us. We'd spent the better part of the summer helping to renovate the old, outdated farmhouse.

"Weird stuff? Like...our kind of weird stuff?"

"Yours, specifically. Some of the kids are reporting ghosts."

"No shit?"

Despite spending quite a lot of time in the otherplane, I didn't see many actual ghosts. There were two types, as far as I knew—and if you didn't include me. The most common sort was an echo, which was like an imprint of ghostly energy that repeated itself again and again. The spirit that the echo originated from wasn't present, but had already moved on to the

afterlife. That's what those ghost hunter shows usually captured—footsteps, whispers, and so on. In the otherplane, I could see the echo's form, and they normally looked like a person, but I couldn't interact with them.

The rarer type of ghost was an intelligent one looking to interact with people or get help to complete a task. Those were the ones mediums could pick up on, the ones that played with Ouija boards and left messages and tugged on your clothes to get your attention, if they could summon enough energy.

"No shit," Lexi confirmed. "Kee overheard me say something about being a witch and assumed that meant Wiccan."

"So let me guess—today's a field trip day instead of shopping."

"Unless Hudson needs you in the office for something? This'll be a few hours."

Aurora House was located well north of the city, so it was a hike to get there and back. Which was fine. Getting away from work-Hudson was not a bad idea. I was still a bit peeved from the night before.

I slouched back in my seat. "I'm not even going to ask him."

She cast me a sideways glance. "You know he's got a point, right?"

"So do I."

"You're both going to have to work out a compromise on this."

"Compromise?" I scoffed. "Have you met Hudson?"

I let out a sigh and tried to release some of the resentment I still carried about the "no paranormal cases" thing. Lexi was right—Hudson did have a point. But I honestly, truly felt we could be doing something more than just skip tracing people or following cheating spouses. We all knew about this whole other world that most people never even saw—didn't that mean we had an obligation to help other people who were in on that secret?

"Hey, Wes?"

I shook off my ponderous thoughts and looked at Lexi. "Yeah?"

"Did you feel something at the café last night?"

"Other than lots of little teeth biting me?"

"I mean magically."

My heart thudded a little harder. "Uh... I felt your magic. Kind of. It made the hair on my arms stand on end, like usual."

She shook her head, her curls bouncing. "Not that. I was tired, down to the dregs, and then...suddenly I wasn't."

I could tell her. It hit me—this was the opening I’d been waiting for. Wanting. I could confess and tell Lexi everything. How worried I was, how scared.

And then she’d flip out and get distracted, and we wouldn’t be able to help Kee.

I looked out the windshield again. “Sounds like you got your second wind.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her scrunch up her nose. “Eh. Maybe.”

“Oh hey. I like this song.” I turned up the volume on a pop song I’d never heard before and hoped Lexi would let it go.

She did. I wasn’t sure if I was thankful for that or not.

\* \* \*

A hundred years ago, when the farmhouse that was now Aurora House was built, its location would have been on the edge of civilization. Now, though—well, it still felt like it was on the edge of civilization, but at least we had cars these days.

Kee had shared that they’d inherited the house from a relative, and it had been in a sad, saggy state of disrepair when I’d first seen it last summer. It was a classic brick farm home with a rainbow-striped front porch—which I might have helped with. It looked fantastic, if I did say so myself. A barn sat a little ways off to the right of the house, looking much more solid than it had in the summer. I wondered if Kee had decided what to do with it yet.

Kee ushered us inside and out of the cold as quickly as they could. Today they wore a frilly, flowy dress and makeup, slipping into a feminine presentation, and they looked fantastic. A silk scarf with streaks of yellow, orange and blue was wrapped around their short hair, the long ties swept over one shoulder like a colorful ponytail. Tomorrow they might dress in a more traditionally masculine style, and look equally amazing. Kee rocked their genderfluidity.

“Thanks for coming over so quickly,” Kee said and offered to take our jackets. Eventually we made it down the hall to their office, and sat in the chairs in front of the broad desk. “Can I get either of you a coffee?”

“I’m good, thanks.” It was a testament to Lexi’s curiosity about what was going on that she turned down coffee. “Tell us what’s happening, hon. You sounded spooked on the phone.”

“Spooked. Yeah.” Kee took off their aubergine-rimmed glasses and rubbed the bridge of their nose. “The first report we got was last September, shortly after the renovations were done. One of our residents said that she heard her door open in the middle of the night. The light in the hall was on, so she was able to watch it swing completely open, and there was no one there.”

“Was it possible she was half-asleep and missed whoever opened it?” I asked.

“That’s what I thought at the time, so I didn’t pay too much attention. It happened again to that resident about a week later, and then another couple of residents on that floor reported the same thing.”

I shared a look with Lexi. “That’s a little creepy,” she said.

“Right? And it gets worse.”

According to Kee, the activity had only increased over the next few months. It went from doors opening on their own, to the TV and lights turning off and on randomly, to personal items being moved and put in very unlikely places, such as a toothbrush on top of the kitchen cabinets, and every pair of socks one resident owned suddenly hiding out in the freezer. One resident’s radio started blaring in the middle of the night—and it wasn’t the sort that could be programmed as an alarm, either, which made it doubly weird.

As unnerving as all of these events were, they were benign, and the residents and Kee laughed them off and lived around them. But last week a mirror shattered when a resident was looking at her reflection. Another resident reported being grabbed roughly by the arm, and watched as scratches appeared on his skin. And today, the newest kid in the house reported that as he was walking down the stairs, someone nudged him from behind—not enough to make him fall, but enough that if he hadn’t been holding on to the banister, he might have.

As Kee related all of the events, I couldn’t stop my shoulders from getting more and more tense. At first I thought it was because of the escalating incidents, and the number of them—I’d heard of echoes happening for an extended period of time, but the moving of items to weird places, and the scratching and almost-shoving pointed to this being an intelligent haunt. For a ghost who knows they’re a ghost to continue with that sort of stuff even when it becomes clear none of the living people are sensitive enough to communicate...that bothered me. A lot.



I rolled my shoulders—then froze as I felt a finger brush my cheek.  
“Shit.”

Lexi and Kee immediately stopped discussing details of the events at my soft curse. “What is it?” Lexi asked.

“Something touched me.”

Lexi looked around the room, then shook her head. “I don’t see anything. Or feel anything. Are you—”

I nodded tersely. I could *feel* it standing behind me, which was so beyond weird. Normally when I was in my living form, I didn’t sense much that was otherworldly. For all intents and purposes, in this form, I was human, if longer-lived than anyone else. I might feel a gentle tug if there was something on the otherplane, or the flare of Lexi’s magic. On the otherplane itself, it would be totally different. There, my magic sustained me, suffused me, but there wasn’t usually anything to sense because the plane was empty.

But I’d never felt this—this whole-body shiver-shudder, as though I sat in the path of a blizzard-cold draft wafting from a window. There was only one window in the room—it was behind Kee’s desk, with its heavy, thick curtains drawn. No, the draft I was feeling had nothing to do with the weather outside sneaking in, and everything to do with whatever the fuck was in the room with us.

It couldn’t be a regular ghost, could it? Feeling like that? What if it was another demon? What if it was something worse?

“Wes?” Lexi whispered. “You okay?”

When had I started breathing so fast? When had my heart decided to try to beat its way out of my chest? I couldn’t look. I didn’t want to look. I didn’t know what would be worse—looking and seeing something watching me, or looking and seeing nothing, knowing that everything I was feeling was all in my head.

Neither option was helping my breathing.

I was vaguely aware of Lexi murmuring something to Kee, something about me being sensitive or whatever, and then she was focused on me again. “Slow and easy. C’mon,” she encouraged. “In through your nose, out through—”

Fuck it, I had to look.

I turned.

A man stood in the corner. His clothes were old—I was no historian, but the shirt, pants, and suspenders looked to be from the turn of the last

century, which would place him right around the time this house was built. He wore tiny round spectacles and had slicked-back hair, and he looked as solid as Lexi. As solid as Kee. As though he were in the living plane and not in the otherplane.

It shouldn't have been possible.

When our eyes met, his widened. "You can see me?" he exclaimed and took a step forward.

I jolted up and out of my chair. One of its legs caught on the carpet and it tipped onto its back. I nearly followed it, but I recovered and stood my ground in front of the spirit.

The spirit I shouldn't have been able to see. Not when I wasn't in the otherplane.

"Wes, you're kinda freaking me out," Lexi said quietly.

I was kind of freaking myself out.

There was a—a blip, and another ghost appeared beside the first. A woman this time, in biker leathers. Her long hair was caught back in a braid that extended almost to her butt, and she so didn't fit the house or the first ghost. Which should have intrigued me more than it did, because it was another fucking ghost I shouldn't be able to see.

The implications terrified me. My interactions with ghosts—as infrequent as they were—had always been under my control. What did it mean that I could see them in the living plane? And two at once? Was I about to get swarmed? Did the ghosts have a fucking metaphysical telephone to tell others that hey, here's a guy who can help you out?

When a third ghost appeared—a big, burly guy with an intimidatingly bushy beard—and said, "*Finally*," like I was the answer to all of his prayers, I broke. I backed up and promptly tripped over the upended chair and landed on my ass. Lexi jumped up to help me and I think I might have kicked her by accident—but my brain was in full-on flight mode and I couldn't stop to worry about it.

Especially not when the temperature around me plummeted. The ghosts had gotten closer. I flinched back as a ghostly hand slipped through my arm.

I needed to get out of here. I needed to get out of here *now*.

I didn't realize I was mumbling to myself until Lexi said, "Okay, Wes, we're going."

She helped me to my feet and we staggered out of the room. Kee trailed behind us with our jackets, murmuring apologies. They didn't understand

what had happened, that was clear, but the concern they showed was a trickle of warmth in an otherwise cold and shocking day.

Once we were in the car and its heater was bringing the interior above freezing, Lexi turned to me and demanded, “What the hell was that?”

“That was fucked up, is what that was.” I held my hands in front of the vents and explained, in a trembling voice, what I’d seen.

Lexi’s brows rose to meet her hairline with each detail I conveyed. “You saw ghosts while you weren’t in the otherplane? How the hell?”

“They were in the living plane...maybe. I don’t know.” I looked out the passenger window at Aurora House—we hadn’t left yet, and I didn’t think I’d feel completely warm again until we were well away from this place. “I, uh... I guess I’m a little sensitive now?”

Inwardly, I groaned. Way to chicken out.

“Sensitive?” Lexi considered that, and I thought she’d call me on it. If she did, I’d tell her everything...but she didn’t. “Yeah, I can see that. You touched a lot of magic when you used the Crown of Osiris.”

I couldn’t help but shudder at the mention of that damned thing. “Right,” I said weakly.

“Do you think Kee and the kids are in danger?”

“No.” With some distance and regained objectivity, I could see that the ghosts weren’t trying to hurt anyone. “None of them seemed aggressive, despite everything that Kee reported. I think they’re just eager to talk to someone.”

“Like you.”

“Like me,” I confirmed, and sighed. “Sorry for the freak-out. It caught me off guard and they started moving toward me—”

“I get it.” Lexi gave me a look. “Well, I mean, I don’t get it, because I’ve never seen it, but I can imagine how startling it would be. You think you’re up for another visit?”

“If you can cleanse the room or something, sure.”

“That’s not a bad idea. It would keep them from overwhelming you again...but then you might not be able to talk to them and figure out what the hell’s going on.” She shifted the car into gear and started back down the long driveway. “I’ll figure it out.”

\* \* \*

It was past time for me to show up at the office when we got back to the city. I had her drop me off there instead of at Hudson's place.

"You want me to come in and talk with him?" she offered.

"I think I can manage to talk to my boyfriend on my own."

"Without yelling?"

I didn't bother to answer that.

Iskander was wrapping a scarf around his neck as I walked into the office, but Hudson was nowhere to be seen. "Where are you off to?"

"First meeting with a new client." He checked his pompadour in the mirror, making sure everything was smooth.

"Hud's not going with you?"

"Had errands to run." Iskander's dark gaze flicked to mine in the mirror, but he turned his attention back to his hair before I could figure out what that brief glance meant. "He'll be back later."

"Did Evan go with him?"

"No. He's on a date."

"Oh." Another one? I wondered if it was the same guy as last night.

"Look, can I talk to you about—"

"Running late." Iskander pulled on his jacket. "Back in a couple of hours. Text if you need me."

And before I could even argue it was important, he was gone.

Well then.

Before I could dwell too much on that brush-off, the phone rang. I scooped up the receiver and spent the next fifteen minutes talking with a potential client. It wasn't the most glamorous part of the job—not that any part of being a PI was truly glamorous—but I'd found over the past few months that I was pretty good at digging out details over the phone. It wasn't that much different from what I'd done as a thief for hire. I might not have the license or the official training to be an investigator, but I had a shitload of life experience that neither Hudson nor Iskander had. It made me surprisingly good with people. Hudson and Iskander had dubbed me the Director of HR, which was a fancy title to say I was in charge of everything but the investigation side of things.

Worked for me.

After promising to consult with my partners and get back to the client, I spent the next couple of hours writing down all the pros to investigating Aurora House officially. No need to write down the cons—I was sure

Hudson would fill those in without any effort. As I worked, I sent a few texts to Hudson, just to check in.

They went unanswered.

It was past eleven when I heard footsteps crunching on the snow and salt on the walk. Hudson strode into the office a few minutes later and stomped his feet. “Hey,” he said brightly.

I leaned back in my chair and crossed my arms.

“What?”

“What?” I echoed. “Is your phone dead?”

“I was driving.”

“For three hours?”

Something flickered across his expression. “I had errands.”

“Again, I repeat, for three hours?”

He shrugged off his jacket and I tried not to notice how his gray sweater hugged his chest and shoulders. “I don’t need to report what I do every minute we’re apart.”

“No, but a return text would be nice. Just so I’m not imagining you as a pile of dust somewhere.”

He hung up his jacket with a sigh. “You’re right. I’m sorry.” He walked over to my desk and pressed a kiss to my forehead. “How was your day? Did you have fun shopping with Lexi?”

“Funny you should mention that.”

“Uh-oh.” He perched on the edge of my desk as I rolled my chair back a bit. “What happened?”

“Kee—remember Kee?”

He frowned. “The youth home coordinator?”

Okay, he earned a smile for that one. He hadn’t been able to volunteer at Aurora House because, well, vampires couldn’t work day shifts, and also he’d been taking courses to get his private investigator license. The fact that he remembered Kee’s name and who they were said a lot about how much he paid attention to me. “Yeah. They called Lexi today about possible ghosts at the home.”

“Huh.”

“So we drove out there to have a look. And I, uh...” I cleared my throat. “I saw a ghost without being in the otherplane.”

“What? How?”

I shrugged, trying to play it off as no big deal to minimize the chances he'd freak out. "I've been a little, um, sensitive since...you know. The crown."

He pushed off the desk and stood straight. "Why is this the first I'm hearing of it?"

God, here was the proof I needed that not telling him the truth was the best plan I could've come up with. Go, procrastinating me. Because, damn. If he was this annoyed about a minimized version of the issue...

"It's not a big deal," I said.

"This is a very big deal."

I threw my hands in the air. "It's not."

Except he was right—it was. The words to tell him the truth were on my tongue, but fear held them back.

He sighed. "You've been so closed off."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Exactly what it sounds like. You're not talking to me—"

"I talk to you."

He shook his head.

After a few moments of silence, I said, "Lexi's going to arrange for another meeting with Kee."

He grunted.

"I think we should talk to them about hiring us." His shoulders tensed and I rushed on. "I get your point about Bhavana, but this situation is different. Kee believes in the ghosts—I mean, they can't not, after they witnessed my reaction. And figuring out why there are so many intelligent ghosts there—because there were three, all from different eras, which is so weird. Anyway, figuring out why is going to take some time. And then figuring out how to get them to move on, more time."

"Wes, I don't—"

"I don't want to abandon Kee to this, you know? They're good people, and the kids shouldn't have to be scared—"

"We're not a ghost-hunting service."

"No, I know. But—"

"If you and Lexi want to look into it in your spare time—"

"That's not what I—"

"It's not the type of case we want to take on."

I snapped my mouth shut and stared at him. "Says who?"

“Says me and Iskander. We chatted about it before I left earlier.”

“Oh.” I got up and sort of...hovered next to the desk. Iskander and Hudson were the investigators, yeah—the ones with licenses. But I was no less a partner than they were. I’d invested funds—and time and sweat—into this place. There was a reason we hadn’t named the firm Hassan and Rojas Investigations.

“Don’t flip out. This isn’t me—or Isk—rejecting you.”

“Tell me why.”

Hudson groaned. “It’s simple. I want a legitimate business.”

“This *is* legit—”

“Not in the eyes of most of our clients. How are we going to get a testimonial from Kee, Wes? A reference?” His voice dropped into a mocking, announcer-like register. “Got ghosts? Caballero Investigations was fantastic at taking care of *our* ghost problem!”

Okay... I could see the logic in that. But I wasn’t ready to give up my argument. We were investigators who knew about paranormal shit—didn’t that give us an obligation to help people who couldn’t get help elsewhere? “Who says we need to put them on the website? Or use them as a reference?”

“If we spend all our time on cases we can’t talk about, what *will* go on the website?” Hudson shook his head. “We can’t get distracted. Isk and I agree—”

“Stop.”

“Wes—”

“Just. *Stop.*” I headed toward the door.

Hudson sagged. “C’mon, Wes, don’t be like that.”

“I’m gonna take off.”

“Goddamn it, Wesley—”

I shook my head, slipped into the otherplane, and walked out through the door.

## Chapter Four

All I wanted was for my apartment to be my sanctuary. Okay—my slightly dusty, sort of musty-smelling sanctuary, since I hadn't spent much time here recently. Was it too much to ask for it to be a space where I could escape from the world and breathe?

“—lo, Wes.”

I glared at Michael, my first love.

The man who'd killed me.

He wasn't a ghost—at least, up until today, I was pretty sure he wasn't, since I had been seeing him outside the otherplane. Now, I had no idea. His form did this weird glitchy kind of thing, where his motions weren't smooth and continuous, like he was in one of those terrifying Japanese horror movies. It wasn't something I'd ever seen a ghost do—in the otherplane or not—so clearly it was my imagination that had placed him in my living room, one ankle crossed over the opposite knee, one arm strewn out along the back of the couch. My brain had kept his medium-brown hair cut the same as the last time I'd seen him in 1933—short on the sides and slightly longer on top—and wearing coveralls and a coarse button-down shirt, the farmworker's uniform of the era in which he'd lived and died.

Looking at him *hurt*.

I had been blindly in love with him once. We'd carried on in secret—because, hey, 1933—and made so many promises to each other. Promises that were derailed by his parents' plan to marry him off to further establish their place in the community. I'd been heartbroken when he refused to talk to me for weeks, then elated when I got word he wanted to meet with me during the day. When I walked into the abandoned store, I found him with two shotguns and a plan for us to be together forever.

A plan I'd agreed to wholeheartedly. Stupidly. Except, when the time came, I couldn't pull the trigger and end my own life.

So he did. But he didn't follow through with the plan to shoot himself.

I didn't know if murdering me had been his goal all along, or if he'd had second thoughts too when it came to turning the gun on himself.



I avoided the living room, bypassing it to head into my bedroom. There, I cracked open a window, despite the below-freezing temps outside, and stuck my nose in front of it, inhaling deeply. Fresh air was what I needed to chase away this specter. There had to be fumes in the apartment from it being closed up.

Though that didn't explain why I saw him at Hudson's sometimes too.

"—not going to help."

Along with the glitchy movement came an unclear voice, sounding as though Michael was speaking through a long cardboard tube. It was as creepy as the glitches.

"—don't have time—"

"Go away," I said, each word as clear as I could make it.

"Wes, I nee—to—"

"Go away!"

Exasperation flashed over Michael's face. "Soon," he said, the whole word understandable for once.

"Soon? What the fuck does that—"

A knock at the door interrupted me. Michael was gone, as though he'd never been there in the first place...which was probably accurate.

I was losing my fucking mind.

Another knock, followed by a muffled "Wes? Open up."

If I hadn't been so distracted by Michael's apparition, I would have sensed Hudson's approach. Not sure what I would have done if I had. I didn't want to avoid him. He'd pissed me off, sure, but that didn't mean I didn't love the jerk.

Because I did. It was kind of funny to think about—I mean, we'd only been together for a grand total of not-quite six years, five of which had been in the 1980s. But hey, maybe the idea of soul mates wasn't so far-fetched. There was definitely something there, something connecting us, even if we hadn't shared those three little words out loud yet since we'd gotten back together. We'd shown each other how much we cared in other ways, though. Logically, I understood that. But my emotions felt fragile, easily twistable, and god, I didn't want to fight anymore.

I opened the door to find Hudson leaning against the frame, looking adorably disheveled and uncertain. "Are you okay?" he asked.

My breath caught in my throat, and not only because his presence tended to make my brain shut down from sheer sexiness overload. "I'm fine," I

said gruffly, and stepped back to let him in.

He kicked the door shut behind him and wrapped me in his arms. I hadn't known how much I needed this hug until I felt it—safety, warmth, protection. Melting against him, I wrapped my arms around his back and held on tight.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. If there was one thing I'd come to appreciate about the twenty-first-century Hudson, it was the fact that he apologized when it was warranted. The eighties version would have held on to his righteousness beyond all reason. It had been one of his biggest flaws. "I didn't mean to ignore your input."

I let out a ragged breath, exhaling some of the tension in my body. Hudson drew back and nudged my chin upward.

"I felt like the unwanted third in a threesome," I said. "You and Isk making decisions, and then me, over here, useless."

"I clued in after you left how you must have felt. I fucked up."

"Yeah. I mean, you wanted me to be a part of your business."

"I did. I do."

"I don't want to feel like I'm being ganged up on."

"I get it."

"So what's with the anti-paranormal stance?"

"That's not—" He blew out a breath. "I'm not anti-paranormal."

"It sure sounded like you were earlier." I gave him a conciliatory look. "And I get it. I do. I'm not saying we should specialize in paranormal investigations, but we might be the only people who can help. Like at Aurora House."

"Yeah, maybe."

"So?"

Hudson was quiet for a moment, as though he were trying to organize his thoughts. "The truth is, the paranormal is my life. I don't want it to be my job too."

I blinked at him, stunned. That was damned simple. And something I hadn't considered. "Why the hell didn't you tell me that? Why go on about testimonials and crap?"

"I didn't think you'd get it. You spent seventy years with the paranormal as your life *and* your job. I've spent twenty trying to forget all about the paranormal."

"Damn it, Hud." Put like that, it made perfect sense.

“But you’re right—there are some paranormal cases we should look at. The situation at Aurora House is not like at Bhavana’s. If you’re still up for it, we could talk to Kee about our services.” He wrapped me up in his arms and held me close. “You’re everything to me. You know that, right?”

In moments like this, I knew it unequivocally. I could almost feel the love in Hudson’s heart, even if he hadn’t said the words yet, and even if the whole feeling-emotions thing was impossible. I wished I could feel this sure, this confident, when Hudson’s careless slips chipped away at my certainty.

I lifted my head and he took the invitation for what it was. His lips brushed mine, his skin cooler than a regular human’s, but not cold, not deathly. Lexi had explained more than once that Hudson and Evan weren’t dead—in fact, they’d never died, unlike what traditional Hollywood vampire lore would have you believe. They simply traded their human life force for blood-driven magic at the moment before their death.

Hudson’s tongue slipped inside my mouth, dancing with mine, and I sighed into the kiss, feeling the tension I’d been carrying around—for forever, it seemed—melt away. This was what I’d craved, without even knowing it. Hudson’s warm but not too warm touch, his slightly elongated fangs as he fell into the sensations we brought out in each other, his smoky cedar scent that surrounded me, infused me.

We were suddenly moving—Hudson’s doing, not mine, because I couldn’t even remember I had legs—and in an instant, I was lying on my bed, looking up at him. His eyes were glowing a soft yellow, a sign he was aroused.

“Do you want to?” he asked.

God, if I didn’t already love him, I would have fallen right there.

I didn’t often feel sexual attraction. Objectively, I could evaluate a man’s appearance as handsome, rugged, beautiful—but it was an esthetic appreciation, not an “I want to jump his bones” kind of one. I rarely felt the need to be close to someone, to kiss someone, to make love to them. In fact, there had been only two men in my life I had felt that way about—Michael and Hudson. But even though I desired Hudson and most of the time, just looking at him was enough to get my engine revving, sometimes my body wasn’t on board with the sex stuff. Sometimes it wanted cuddles and closeness rather than passion and orgasms. And the best thing? The absolutely amazing best thing?

Hudson accepted that without question. He always had.

“Yeah,” I said with a grin.

He yanked off his shirt. Commence drooling. Hudson wasn’t model-chiseled—his chest was too broad, too hairy, too much of a barrel shape to fit into society’s image of a perfect body. But I loved it.

Hudson hooked his thumbs into his waistband, then paused. “Aren’t you going to join me?”

I folded my arms behind my head. “Too busy enjoying the show.”

He smiled, the full-wattage version that rarely made an appearance, the one that made the corner of his eyes crinkle. I loved that smile. He shucked off his pants and kicked them aside, then held out his arms so I could look to my heart’s content.

And look, I did.

Hudson’s body was all power. From his barrel chest to his plump biceps to his thick thighs, everything about him was solid. Unmovable. Just looking at him, a sense of safety and security flooded me. He would never let anything hurt me.

After eighty-some-odd years spent mostly alone, that was incredibly reassuring.

His cock twitched under my perusal—half-hard and standing up farther with every second that passed. It wasn’t obscenely huge, but thick enough and long enough to be in scale with the rest of him, and make my mouth water.

I licked my lips and scooted back so I was sitting against the headboard. “C’mere.”

Hudson didn’t have to be told twice. He knelt on the bed and crawled over me, straightening again when he was straddling my waist. His dick was pointing at me, daring me to lick it. He grabbed the base and waved it in front of me. “You want it?”

“God, yeah.” I opened my mouth wide and he leaned forward to place the tip against my tongue.

I groaned at the taste of his skin. It had taken some getting used to, but I loved the fact that Hudson didn’t produce any seminal fluid—it was a vampire thing. I’d never liked swallowing, and now I didn’t have to worry about pulling off before he came. I could concentrate on giving him as much pleasure as possible...and that’s what I did. Tonguing the thick vein running along the underside of his heavy cock, giving the length of him a

barely there scrape of my teeth that made him moan, sucking hard on the head and focusing on the slit until he thrust forward, enough to let me know his control was slipping.

I unzipped my pants and pulled out my own aching dick as I looked up at Hudson. He had one arm braced against the headboard above my head, his face canted downward to watch his dick disappear into my mouth. His pupils were blown wide, surrounded by a ring of glowing yellow, and his fangs had fully descended. A few months ago, I hadn't known what to make of this transformation—now I had a Pavlovian response to it. Precome leaked from my dick and I smeared it over the head.

“Can I?” he whispered.

Oh god, yes. I nodded and relaxed.

His first thrust was tentative. His second was stronger. By the third, he knew I was ready, and he stopped holding back. He couldn't thrust all the way in—I was talented, but I wasn't a porn star. The feel of his hard shaft sliding against my tongue, stretching my mouth and teasing my throat was hot enough to shut down my brain. I became a being of sensation, nothing more, each one of Hudson's thrusts, each of my own strokes on my dick carrying me further along the edge.

“God, Wes.” Hudson's rhythm stuttered. “So good.”

I groaned around his length and that was it. Hudson shoved in, hard, his entire body stiffening as he came with a gasp. I stripped my dick, harder, faster, but it wasn't quite enough, and I couldn't help the small whimper that escaped.

Hudson withdrew and bent his knees so he was almost sitting on my thighs. His hand covered mine and slowed my strokes—and it was almost enough. But I'd learned to love something I never thought I would.

“I got you,” he murmured. Then he leaned forward and sank his fangs into my neck.

The pinch and the pressure of Hudson drawing my blood into his throat—that was the sensation I'd come to expect, come to *need*. My eyes rolled back into my head as I came, shuddering with every jet of my release.

When I came back to myself, it was to find Hudson licking every drop of come from my cock and my hand. The little growling noises he made were enough to make me want to go again—but even though the spirit was willing, the flesh was not. I was far too floaty to do anything but watch him.

I must have drifted off, because the next thing I knew, light was blazing across my eyelids. With a frustrated groan, I pushed myself up to lean over and turn off the nightstand light—but the click of the lamp did nothing to lessen the light in the room. I blinked my eyes open, frowning—and realized where the light was coming from.

The sun was streaming through the still-open window.

“Shit!” I scrambled out of bed, tripped on the sheet still tangled around my feet, and slammed to the hardwood floor.

“Wes?” Hudson’s sleep-muddled voice rose from above me. Or maybe that was what he sounded like right before the anaphylactic shock set in.

“Fuck—Hudson, I’m sorry. Get in the closet or—goddamn it!” I kicked at the sheet, then yanked it off my feet and lurched upward. “Get out of the sun. I’ll close the blinds—”

“No...wait.”

Fuck no, I wasn’t waiting. I darted across the room, toward the window, and my hand was on the blind when Hudson spoke again.

“Wes, just...hold on.”

Something in his voice made me pause. Maybe it was the lack of panic. Or the outright wonder. But I stopped and looked at Hudson for the first time since I realized the blinds were open. He sat on the bed, sunlight streaming across him, one hand held up in front of his face. Not to block the light, but...to feel it. He turned it back and forth and watched it.

What was he...

Was he enjoying the sun?

“Hudson?”

“It’s fine,” he said softly. “It’s... I don’t feel anything.” He blinked and gave a small shake of his head. “I mean, I feel the heat but...that’s it.”

My hand fell from the blind, shock weighing it down. “What are you saying?”

“The sun.” He looked up at me, the wide smile I loved firmly in place. “The sun isn’t hurting me.”

## *Chapter Five*

“Twigs or crystal?”

I eyed the items in Lexi’s hands from my seat on the Caballero Investigations employee couch and tried to ignore the gaping hole above me that I still hadn’t fixed. “Both?”

She screwed up her lips as she evaluated the witchy things. One was a pretty pink-and-yellow crystal on a leather thong, and the other was a bundle of...well, twigs and grass. They smelled nice, though. “That might be overkill. We don’t want to make you invisible to the ghosts, right? Just mute you a bit so they’re not crawling all over you.”

“That’s a great image, Lex. Thanks.”

She shoved the necklace at me, ignoring my sarcasm. “Here. The bundle is easier to add or take away.”

“And the crystal’s more fashionable,” Iskander added from his desk, his eyes on his computer screen.

Necklace it was.

“So what is it?” I asked, lifting the crystal up to get a better look at it. It really was beautiful, kind of like a rainbow. Appropriate.

“Tourmaline, for grounding and protection. It’ll absorb any negativity from the spirits, and subdue your aura so it’s not calling to all the ghosts in the area.”

“That sounds good. And the bundle thing?”

“It’s basil, rowan, and vetiver, and it will enhance the effect of the crystal. You might need it, you might not.”

The bell over the front door rang abruptly. Hudson appeared in the reception area—and froze when he saw us. As though he was startled to find us here. Whatever that weirdness was, he shook it off quickly and scowled. “Is this our new hangout spot? Here I thought it was an office.”

He took his jacket off and draped it carelessly over a chair, when there was a coat tree by the front door for that purpose. Things not in their place—always a good sign that Hudson was dealing with something. Maybe it was the whole making-friends-with-the-sun-again thing, but I doubted it. He’d been too happy about that new—and weird, and completely

unexplained—phenomenon. It was more likely that his early meeting had pissed him off.

He was normally better at keeping his annoyance at clients locked down, though.

I held up the crystal. “Lexi’s showing me what she prepared for my protection at Aurora House tonight. Pretty, eh?” When Hudson looked at me blankly, I prompted, “You asked me to arrange a meeting, remember?”

“Oh.”

“We should leave soon if we’re going to make it.”

“Yeah.” He moved over to the single-serving coffeemaker we kept near the reception area and pulled out a pod and a mug.

“How was your meeting?”

“Fine.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, Wesley.”

“We don’t have time for you to—”

“All I want is a *fucking* cup of coffee before I go investigate some *fucking* ghosts. All right?”

I stared at Hudson, his heaving chest, his tightly clenched fists, and all I could think was *What the ever-loving hell?*

Before anything could work its way out of my mouth, though, Iskander popped to his feet. “C’mon upstairs, Hud. I brewed a pot of the good stuff a little while ago.”

Hudson turned to look at the machine for a moment, then said quietly, “Okay.”

I couldn’t make my mouth move as Hudson followed Iskander to the back of the office, where the staircase to his second-floor residence was located. Anger and unhappiness warred in my chest as the door closed behind them with a final-sounding click.

“That was not normal,” Lexi said. “What the hell meeting did he go to?”

“He didn’t tell me. Just that he had a meeting.”

She plopped on the couch beside me and leaned her head on my shoulder. “That wasn’t cool.”

“No, it wasn’t.”

“But you know he’s reacting to whatever went wrong in that meeting, right? Not you.”



I sucked in a ragged breath. “No, actually, I don’t know that, because he’s not fucking telling me anything.” I brushed my cheek against her fuzzy hair. “He’s got these mysterious errands, and he’s making decisions with Iskander and leaving me out of them—”

“He is *not* having an affair with Isk.”

“Of course he’s not. But—”

He left me before.

I couldn’t say the words. They felt like the worst sort of betrayal, because we’d vowed to make it work this time, right? I was his everything. But the words I couldn’t say still rang with truth in my mind, because he *had* left me before. We *hadn’t* been able to make it work. It had been less about trust back then and more about priorities—Hudson’s job had been more important than us. I’d known it, and I’d hated it, and we were both miserable.

“But?”

I sighed. “I don’t know.”

It definitely didn’t help that when Iskander and Hudson came downstairs ten minutes later, Hudson wouldn’t look at me.

And he didn’t have any coffee.

\* \* \*

Returning to Aurora House was an exercise of faith on my part. I knew Lexi *thought* her solution would keep the ghosts from overwhelming me, and I trusted her. But I couldn’t quite shake the fear that the ghosts would crowd me again and I wouldn’t be able to escape.

It didn’t help that the home looked way more intimidating at night.

The old red brick was welcoming in the day, but with the sun fully set and wintry night blanketing the city, all that color was washed away. Safety lights sat at the corners of the building, but despite their illumination bouncing off the snow, it didn’t extend very far from the house, leaving the grounds in shadow. Two lights next to the front door gave off an inviting aura, highlighting the cheeriness of the porch. The barn was a black, hulking mass nearby.

My entire body screamed at me *not* to reenter the house, but for once I needed to ignore my self-preservation instincts. The only reason Hudson

had offered to extend our services to Kee was because I'd pushed for it. If I chickened out now...

Kee greeted us at the front door, androgynous in jeans and a long-sleeved aqua-colored T-shirt. Their eyes widened as they saw Hudson and Iskander standing behind Lexi and me. "You brought backup this time?"

"Sort of," Lexi said with a smile. "This is Hudson Rojas and Iskander Hassan—the investigators at Caballero Investigations."

"Like...ghost hunters?" Kee looked skeptical.

"Private investigators, actually," Hudson said with his wide, charming smile. All trace of his earlier pique was gone. "Can we come in?"

"Oh, god. Of course." Kee stepped aside and this time, instead of leading us back to their office, we went into the living room. The TV was on low, but there was no sign of any of the residents. I don't know if Kee saw my gaze roaming around the room, but they volunteered, "It's quiet time before lights out. Everyone's up in their rooms, reading or listening to music or—" they waved a hand "—something quiet."

They settled on one of the armchairs and turned the TV off.

It immediately flicked back on.

"Wes?" Lexi asked softly.

I looked around the room, but I didn't see anyone. Any ghost. Had the events of the day before been an anomaly? No, wait—there was something in the corner. A vague outline of a figure.

Grimacing, I explained what I saw. "I think your twigs are working a little too well." I'd tucked the bundle into my pocket before we'd left the office.

"Eh, maybe." Lexi held out a hand and I passed the bundle to her.

The figure in the corner gained some definition and details. It was the biker. She seemed to be squinting at me, as though it was as difficult to see me as it was to see her. Before she clued in completely, I snatched the twigs back from Lexi.

"Let's talk with Kee before the show starts," I said.

Kee swiped their hands over their arms, as though they were smoothing down goose bumps. "Okay, I've got to admit—I didn't actually think the place was haunted. Bad vibes maybe. Sure. Drafts. Shifting floors. I don't know. But *actual* ghosts?" They shivered.

Hudson leaned forward and handed over one of the postcard-like things we'd had printed up a few months back. They summarized the firm's

services and Hudson's and Iskander's backgrounds. "We're a legitimate investigation firm. We don't normally take on these types of cases."

"You mean there's no money in investigating ghosts?" Humor danced in Kee's voice, but faded quickly.

"Real hauntings aren't common—right, Wes?"

I took my eyes off the faded, fuzzy figure in the corner to look at Kee. "Have you ever seen any of those ghost-hunting reality TV shows?"

"One or two."

"Okay, so, those hauntings are mostly put on for the camera."

"I figured."

"But sometimes they're sort of real. They capture echoes. You know, footsteps, murmurs? Stuff that doesn't interact. It's just there, actions repeating themselves."

"Okay..." It was clear Kee wasn't sure where I was going with this.

"That's not what you have here. When we were here yesterday—" I glanced at Lexi for reassurance. I'd never talked to a normal human about my abilities before—other than Iskander—and it felt weird. "So, uh... I'm not going to make you sign a nondisclosure agreement or anything, but I'd really prefer you not to talk about this with anyone else."

Kee smiled and shook their head. "I've already learned that lesson. I tried talking to my mom about it, and I spent thirty minutes reassuring her I *wasn't* too stressed out."

"People don't want to believe in what they can't see, but...when we were here yesterday, I saw three separate, intelligent ghosts."

Kee's brows rose. "You saw them?"

"Clear as day," I confirmed.

"Intelligent ghosts are the type that interact," Hudson explained. "They try to communicate with people."

"And it's very, very rare to find three in one area. I've never seen it. In my entire life." I realized as I said it that Kee wouldn't find that very impressive, since I looked as though I was in my early twenties. But it was still the truth.

Kee's gaze swept from me, to Lexi, to Hudson and then to Iskander. "So what are you saying?"

Hudson shared a look with me. We'd discussed this with Lexi and Iskander earlier as we prepped for this meeting. What *did* it mean?

“We’re not entirely sure,” Hudson admitted. “But we’d like to investigate.”

“And you want me to hire you.”

Hudson gave them an apologetic look. “We can’t do it for free, but I can offer a discounted rate.”

Kee zeroed in on me. “How do I know you’re not taking advantage of me? That it’s not all an act?”

Good question. I glanced at Lexi, who gave me the barest nod. I stood up and said, “No screaming, okay?”

I slipped into the otherplane. All of the living people in the room became fuzzy and indistinct, as living beings always were when viewed from this side of reality. I knew their shapes—Hudson’s broad shoulders, Lexi’s effusive curls, Iskander’s leanness capped by a perfect pompadour, and Kee’s slim silhouette—but that was the only way I could tell them apart. Strangely enough, the ghost was fuzzier too, when she should have been easier to see.

Another indication that whatever was going on in Aurora House was not a normal haunting.

I moved quickly, rising and stepping over to the side of Kee’s chair. They had started to straighten in surprise and confusion when I stepped back into the living plane.

“I’m here,” I said softly.

They jerked to the side, away from me, and looked up with something like fear. “How the hell—”

“I’m not lying to you.”

They blinked up at me, their mouth opening and closing, and then they turned to Hudson. “When can you start?”

\* \* \*

While Kee retreated to their office to work out the contract with Hudson and Iskander, Lexi and I rearranged the furniture in the living room slightly, pushing the coffee table and chairs to the side so I could sit on the floor in the middle of the room. Technically I could have done what I needed to do with everything in its original place, but Lexi wanted space in case she needed to do something.

I wasn't sure what *something* entailed, and I didn't think I wanted to find out.

The ghost was still a presence in the room—but it remained only the one. She hadn't made an effort to draw in any others and I didn't know why. Maybe she wanted to know for sure that she wasn't seeing things? Which was an incredibly weird thought to have. A ghost worried her eyes were tricking her.

"You ready?" Lexi asked.

"No."

"You never used to be so gun-shy."

"I never used to see ghosts in the living plane."

"Fair enough." Holding out her hand, she said, "Okay, hand it over."

I had considered going into the otherplane to talk to the ghost—or ghosts, if more showed up—but with what I'd discovered in my most recent visit to the otherplane, that the ghost wasn't quite there, that wasn't an option. I retrieved the bundle from my pocket and gave it to Lexi. Instantly, the ghost became clearer, though still fuzzy at the edges. She looked the same as she had the day before—long hair pulled back into a braid that nearly touched her ass, and a leather jacket open over a tight gray T-shirt bearing a logo so worn I couldn't read it.

"It is you," she whispered, taking a hesitant step forward. "Can you—can you see me?"

"Yes," I said, cognizant of Lexi watching me. I kept my eyes on the ghost, though. "What's your name?"

"Charlie." She seemed to remember she was supposed to be a badass biker, and her back stiffened. "You?"

"Wes."

"You gonna talk to me today, Wes, or are you gonna run like a pussy again?"

My eyes narrowed. "Don't throw around gendered insults. It's not nice."

Her brows rose and she started laughing. "Oh my god. Seriously?"

"Seriously."

"You're something else."

Well...yeah. "Why are you here?"

"Good fuckin' question." She heaved out a sigh. "Where *is* here, by the way?"

"You—you don't know where you are?"

She tugged on her hair. “No. I kinda remember wiping out on the 401—”  
Oh, ouch. I was very glad that she did not look like she had at the moment of her death. Gruesome.

“—and then I was here.”

“What year was that?”

“Ninety-one.” She watched me closely, and clearly I didn’t hide my reaction quickly enough. “I take it it’s not 1991 anymore.”

“Nope.”

“Fuck. So where am I?”

“A farmhouse north of Nobleton. Except it’s now an LGBT youth home.”

“Huh.” She looked around, as though she were seeing her surroundings for the first time. “I’m pretty sure I’ve never been here before.”

“That makes no sense.”

Ghosts didn’t haunt buildings they’d never been to in life. They retreated to places they knew, places they were comfortable. Places that meant something to them. Or, especially, places where their loved ones were, or where they had unfinished business.

Not farmhouses they’d never seen before.

“What?” Lexi whispered.

I quickly related what Charlie had told me.

“You’re right—that doesn’t make any sense.” Lexi frowned. “Ask her if she’s seen anything weird here.”

I opened my mouth to relay the question, but Charlie cut me off. “Yeah, yeah. My ears work. This, uh... It’s a strange place,” she said. “I mean, I don’t mind hangin’ here, but it’s not...comfortable. Like there’s an itch I need to be scratchin’ but I can’t find it or something. And I’m not the only ghost here.”

“I know. I saw the three of you yesterday.”

She shook her head. “Three of us here now, yeah. But there have been others.”

“Others?”

“They appear. We all just appear. We stick around for a time, but always—we leave.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You and me both.” She tugged her braid again. “It’s like something...summons us here. I can hear the whispers, but fuck ’em. I don’t need to listen to them. I don’t need to follow where they say.”

My brain raced as I tried to put together everything Charlie was saying into some sort of sense. “So you’re here because you were summoned and something wants you to go to it?”

“Yeah. Other ghosts have, and they’re...gone.”

“Maybe they went back to the beyond.” Because that had to be where they were summoned from, right? Which was a horrifying thought, that spirits at their ultimate rest were being brought back toward the living plane.

“No,” Charlie said. “I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t hear their screams echo if they were headed back home.”

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## Chapter Six

Charlie had said the barn was where she first popped into being—which had been confusing as hell, and I could see why. It was difficult to identify what the space had once been, unless you already knew you were in a barn. There were no stalls anymore, though the hayloft was intact, minus the hay. Lexi and Iskander were up there, looking around, checking for evidence of magical workings, the low murmur of their voices and the creak of floorboards under their feet giving evidence of their presence. The main floor was filled with leftover paint cans, lumber, and other construction materials, drape-covered furniture, and I thought I spotted an ancient tractor crouched in one corner when Hudson's flashlight swept in that direction. The lack of electricity made getting around a challenge. I appreciated Hudson's cop habit of always carrying a flashlight.

I was less appreciative of his ability to utterly focus on a task at hand. We needed to talk about the whole sunlight thing—and since he was a captive audience at the moment...

"Are we going to ignore it?" I asked, my voice pitched low. I didn't really want Lexi and Iskander to overhear, though I was pretty sure they were far enough away they wouldn't.

Not that I didn't want them to know about it... I just didn't want them to know about it *yet*.

"What?" He stepped on a loose floorboard and it emitted a cloud of dust. "Whoops. Sorry."

I coughed and waved a hand in front of me to clear the air. "Don't play dumb. That's my shtick. About the sunlight."

He grunted.

I grabbed the sleeve of his jacket and pulled him to a stop. "It was *weird*."

"Weirder than you seeing ghosts while you're in the living plane?" He arched a brow.

"We're not talking about me right now. Vampires aren't supposed to tolerate the sun like that until they're over one hundred years old."



“That’s what my contact said, but maybe she was fucking with me. I don’t know.”

“Why would she?”

“Because she could?”

She’d once been the fuck-buddy of Hudson’s sire, so yeah, I doubted she was the most upstanding citizen.

“Or maybe my tolerance has increased with age and I didn’t know it. I doubt it’s like a switch gets thrown one day after your one-hundredth year as a vampire, and suddenly the sun is your friend again.”

“Yeah,” I said, conceding the point.

He leaned forward and kissed my forehead. “I bet if I’d stayed in the sun much longer, I would have started feeling it.”

“Maybe we need to test that out.”

Hudson made a face and started walking again. “No, thank you.”

We picked our way around a pile of what was probably spare lumber covered with a blue tarp. I lifted a corner to glance underneath—yep, lumber. I had no idea what sort of magical evidence we were looking for, beyond Lexi’s cryptic, *You’ll know it when you see it*.

Great. Helpful.

I let the tarp drop. “It’s something we should know, though, right? Your limits?”

“I’m not volunteering to stand in the sun until I puke. Been there, done that.”

“Hud—”

“You feeling anything hinky down here?”

I gave in to the change in topic. “The entire place feels hinky.”

“That’s helpful.”

“It’s the truth.”

I hadn’t noticed at first, what with my trauma from yesterday and my anxiety over seeing any of the ghosts on this visit. But now that Charlie had given us some details about the strange circumstances here, and I could concentrate on something other than my own nerves...yeah. *Hinky* was a good word. There was something subtly off about Aurora House and its barn. Not on the level of a demon, but something that made the hair on the back of my neck dance the mamba at regular intervals. An atmosphere that murmured of fear and uncertainty, rather than the warmth and safety the

home should have exuded. It was like everything was waiting for something to happen. No—for the other shoe to drop.

“Any chance if you talk to Charlie again out here, she’ll be able to give you better directions?”

I wrinkled my nose. “She was pretty adamant that she was not going to come back to the barn ever again, if she could help it. Which, you know, tells us something on its own.”

Hudson looked around, his eyes glimmering as his vampire night vision kicked in. “Any ideas what’s going on here? Theories, thoughts, suppositions?”

“I don’t know.” I went to drag a hand through my hair and encountered my toque instead. I tugged it lower over my ears. “There wasn’t anything odd about the place when we were renovating it. Though I didn’t spend much time out here.”

“Renovations can stir things up though, right?”

“There have been reports of that, sure. *During* the renos, not freaking seven months later. And my impression from Charlie is that she wasn’t even here then. She showed up when the rooms were all furnished and occupied.” I let out a soft sigh. “I don’t see anything. I don’t feel anything extra strange. I just... I don’t know.”

“Hey, Wes!” Lexi’s voice rang out from the loft.

Hudson and I moved to a section of the main floor where we could see Lexi standing at the edge of the loft. “What’s up?” I asked.

“We found something. C’mon.” She gestured for us to come up the ladder.

The hayloft was huge...and less than steady. The floor vibrated and creaked with every step we took, and my fingers desperately wanted to grab Hudson’s arm. I shoved my hands in the pockets of my jacket instead as we joined Iskander at the tight junction of the roof and the loft. It was a triangular space, deep and low, with some small crates pushed off to one side, and it seemed to hold...

I frowned. “That’s a lamp.”

“That’s what I told her,” Iskander said.

“It’s not a lamp,” Lexi insisted, crouching down to get a better look.

“Why would someone hide a lamp up here behind some boxes?”

“It looks like a lamp to me,” Hudson said.

“Does a lamp usually do this?” Lexi slipped a finger near what I thought was a bulb, and blue sparks trailed in the wake of her touch.

“It’s a lava lamp?” I suggested.

“Oh my gods, you guys.”

“So if it’s not a lamp, what is it?” Iskander said.

“I don’t know,” Lexi admitted. “I can feel magic in it, but it’s not...not natural magic. It’s hard to explain. It’s like—” She broke off and waved a hand absently as she sought the right word. “Battery-powered magic?”

“Battery-powered magic,” I repeated flatly. “That’s a thing?”

“I don’t know!” Lexi shifted back on her heels. “It could be an anchor for a spell to keep it running when the witch isn’t here. It could be an artifact of some kind—but honestly, it doesn’t look like an artifact.”

“It looks like someone took a shade off a lamp and added some reflectors and other doohickeys to the base,” Hudson said.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “It looks like someone’s basement craft project. But what’s it doing here?”

“Million-dollar question.” Lexi pushed to her feet. “Okay—Isk and Hud? Can you see if Kee has anything we can put this in? A cardboard box, maybe? And some gardening gloves. I don’t want to touch it if I can help it.”

“On it.” Hudson handed me his flashlight and headed in the direction of the stairs. Isk gave a thumbs-up and followed him.

“Wes, can you see anything?”

“Other than the lamp?” I grinned at her unimpressed look and focused the flashlight on the quasi-cubbyhole the object was in. “No.”

“What about from the otherplane?”

Reluctantly, I faded half into the other realm. Lexi’s form grew fuzzy around the edges, but everything else remained the same—damp, dingy, unwelcoming—

Wait.

The lamp—well, in the otherplane, it was clear it wasn’t a lamp. There was a resonance to it similar to what I’d felt from the Crown of Osiris, the magical artifact the demon had forced me to use all those months ago. The lamp’s energy wasn’t as strong, or as threatening, but it was definitely there. And unlike the crown, the lamp was emanating something. I slipped further into the otherplane to get a better look—

And a shadow figure burst out of the gloomy corner of the loft and slammed into Lexi.

She skidded across the floor toward the open edge of the hayloft opposite the ladder. I leaped out of the otherplane to grab her, but the person hip-checked me as he reached for the not-lamp, and I ended up grappling with him—and it was definitely a him. The figure that had been dark and shadowy in the otherplane was more distinguishable now—a young kid, maybe in his late teens or early twenties, wearing a dark hoodie. The flashlight I'd dropped on the floor illuminated the inside of his hood for a second, and I spotted a tattoo on his neck—black ink against white skin.

He tried to lift the lamp away, but I grabbed it and yanked back. The resistance must have caught him off guard because he let go and scurried away, down the ladder. Breathing hard, I put the lamp down and rolled over to see how Lexi was doing.

She—she wasn't there.

I couldn't breathe as I got to my hands and knees, grabbed the flashlight, and scrambled forward.

Please let her be hanging on the edge please let her be hanging on the edge please let.

She wasn't hanging on the edge.

She was crumpled a story below, on a tarp-covered pile of something. Unmoving.

“Lexi!”

## Chapter Seven

I hated hospitals.

No. *Hate* wasn't strong enough of a word.

For the past eighty-five-plus years, hospitals had been a constant reminder that I would outlive everyone I loved. I'd already outlived April, Michael's sister and the witch who had resurrected me out of misplaced guilt, and her daughter, Vera. I'd sat with April until the end, until her rheumy blue eyes closed for the last time, as her breaths faded into nothing. I'd held her hand until it went cold, wishing that I could do for her what she'd done for me—bring her back, give her life—even though she'd told me more than once that she wanted to see what came next. She wanted to continue on her journey.

That made her so much braver than I would ever be.

Lexi was everything I'd expect April's great-granddaughter to be. Epically unafraid, loyal to a fault, not perfect, but not pretending to be, either. I wished that April had been able to meet her.

The pungent smell of antiseptic burned my nostrils. The ER waiting room was packed, and the low-level murmur of voices, so many voices, never stopped. A baby cried somewhere on the other side of the room. A nurse's shoes squeaked on the immaculate corridor floor past the reception desk.

Everything after I'd discovered Lexi had fallen was a blur. There'd been blood. Too much blood leaking out from under her hair. I'd screamed and somehow made it down to her to discover she had a pulse. Hudson had been there a moment later. He'd called 9-1-1 immediately and convinced me not to move her. The ambulance had taken her to the closest ER—not the hospital where Lexi worked, which I knew would bug her to no end when she woke up.

Because she *would* wake up.

Hudson placed his hand on my knee, and only then did I realize I'd been bouncing my foot and shaking the entire row of seats. His touch was comforting—and it wasn't. I wanted to lean into him and let him hold me up, but if I did, I wasn't sure I wouldn't crumple to the floor, anyway.

“How long does it fucking take?” I muttered.

“Be patient.”

“Fuck that.”

His grip on my knee tightened. “You’re not going to help things by having a tantrum.”

I glared at him. “A *tantrum*?”

He huffed out a breath. “You know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t. Enlighten me.”

“Wes...”

I flung his hand away and got up, ignoring his repeated hisses of my name. Iskander watched me from his perch beside Hudson, but he didn’t say anything or try to stop me as I marched past. Good. I didn’t want to fight with him or Hudson, and I knew Hudson didn’t want to provoke me. He just sucked at communicating.

I got the gist of it, though, and he wasn’t wrong. Demanding answers from the nurse at reception about Lexi’s condition wasn’t going to get me anywhere.

I didn’t know *anything*, and it made me want to kick a hole in the wall.

“Wes?”

Evan’s soft voice drew my attention to him. He was dressed in a nice button-down, with jeans and Converse sneakers—which was stupid. It was January, for fuck’s sake, and Converse were a shitty choice for snow-and-ice-laden sidewalks. His jacket wasn’t heavy enough, either.

My eyes narrowed. “You *want* everyone to know you’re a—”

“Hi to you too.”

“Where have you been?”

“I came as soon as I could.”

“We’ve been here for hours.”

“It’s been forty-five minutes since I got the text from Iskander. I had to get a Lyft.” He squinted. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“My goddamned best friend is unconscious and won’t wake up, that’s what’s wrong with me!” I lunged forward—to do what, I had no idea—but something dragged me back.

“Easy,” Hudson rumbled in my ear. “Don’t make a scene.”

I’d told myself that only moments ago, but hearing that same advice made my blood boil...and my magic strain against its container. I jerked my arm out of his hold and stalked off down the hall, refusing to look back at

Hudson and Evan. A few doors down, I found a men's room and ducked inside. It was empty.

Thank god.

I hunched over one of the sinks and released my magic. Immediately, my temper cooled, soothed by the sensation of letting go. My skin was glowing—I didn't have to look directly at it to know, but it didn't stand out as obviously as when the room was dark. If someone came in, they'd likely think I was simply having a moment.

Which was the truth.

God, I wanted to *fight* something. Preferably the asshole who'd shoved Lexi down.

I wanted to hold him up in front of me. I wanted to look into his eyes and see them widen with fear. I wanted to—

Something grabbed the back of my head and slammed my forehead into the sink. Pain cascaded through me, making me see stars. I whirled to face my attacker, stumbling when the room continued to spin—but there was no one there.

“What the—”

An invisible fist slammed into my right cheek, then my left. I leaned on the sinks, trying to get my bearings and make sense of what was happening. The stall doors crashed open. At the same time, water spurted out of the faucets and the urinals.

What the fuck—a poltergeist? In the hospital?

Poltergeists weren't intelligent—they were closer to echoes, but not quite the same. Whereas an echo was a ghostly version of a repetitive or habitual action that had occurred when the person was alive, a poltergeist was otherplane energy reacting to something in the living plane—usually the volatile and uncontrolled emotions of a sensitive teenager—that resulted in spontaneous and violent bursts of activity. Not really a ghost.

To have one in a hospital, and not even a children's hospital, made no sense.

Then hands wrapped around my throat, and I couldn't think about the impossibility of the situation any longer.

I tried to grab the hands, but there was nothing to grab. My fingers clawed at my own skin. If I stepped into the otherplane, I might be able to disrupt the energy, but I couldn't do it, not when every breath was getting

harder to suck in than the last. Black dots danced at the edges of my vision and I sagged against the sinks.

A door slammed open and I thought for a minute that the poltergeist was playing with the stalls again. But then I heard Hudson's panicked "Wes!"

He growled. It was a distant sound, far away. Another growl reverberated in the room and I realized Evan was there too. The dots were growing, getting larger, and I slumped. My head grazed the bottom of the ceramic sink and I thudded to the floor—

And suddenly I could breathe again.

I gasped, drawing in as much air as I could, great big heaving lungfuls of it. It took me a few to banish the dark spots and see that Hudson was crouched over me, his expression beyond concerned.

"You okay?"

I tried to talk, and winced. "Yeah," I whispered. "How'd you know?"

Hudson hesitated, the barest of pauses, before saying, "I heard you."

Had I been that loud? I knew his senses were enhanced, predator-keen, but I wasn't convinced he'd be able to hear a fight in a busy hospital, rooms away from where he'd been.

"What the hell was that?" Evan was standing and I couldn't see his face from my perspective on the floor under the sinks, but I could hear the fear and frustration in his voice.

"Poltergeist." I grasped Hudson's hand when he held it out, and let him guide me back to my feet. Once upright, I leaned on him, and he opened his arms without hesitation.

"I thought poltergeists were a teenage psychic thing?"

I nodded. "I have no idea how it was here."

"Why did it attack you?" Evan asked.

Eh, I had an idea about that. I was thinking pretty negative thoughts, with my magic spewing everywhere. I had never considered that there would be anything for me to attract, let alone violent energy looking for an outlet.

The door opened and Iskander joined us. His gaze swept over Evan and Hudson, seeing their fangs still extended and their eyes glowing, and finally landed on me. "How come I wasn't invited to the bathroom party?" he rasped.

"A poltergeist tried to play with Wes," Evan said. He gave his head a shake. His fangs disappeared and his eyes reverted to their usual gray-blue.



“Never a dull moment.” Iskander’s slight smile drifted away. “The doctor was looking for you, Wes.”

I pushed away from Hudson. “Let’s go.”

\* \* \*

Twelve hours later, Lexi’s mom and dad were there.

I hadn’t seen Rosanna in years—about three, I think, since the last time Lexi had dragged me back to Alberta to share Christmas with the family. Neither Rosanna nor her husband, Darrell, had changed much. She still wore her golden-blond hair in a professional bob, though it was frizzier than usual and she wore no makeup. I was used to seeing her as a businesswoman who happened to be a mom, but right now, she was the mom first. Darrell towered over his wife, his hand cupping her shoulder in a show of support. His rich brown skin had a dullness to it that spoke of his worry and stress.

Rosanna made a beeline for me as soon as she saw me, and I rose to gather her in my arms. “Wes,” she breathed. She pressed a kiss to my cheek and drew back so she could look at me. A hand swept over my forehead, brushing aside a stray curl. “Any news?”

I returned Rosanna’s cheek kiss and shook Darrell’s hand. “Nothing since I texted you.”

The doctor had been reluctant to share any information with me at first, but relented when she realized I was on Lexi’s record as a substitute decision-maker since her parents were in Alberta. I listened, shaking, as she described Lexi’s injuries—and I stopped breathing when she said *skull fracture*. The dislocated shoulder, the bruises and cuts, they’d all heal on their own, for the most part. But the skull fracture needed surgery. Except first they had to manage the pressure in her brain, or something. I didn’t quite understand it all, and the one person who could have interpreted it for me was the one who was unconscious.

“I’m so sorry,” I said, and pulled Rosanna into a tight hug.

She let out a muffled sob and shook her head against my chest. Her back trembled, and I didn’t say anything, not even when Darrell moved in closer to rub her shoulders and laid an arm around the both of us.

She could use me as a leaning post, as a tear-towel, for as long as she needed.

I'd told her the circumstances surrounding Lexi's fall, how I hadn't acted quickly enough. Anyone else would have been at least a little resentful of me—I mean, I'd been *right there*. I was a fucking not-ghost with jacked-up magic. I should have been able to do *something*. "I should have—"

She leaned back, shaking her head again, and wiped her eyes. "Stop. You're not omnipotent."

"I know, but..."

"I'll go find a doctor, see if I can get an update," Darrell said, his voice a low rumble. He dropped a soft kiss on his wife's lips before turning to the nurses' station.

Rosanna wove her arm through mine and leaned on my shoulder. She was close to my height in her sneakers. I tilted my head so it rested on hers and reveled in the closeness for a second, but the doubts I'd been trying to fight for the past few hours kept rising up. Maybe if I'd used my extra magic, if I wasn't so intent on suppressing it, I would have known there was someone hiding in the shadows, behind another set of crates and boxes. I would have been able to stop them before they hurt Lexi.

"She'll be fine." Rosanna's voice was firm, strong, but I still detected a slight waver in it, as though she wanted to believe her words with everything in her, but still had a sliver of uncertainty.

I didn't call her on it.

A few minutes later, Darrell returned with the same doctor I'd spoken to earlier. She repeated everything she'd said earlier—depressed skull fracture, other injuries, no surgery yet, ICU for the foreseeable future.

"She's breathing on her own and her pupils are reacting to light," the doctor said. "Those are both very good signs."

"Does that mean she'll wake up soon?" I asked.

"We're keeping her sedated for now so we can get the pressure on her brain under control. Everything looks as good as it can be right now."

The doctor said we could go in and see her, two at a time, and Darrell made sure my name was on the list of allowed visitors. Rosanna and Darrell followed the doctor to Lexi's room first, and when they came out a few minutes later, Rosanna's eyes were red and her nose was running. Darrell wasn't faring much better.

Rosanna nodded and gestured for me to go in. Swallowing, I retraced their path into Lexi's room, and froze on the threshold.

The first thing I noticed was that they'd shaved her hair. Oh, she wasn't going to appreciate that. She lay still on the hospital bed, her eyes closed. Wires and tubes cascaded around her and a machine beeped in the corner, an incessant noise that punctuated every second she wasn't awake. A cannula fed oxygen into her nose.

My body moved on autopilot and sat on the chair next to her bed. Leaning forward, I grasped her hand, pressed a shaky kiss to the back of it, then held my forehead to it in a silent, godless prayer.

"Please wake up," I whispered. "I mean, not now—you've got excellent drugs, I hear. But...you know. When you're supposed to wake up, you *need* to."

The only response I received was the unending series of mechanical beeps.

Inside my head, my magic swirled, and I tentatively reached out a mental finger. It reacted to my interest like a dog being offered a treat, eager and excited, and for once, I didn't slam it back into its container. What if I could use it to help Lexi? Immediately, I scoffed. I wasn't a healer. Hell, even Lexi, a nurse, wasn't much for magical healing—that discipline was difficult to master and even more difficult to use, if you had any morals at all. Patients couldn't consent to something they didn't believe in.

But...what if?

So far, I'd tried very hard not to use my magic at all. I'd let it out—I had to, or else I felt as though I would explode—but other than the incident at the café, I hadn't consciously exploited it. It had increased my sensitivity, obviously, but I didn't know if that could be categorized as using it.

If I concentrated, focused, maybe I could help Lexi. Somehow.

I gripped her hand with both of mine, keeping it pressed to my forehead, and closed my eyes. Deliberately, I widened the opening of the metaphysical box that held my power—slowly cracking the lid so the magic didn't rush through me uncontrollably. It saturated me like bubbles fizzing in a glass of soda—almost enough to make me giggle, until I remembered why I was doing this.

I pushed the magic in Lexi's direction.

It bounced back at me.

"Heal," I said, and pushed it again.

It bounced back hard enough this time to jolt me off my seat. I let go of her hand before I tugged her sideways.

“That’s not go—to work.”

I looked up to find Michael standing on the other side of Lexi’s bed. Glaring at him, I righted myself. “How do you know?”

“—I know.”

“That’s helpful. Thanks.”

Michael watched Lexi’s face for a moment, and it hit me that this was his great-great-niece. I felt a twinge of something like sympathy deep in my gut—then shoved it away, because Michael wasn’t actually here. He was a figment of my demented brain.

“You’re n—a healer.”

Despite the fact that I’d said the same thing to myself a couple of minutes ago, Michael’s words stung. “But I have magic. And willpower.”

Michael shook his head in that jerky, there-not-there motion.

“I had to try.”

“—like a child with—shotgun.” Michael’s voice dropped into a growl for the first time since he’d reappeared in my life. Or my mind. Whichever. “—isn’t a toy—need to—”

“It wants me to use it, so I used it!”

“Wes?”

I jerked my gaze away from Michael to see Rosanna at the door, then glanced back—but Michael was gone. I hoped Rosanna hadn’t heard any of that argument. When I looked at her again, though, the concern in her face told me she had.

“You okay?” she asked softly.

I cleared my throat. “Yeah, fine. Just—” Nothing came to mind as an excuse. “My time’s up?”

“Why don’t you head on home, get some rest.” The way she said it, I knew it wasn’t a suggestion. Like all Aster women, Rosanna had a spine of steel. “You’ll feel better.”

“I—Yeah, okay.” I offered her a reassuring smile before bending to kiss Lexi’s cheek. “I’ll be back soon,” I murmured to her, before turning to Rosanna. “Do you need anything? Want me to pick up some lunch, or coffee, or—”

“Lunch would be great. Anything. I’m not picky.”

And probably not terribly hungry, either, but Rosanna was practical enough to know she needed to eat even if she didn’t feel like it. “You got it.”

As I started to slip by her, she placed a hand on my arm. “I know we’ve never had the same relationship as you and Lexi do, but...you know you can talk to me, right? Anytime. About anything.”

I laid my hand over hers and kissed her temple. “Thanks, but I’m good.”  
If she knew it for the lie it was, she didn’t let on.

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## *Chapter Eight*

When I woke that evening, Hudson was already in the shower. I checked my phone to find an update from Rosanna—the pressure in Lexi’s head had eased but she was still sedated. Rosanna said I didn’t have to come in; I could if I wanted to, but she hoped I would take the time to rest some more.

I knew Rosanna’s suggestion came from the knowledge that I’d stayed at the hospital for nearly twenty-four hours already, but I felt the tiniest bit slighted. Except...the thought of returning to the hospital, with all its hated smells, sights, and sounds, only to sit helplessly in the waiting room, made me want to collapse back to the mattress and pull the covers over my head.

Maybe recharging would be a good idea.

I put my phone aside, undecided, when Hudson emerged from the bathroom, a towel slung low on his hips and rubbing another one over his wavy hair. “Any news?” he asked.

“Same.”

He draped the towel around his neck and leaned over to kiss me. “Good morning.”

I couldn’t help the upward curve of my lips. It wasn’t morning, but Hudson insisted that greeting me with “Good evening” sounded weird and Dracula-ish. I brushed my lips against his, a chaste caress. “Morning,” I returned.

“You and I are going to play hooky,” Hudson announced. “Because, sweetheart, the bags under your eyes have bags.”

I squinted at him. “Thanks.”

“Come out with me. We’ll go for a walk. Maybe get something to eat.”

“Hud...”

He loosely cupped my ear, the heel of his palm sliding against my jaw and cheek. “Trust me. You need this.”

I heaved out a sigh. The man wasn’t wrong. “All right. Let me have a shower and get dressed.”

I thought we’d go for a walk around Hudson’s neighborhood or in a park somewhere, but Hudson aimed his car for Old Toronto. We ended up in the Distillery District—not a place I spent a lot of time in. It was quaint and

quirky, and as a result, drew a lot of tourists year-round. Which meant crowds and people stopped randomly on sidewalks ogling the skyline or something else the big city offered that their home residence didn't, or holding their cameras out as they tried to take selfies or whatever in the middle of the freaking walkway.

I didn't like tourists. Sue me.

But the nip in the air must have deterred some of the crowds, because the Distillery District wasn't that busy. As we stepped into a broad alleyway, I realized why Hudson had brought me here.

*Everything* was lit up.

Not only tiny fairy Christmas lights left over from the holiday season, but sculptures made of light. Against one wall, lasers traced a figure of a woman, making it seem as though she were dancing with strips of ribbon flowing around her form. A little farther down was the form of a dog, with lights twinkling to give the illusion of fur blowing in the wind—even though the dog was simply a wire sculpture without any covering. Above our heads, butterflies flitted by in a seemingly random path. Everywhere I looked, there was something new and creative that someone had dreamed up, and it took my breath away.

When I pointed out a new amazing thing, Hudson smiled that wide, brilliant smile I adored. He spent more time looking at me than at the lights, and I didn't protest when he tugged me into a dark corner after we'd been walking for about thirty minutes. The kiss he gave me was soft, full of love and tenderness, and I soaked it up like dry ground in a drought.

"How did you know?" I whispered when the kiss was done and I had tucked my head into his chest.

I felt the rumble of his chuckle more than heard it. "Because my Wes likes pretty things."

I shook my head, but I couldn't help smiling. He was right. Quiet time was good, but nothing recharged me like surrounding myself with beauty and life.

The moment changed subtly. I could feel tension in Hudson's muscles that wasn't there a moment before and I drew back so I could look up at him. His golden-brown eyes regarded me with a weight I hadn't expected, and his fingers trailed down the side of my face, skimming along the curve of my cheekbone to my jaw.

"What?" I whispered.

“We’re good together, right?”

I pushed up on my tiptoes to kiss him, trying to ease the worry in his face. “We’re amazing together.”

“And we can—we can talk about...stuff. Even weird stuff.”

My smile dimmed. Had Hudson figured out that it wasn’t PTSD I didn’t want to talk about, but something more magical? “Yeah,” I said cautiously.

“Good.” A heavy breath escaped him. “Because there’s something—” Hudson’s phone chimed in his pocket. He pressed his lips together in a firm, white line, before deflating. “Goddamn it.”

“You better check it.” I’d recognized the notification sound—it was Iskander, and I doubt he would have disturbed our free night unless it was important.

He drew out the phone and frowned at it. “Kat’s at the office.”

Why on earth would Hudson’s old boss be at the office? I supposed it could be for a visit, but Isk would have told us later. Another chime sounded, and the way Hudson’s expression transformed into something close to his Asshole Cop expression told me I was right.

“She wants to talk to you,” he said.

“Me? Why?” I liked Detective Sergeant Katrina Li, but we weren’t friends. In fact, I was pretty sure she wasn’t all that thrilled to know any of us at this point. Because of us, the paranormal cat was out of the bag—for her, anyway—and she’d had to twist and bend the truth to cover for us last year.

“Something about a theft.”

“But I’m not—”

“I know.” Hudson tucked his phone away. “Let’s go talk to her and see what this is all about.”

I would have preferred to stay among the magical lights, but I’d known the real world would intrude. It always did.

\* \* \*

Katrina Li was a powerhouse of a woman. Not in size or stature, but in attitude. She was average height for a woman—so a few inches shorter than me—and always wore perfectly tailored pantsuits in nice, neutral colors. She kept her hair clipped short and tidy. With her badge on her belt and the



hint of a gun holster under her arm...well, if I was at all into women, I might have been interested.

Good thing I wasn't, because damn, I did not need that complication in my life.

Kat gave me a smile from the couch in the reception area as we entered the office and stomped the salt and slush from our boots. It was a good sign—until I noticed that the smile didn't quite reach her eyes. Fantastic. So this was a courtesy call to confirm her preconceived notions.

"I'm not in that life anymore," I said as I shucked off my winter jacket.

She shot a glance in Iskander's direction where he was leaning against the reception desk, and he lifted his hands innocently. Sighing, she placed her mug of coffee on the table in front of her and pulled a tablet onto her lap. "Come have a look at this."

Curiosity piqued, I did as she requested—but as I sat down, I noticed Evan wasn't present. I caught Iskander's eye and made a quizzical expression. *Date*, he mouthed.

Another one? Jesus, were things getting serious with this guy? I hoped Evan would bring him by to introduce him soon.

Iskander joined Hudson behind the low minimalist couch and they both leaned over to see the tablet.

"What're you showing us?" Hudson asked.

Kat brought up a video but didn't start it. "This is footage captured at 3:00 a.m. yesterday from a pawnshop over on Church Street. I need you to keep an open mind, okay?"

"Because we're so disbelieving of weird things," I deadpanned.

"Yeah, okay, fair. I forgot who I was talking to for a minute. Have a look." She triggered the video.

It was your typical surveillance tape—black-and-white, a little grainy. It flipped between two cameras: one at the front of the store, and one in the back room. The light was not good, but it was enough to make out the counter at the front of the store with some items on display and the register, and in the back office, the desk, with its computer monitor and chair set slightly askew, as though someone had gotten up and not set the chair neatly against the desk.

For a few rotations of the image, the shop was empty, motionless. And then—

"Is the chair moving?" Hudson asked.

It was. The chair, which had been completely still, was now sliding out of frame. Not quickly, but consistently. The seat rotated, though whether that was simply from the motion of the chair or from an unseen someone manipulating it, I couldn't tell.

"Wait," Kat said.

The image flipped back and forth a few more times, and then I saw movement behind the counter in the front of the store. A drawer near the bottom, to the right of the cash register, was opening. Centimeter by centimeter, it extended out from the counter, pulled by an invisible force. It moved as we watched it, so it wasn't like someone was pulling at it only when the camera wasn't on them.

"I see why you wanted us to see it." I couldn't help it—my voice was shaky. There were way too many fucking ghosts in my life at the moment.

"Wait," Kat stressed.

Just as Kat said it, something rose from the drawer. Before I could identify what it was, it disappeared—and all movement in the shop stopped.

I cleared my throat. "That was...uh."

"Weirder than normal?" Hudson suggested.

"Definitely weirder than normal," Iskander said.

Kat grimaced. "I hate to do it, Wes, but I've gotta ask—"

"It wasn't me. I was at the hospital when it happened."

"Hospital?"

"Lexi got hurt." Briefly I explained the circumstances and the fact that I hadn't left the hospital until close to noon today.

"Shit. I'm sorry to hear that."

Iskander tapped the tablet, starting the video again. "What was taken?"

"The owner was pretty sure it was a brooch."

"Value?" Hudson asked.

"Negligible. It had been sitting in that drawer ever since it was pawned because it wasn't worth putting on display."

"Are we going to ignore the fact that it was stolen by an invisible—" I waved a hand "—something?"

"So you don't know what it was," Kat said.

"Well, I mean, it had to be a ghost."

"Oh...right. So ghosts...they're real, then."

"And much less problematic than vampires," I assured her. I didn't add "usually" to the sentence, but with what had been going on at Aurora House

lately, I was thinking it.

“But ghosts don’t steal things. Present company excluded,” Hudson added with a poke to the back of my head. “And it didn’t search through anything in that drawer or any other drawers. It knew what it wanted and where it was.”

“What are the police doing?” Iskander asked.

“Nothing,” Kat said. “The responding officers wrote up a report, examined both the shop and office, and took a copy of the video, but that’s about all we can do. There’s nothing there to investigate—everyone who’s seen the video thinks the owner rigged it or it’s a glitch. It’s not on anyone’s radar—the officer writing up the report was talking about the video in the lunch room, and when I saw it, I knew you guys might want to know about it.”

I leaned my head back to look up at Hudson. “What do you think?”

A frown creased his brow, but at least he wasn’t dismissing out of hand the possibility of this being a new case for us. “Let’s go talk to the pawnshop owner and see.”

\* \* \*

Art’s Attic was in a decent section of town—not the best, but certainly not the worst—and smack dab in the middle of a string of buy-and-sell shops that stretched along Church Street for about a block. The street was busy, particularly this close to Queen Street, with streetcars rumbling by every so often and pedestrians making their way to and from the more upscale shops farther west up Queen. Unsurprisingly, there were at least two churches in sight of the pawnshop—Church Street had to get its name from somewhere, right?

The pawnshop itself was pretty typical looking, not that I’d spent a lot of time in pawnshops. But hey, I’d seen enough on TV. It had bars on the windows and door, with large garish letters painted across the picture window in the front of the place. Gold-edged letters proclaimed CASH NOW and TOP \$\$\$ FOR GOLD DIAMONDS JEWELRY and TRUST ART WITH YOUR HEART.

Aw.

When I pointed out that last bit, Hudson snorted and pulled open the door. An electronic chime announced our arrival and a short, round figure

lurched out of the back office. The man wore gray sweatpants and a white T-shirt, with a knitted forest green cardigan pulled on over top. I put him at nudging seventy, given the white hair, the deep lines etched into his face, and the fact that he couldn't quite straighten up to walk properly. "Help you?" he asked in a voice ravaged by cigarette smoke.

Hudson turned on the charm. "Art?"

The man chuckled, a sound that was more air than anything else. "No, man, Art's been dead for five—no, shit, what year is it?" He looked up, clearly calculating the time in his head. "Yeah, five years."

"Sorry about that."

The man waved off Hudson's apology. "Eh, I get it at least once a week. Serves me right for leaving the name as is. So, what can I help you fellows with?" He examined us with a narrow-eyed look. "Wedding rings?"

"Uh—" Hudson had a deer-caught-in-the-headlights look, and I probably wasn't much better.

"I got a few his-and-his behind the counter." He gestured for us to follow him over.

By the time we reached the glass counter, Hudson had gotten his shit together. I was still kind of curious to know the story behind the his-and-his rings. Same-sex marriage in Canada wasn't exactly new, but I'd never thought about husbands—ex-husbands?—pawning their jewelry.

"Thanks, but we're actually here for another reason." Hudson pulled out his card and placed it on the glass. "I heard you had some...excitement the other night."

The man's considering look turned downright nasty. "Who put you up to this?"

"No one—"

"Because they and you can fuck right off. I didn't mess with the tapes—"

"Whoa." I made a time-out sign. "He's ex-Toronto PD," I said, pointing a thumb at Hudson, "and some friends let him know about the tape."

"Laughing about it, right? 'Cause—"

"No laughing, we promise," Hudson said. "We absolutely believe the tape is real, and if you want to get to the bottom of what and why, we can investigate."

The man remained silent for a minute, evaluating our expressions, and then picked up Hudson's card. "Caballero Investigations, eh? And you believe in ghosts?"

“A hundred percent.”

“What do you charge?”

Hudson rattled off a discounted rate, what I was starting to think of as our paranormal special.

The man grunted. “And you think you can find out why it was here?”

“We can try.”

The man hesitated for an instant, then held out his hand. “Dennis Bloxham.”

Hudson shook. “Hudson Rojas, and this is my partner, Wes Cooper.”

I shook Dennis’s hand and shared a greeting while Hudson called up an electronic contract on his phone.

“While we take care of this, you mind if Wes has a look around?”

“Sure. Appreciate if you don’t touch anything.”

I lifted my hands in an innocent gesture. “You got it.”

As Hudson and Dennis chatted, I wandered through the store trying to get a vibe of the place. I couldn’t sense anything—which I hoped meant that the ghost with sticky fingers wasn’t hanging around. When I moved into the back office, I waited until I was in the camera’s blind spot before stepping into the otherplane. The office looked completely normal from this perspective. No weird resonances, no astral footprints—not that they were a thing, as far as I knew—and most especially, no ghost. I checked the front room too, but the only inhabitants were Hudson and Dennis. I went back into the office before materializing again, then made my way out to the front of the shop. When Hudson looked up over Dennis’s bent form, I shook my head.

“Perfect,” Hudson said with a smile, his attention back on Dennis. He checked Dennis’s electronic signature, then tucked his phone away. “It was a brooch that was stolen, correct?”

“That’s right. It was a piece of shit, if you’ll pardon my French.”

I kept my grin to myself and didn’t point out he’d already dropped an F-bomb on us.

“Not valuable?”

“No. Cheap-ass gold, tiny little diamond chips. It was dirty as all hell too. Kept meaning to shine it up but never got around to it. It wasn’t going to fetch much, you know? Even melted down. Not worth the effort.”

“Do you know when it was pawned, or by whom?”

“Yeah. I looked it up for the cops.” Dennis reached down under the counter and pulled out a notepad and a pair of reading glasses, which he carefully perched on his bulbous nose. “Art made the deal right before he died. Pawned in December 2013 by a Silvia Samuels. He gave her a hundred bucks for it,” Dennis finished, shaking his head as he pulled off his glasses. “Art always had a soft spot for the ladies.”

“Any idea why she pawned it?” I asked.

“If someone shares a story about why they’re selling something, I guarantee it’s bullshit. Trying to get more dough for stuff that ain’t worth nothing. Art, see, he’d buy it. Me? It’s worth what it’s worth, take it or leave it.”

My phone rang, which was weird enough in this age of texting that I shared a look with Hudson. “I’m gonna take this outside. Nice meeting you, Mr. Bloxham.”

As I approached the door, I checked the caller ID to see Evan’s name flashing on the screen, and I connected the call as I pushed my way onto the sidewalk. “Evan?”

“Shh. Shh.”

I frowned. “Why are you shushing me?”

“Because you’re loud.”

There was something off about Evan’s voice. It was...sloppy. “Evan, hon, why are you calling?”

“Feel weird.”

“Weird how?”

“Jus’ *weird*,” Evan whined.

I counted to three for patience, because I didn’t think I had time to count to ten. “Where are you?” When he didn’t respond immediately, I barked, “Evan!”

“Too loud.”

“Focus, buddy, come on. Where are you? I’ll come get you. Evan!”

There was a thud on the line, which I recognized as a phone being dropped. A second later, the call cut out.

## Chapter Nine

“Shit!”

I hadn’t noticed Hudson leaving the pawnshop, but suddenly he was right there, his face all frowny and concerned. “What’s going on?”

“Evan. He called, and his voice was all weird, and then the phone dropped.” I paced a step away, then back. “It’s not overreacting for me to haunt him, right?”

“Fuck no. Do it. Text me when you know where you are.” He pressed a quick kiss to my lips. “Good luck.”

I called it haunting, but it was more like teleportation, and one of my stranger abilities. If I focused on someone I knew, I could zip through the otherplane and pop into the living plane wherever they were. No muss, no fuss—except it exhausted me. In fact, when I’d haunted Evan one night, and then Hudson the next day, I’d put myself into a coma for two days and worried the shit out of all of my friends. So it wasn’t a skill I used lightly.

I stepped back into the tiny alley beside Art’s Attic, closed my eyes, and concentrated on Evan. His poofy brown hair. His blue eyes edging more toward gray with the addition of the yellow around the irises. His too-big nose. But most especially, the *sense* of him—his drive to not let his depression define him, his bravery, his enthusiasm for his new life.

Reality rushed around me, like I was zooming through a tunnel. When it stopped, I found myself in a dimly lit room with a lumpy and rumpled bed. One of the lumps moved, shifting to an elbow to squint at me. He had ashy blond hair, as messy as the bed, and his eyes were glazed and sort of vacant. He was also mostly naked, though the sheet was draped over his butt. By luck or strategy, I didn’t know, but I strongly suspected it was the former.

“Who’re you?” he slurred.

I ignored him and strode to the bed. The second lump was Evan, who was unconscious, his skin paler than usual. Unlike the lump beside him, Evan was partially dressed, though his shirt was unbuttoned and his pants gaped open at the waist. I grabbed his shoulder and shook him, but he didn’t open his eyes or give any indication he knew I was there.

Blondie shoved at my hand—or tried to. He missed and hit my shoulder.  
“Hey! Leave ’im alone. He’s my boyfriend.”

“What’s your name?”

“Scott.”

“Uh-huh. And where are we, Scott?”

He gave me a weird look but rattled off an address that I thought was pretty close to the University of Toronto campus downtown. I texted it to Hudson and turned my attention back to Scott.

“What’d you give him?” Because that had to be why he was passed out—some drug, because it would take a hell of a lot of booze to do it, and I couldn’t smell any alcohol.

“Evan? I didn’t give him nothing.”

His denial stoked the flames of my temper. “Don’t fuck with me.”

“I’m not!”

“Bullshit!” I looked at Evan, seeing his state of undress all over again, and horror overtook me. “Did you roofie him?”

“What?”

“You know what a roofie is, asshole.” Holy shit. That’s why Evan had called me. This guy had given him something to drink, he’d felt weird, and he’d called me for help. “You did. You fucking prick.”

“Wait.” Scott scrambled backward and tumbled off the bed. He was back up on his feet surprisingly quickly, his hands held out to fend me off. And yep, he was naked, though neither of us really cared about that right now. “You’ve got the wrong idea, I swear.”

“I don’t think I do.” My magic rose, side by side with my temper, and for once I didn’t even try to restrain it. My anger demanded Scott pay for what he’d planned on doing.

No... I wasn’t angry. I was fucking *incandescent* with rage.

My power filled me as I stalked around the bed. “You drugged him. You were going to—”

“What the fuck? No! That’s not—I’d never—Jesus Christ, what the fuck are you?”

In answer, my magic grabbed him and hoisted him to the ceiling. He screamed and started gibbering nonsensically. Urine trickled to the floor, a stream of pungent rain, and I felt a dark satisfaction that I’d literally scared the piss out of him. He deserved to be scared. He deserved so much more—



“Wes!” I hadn’t heard Evan move, or even wake up, but he was suddenly there, tugging on my arm. His words weren’t steady, but they weren’t as sloppy as they’d been on the phone. “What the fuck? How are you...how are you doing this?”

Part of me quailed at that question, a tiny part that whispered *this was supposed to be a secret and now everything’s going to change*. But I was too caught up in the euphoria of actually doing something with my magic that I ignored it. “He was going to hurt you.”

“No, he—”

“He drugged you. Undressed you.” I pressed Scott harder against the ceiling and he cried out again.

“Jesus Christ! Wes, stop! He didn’t...” Evan shook his head, clearly trying to rid himself of fog or confusion or something. “He didn’t drug me. I took it. Voluntarily.”

“You took a roofie?”

“No, you idiot. X.” Evan fell back on the bed, deflating. “He offered me a tab so we could have fun together. I wanted to impress him, but one didn’t have any effect, so I took a second, and...and I don’t even remember calling you.”

Oh, fuck.

The reality of what I’d done slammed through me and it took everything I had not to drop Scott to the floor. I brought him down slowly and he immediately crumpled into a ball next to the bed when I released him completely. I staggered backward, horrified at what I’d done.

“Scott, I—”

Scott curled up tighter and pressed his hands over his ears.

Evan slipped off the bed to try to offer some comfort. Scott shied away from his touch, and Evan looked so fucking defeated. At least until he turned his gaze back to me.

“What the fuck was that?” Evan demanded. He wasn’t yelling, but he was close. “How the fuck did you lift him up there like that? That’s not—you’re not supposed to be able to do that. And you were *glowing*, Wes. I don’t... I don’t...”

“I wasn’t—”

“Don’t you dare lie to me,” Evan growled, his eyes flashing, as he put his clothes back to rights. “I know what I fucking saw. Does Hudson know?”

All the fear I'd felt over the past few months congealed in my stomach at the thought of Hudson knowing my secret. Now that it was real—it was going to happen—I couldn't let it. Hudson would... I don't know what he'd do. He'd—he'd leave. He'd decide I was too much trouble. He'd been patient and understanding after our fight with the demon, but there had to be a breaking point, right? The point where what he got out of our relationship wasn't worth the hassle of dealing with me?

He'd reached it before.

"No." I grabbed onto Evan's arm with both hands and held on tight.

"You can't tell him. Please."

"He needs to know. This is—this is crazy, you know that, right?"

"No one can know. You can't tell anyone. Promise me, Evan."

"Wes—"

"Goddamn it. If you tell him, I'll never forgive you."

Evan stared at me, his expression radiating hurt and betrayal. I clenched my jaw and held his gaze, not backing down.

He sagged and whispered, "I promise."

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## Chapter Ten

I spent the next two days worrying.

About Lexi, because she'd had her surgery but she still hadn't woken up. The doctors said it was normal, but I could see little flickers of uncertainty in their eyes. Like, it was normal *now*, but the longer it went on... I didn't even want to contemplate that.

Next on my worry list was Evan. He'd barely emerged from his basement room, and he'd called in sick the past two nights. I hadn't tried to talk to him, because I knew my demand of secrecy was at least partially to blame for this new low point, and I didn't want to make things worse. Hudson had spent some time with him, trying to gently encourage him to get out of bed, but he hadn't been successful.

And speaking of Hudson... I was worrying about him and his "errands" too. He wouldn't talk about them, and whatever they were, they drained his skin of color and made him irritable. Beyond irritable.

It felt like my world was spiraling out of my control, and I didn't know what to do to fix it.

A "game over" buzz jolted me back to awareness. I closed the app on my phone and tossed it onto my desk, then scrubbed a hand over my face. My eyelids were heavy, but I knew trying to sleep wouldn't do me any good. Though I'd mostly adopted Hudson's schedule—up all night and sleeping all day—my stressed-out body had decided three hours of sleep was enough. I begged to differ, but we weren't on speaking terms at the moment. I'd already spent a couple of hours at the hospital that morning and now that the office was open, I was trying to keep myself occupied with work.

"You okay, Wes?"

I glanced up at Iskander, who had paused in his paperwork to look at me with concern, and offered him a wan smile. "Sure." Turning my attention to my computer, I woke it up and focused on the words I'd typed out. I was pretty sure I'd written English, but I wouldn't swear by it.

"You're a lousy liar."

I shrugged, because he wasn't wrong. "I'm almost done with this proposal."

Iskander rocked back in his chair, the movement typical for him when he was thinking over a problem. I assumed the problem in question was me.

"You've been staring at that sentence for an hour."

"Not quite an—"

Iskander pushed up from his seat and grabbed his phone. "Come on. You need a distraction."

I waved a hand at my screen. "This *is* my distraction."

"And how's it working for you?" Iskander slapped my shoulder. "Up. Let's go."

I groaned. "Where?"

"My mom's house. She wants to get her Christmas lights down before the storm this weekend."

"Oh...joy," I said flatly. But I grabbed my jacket and hat and followed him out of the office.

Iskander's mother lived in Mississauga, about a kilometer or so north of the 401. Despite the houses and greenspace between us and the highway, I could still hear the rumble of traffic as we got out of the car. The house was a nice, modern two-story covered in gray brick, with a two-car garage. A slip-covered boat took up half of the driveway. Nondenominational illuminated Christmas decorations covered the front lawn—deer, bears, and a moose—and unlit lights were strewn along every eave, every window, and each of the four bushes and one small tree in the front yard.

"What, no lights on the roof?" I said sarcastically.

"No." Iskander smirked. "There's more in the backyard, though."

"Fuck me." I pulled my toque down around my ears and debated if anyone would notice if I did the half-in-the-otherplane thing. Despite the sunshine, it was *cold*. The frigid air bit at my nose and cheeks in an entirely unpleasant way.

The front door opened and a woman emerged from the house, her arms wide as she trotted down the short flight of stairs. She was shorter than me, but not by a whole lot, and she wore jeans and a cozy-looking cable-knit sweater in navy blue. A lime-green scarf with blue beading was wrapped over her hair and tied underneath it, leaving much of her black, slightly wavy hair visible. She wasn't thin—she carried the evidence of bearing kids

in her stomach and chest, giving her a shape I associated with all moms. “Iskander! Weren’t you even going to let me know you were here?”

“Hi, Mom.” Iskander bent down and kissed his mother’s cheek before enveloping her in his arms. “You should put on a coat. It’s freezing.”

“I’ll be fine for just a minute.” She pulled back and cupped his face, kind of like she was inspecting him, and tugged his scarf more tightly around his neck. Those simple gestures reminded me that a few months ago Iskander’s mom had been in the same position as Rosanna—child in the hospital, unsure if he was going to make it. “You look good.”

Iskander smiled and gestured to me. I came around the front of the car to join them on the walkway. “Mom, this is Wes Cooper, one of the partners at the firm. Wes, this is my mom, Yasmin Hassan.”

I extended a hand and she grabbed it and pulled me close enough to kiss my cheeks. “So happy to meet you,” she gushed.

“Uh, same. Hi.”

“I wish you’d let me know you were coming over,” she said, giving Iskander a smack on the upper arm. “I texted your brothers and Omar too.”

Iskander’s face went blank at the name “Omar,” though I didn’t have any context as to why. “Oh,” he said. “Are they...going to help?”

“Aziz said he’d try to be here after his shift. Masoud has to work late. Omar didn’t get back to me.” Yasmin hugged her chest and shivered.

“Go back inside. We’ll take care of it.”

“Come in for dinner when you’re done.”

“Oh, Mom, I don’t—”

She pointed a finger at him. “I’m not asking, Iskander. It’s been too long since you’ve visited. And I’d like to get to know Wes too.” She turned a smile on me that looked a little predatory.

“So what’s the plan?” I asked Iskander once the front door closed behind his mother. “Work fast to avoid your brother and sneak out before she knows we’re gone?”

“And hear about it for the rest of my life? Not a chance.”

“I’m not misreading you, right? You’d rather avoid your brothers?”

Iskander typed in a code on the keypad by the garage door, and it started to rise. “No. I’m good with Aziz and Masoud. It’s my brother-in-law I’m not particularly fond of.”

He ducked into the garage and I followed. “Oh?”

“I came out as bi when I was in university.”

My brows rose. “I didn’t realize.”

He shrugged. “It’s irrelevant most of the time. Anyway, I came out, and Mom and Dad had no idea how to handle it, so they ignored it.”

“That reaction’s better than some.” Like the one my parents had had. Or Evan’s.

Iskander hefted a ladder over his shoulder and headed back out into the blindingly bright afternoon sun. “Yeah, I know. Aziz, Masoud, Delara, and Soheila—”

“Wait—are those all of your siblings?”

“Yep. I’m the oldest, then Soheila, Masoud, Aziz, and Delara.”

“Wow.”

“So, the youngest three have no problems with me being bi. They kind of equate bi with gay, but whatever.” He coughed. “I’ll take it.”

I helped him set up the ladder in front of the picture window, unsurprised to see his mom watching us. I waved, which she returned with a bright smile, before moving deeper into the house and out of sight.

“Soheila’s not cool with it?” I asked.

“More like her husband, Omar, isn’t.” Iskander frowned. “We’re Muslim, but we’ve always been more secular. Know what I mean? Omar’s family is more conservative, and way more religious. He is *not* okay with the bi, and therefore Soheila isn’t, either.”

I grimaced. “I’m sorry, Isk.”

“It is what it is. But all the same, I’m hoping he doesn’t come by. That’s not the sort of distraction I wanted to give you.”

Taking down the lights, though—it was the good kind of distraction. It wasn’t difficult, but it did take some concentration, so I had to focus. For an hour, my world narrowed to ladders and strings of lights, and finding out a little more about Iskander.

Like the fact that he’d lost his dad nearly two years before, which is why he and his brothers were on deck to be the handymen for his mother. “We’re normally better at coordinating whose turn it is,” he admitted, and cleared his throat. I imagined the cold wasn’t helping his voice any. “But it’s been tough to get away. With, you know...” He shrugged.

Everything else going on. Yeah.

The sound of tires crunching on crystallized snow and salt tugged our attention away from the lights. A brown SUV pulled in behind Iskander’s in the driveway, close enough that the bumpers kissed. From the whispered

“shit” and the blank look on Iskander’s face, I assumed this was not one of his brothers, but his brother-in-law, Omar.

Omar was big—not as tall as Hudson, but at least as wide. Maybe wider. His winter parka was hard-pressed to cover his chest, and I thought for sure that when he crossed his arms, a seam or two would pop. He looked a bit older than Iskander, wrinkles etched into his forehead by years of frowning. His skin was a shade darker than Iskander’s, and his black hair was cut close to his head.

Made sense, seeing as his parka bore the shoulder crest of the Peel Regional Police, which was the police force that looked after Mississauga.

“Mom said you weren’t coming,” Omar said.

I felt Iskander stiffen beside me, though whether that was at Omar calling Yasmin “Mom” or the insinuation that Iskander wouldn’t help his mother, I wasn’t sure.

“Some time opened up,” Iskander said. “Wes, this is my brother-in-law, Omar El-Amin. Omar, Wes Cooper, one of my partners at the firm.”

Omar made the barest of nods in my direction before turning his attention back to Iskander. “You need to make a better effort for your family.”

“I do what I can,” Iskander said mildly.

I’d seen this side of Isk before in the past few months—the peacekeeper. He let things roll off his back. He didn’t get upset, and he always had a smile and a careful word to smooth things over. He didn’t engage, except to deflect, and I could tell Omar was well-versed in Iskander’s diplomatic skills—and didn’t particularly appreciate them.

He bristled at Isk’s nonreaction, and my magic objected. Iskander was *ours*, and it didn’t appreciate the threat facing him—even if I knew, logically, Omar wasn’t a threat in that way. I shoved the magic back into its box inside my head, but the container felt brittle. Like the rest of me.

“Maybe I’ll move into the backyard, huh?” I said, my eyes darting between Iskander and Omar.

“That’s a good idea,” Omar said, just as Iskander stated, “You’re fine here, Wes.”

Well...shit. I didn’t want to abandon Iskander, but I had the feeling my magic was not going to behave the longer I spent in Omar’s company. Aggression was just bleeding off him, as though he were searching for an excuse—any excuse—to start a confrontation.

Iskander didn’t like Omar, and the feeling was definitely mutual.

“We’ve got the front yard covered,” Iskander assured his brother-in-law. “The backyard still needs attention, though.”

Omar looked at the second story. “You didn’t get the lights up there.”

Iskander had confessed earlier that he was hoping Aziz would show up to do that, as his youngest brother had no problems with heights and was as sure-footed as a mountain goat. His words, not mine.

“I was going to get to them after we finish with the figurines,” Iskander said.

“When it was dark?” Omar scoffed and headed for the ladder. “I’ll do it now.”

Iskander raised his voice, and I could tell it cost him by the wince as he spoke. “You need someone to hold the ladder steady.”

“Go,” I said to him. “I’ll finish this.”

He grumbled under his breath but marched over to stabilize the ladder as Omar climbed up to the second story to remove the lights. I continued delighting the stuff at ground level, missing the conversation Iskander and I had shared while we worked. Now the yard was silent except for the sound of Omar’s boots on the ladder rungs and the occasional grunt of effort.

I carried one of the deer sculptures into the garage and when I emerged, that silence had been interrupted by a low-volume but intense argument.

“What do you mean, you’re not bringing the kids to Mom’s birthday party?”

“You’re going to be there.” Omar said it as though that statement explained everything.

“Well, yes. She is my mother.”

“Soheila and I have discussed it and we would prefer not to expose the boys to your influence.”

“My *what*?” Iskander’s voice cracked and disappeared.

“Your lifestyle choices. They’re immoral.”

Iskander coughed and cleared his throat. I heard him try to form words, but his voice had given out. After another try, he managed to wheeze, “So you’re saying if I’m around, Mom won’t get to see her only grandchildren.”

“We’ve made our decision.”

“That’s bullshit.” The words ripped out of me before I knew I was going to say anything, but I didn’t apologize for them.

“It’s his choice,” Omar said.

“Wes, it’s fine,” Iskander whispered. “I can see Mom another day.”



“Like hell it’s fine,” I growled. “Being bisexual is not a choice. Being a bigoted asshole is.”

Omar hopped down the ladder and turned his considerable bulk to face me. “What did you call me?”

“Wes,” Iskander said softly, but I ignored him.

“Ass. Hole.” I enunciated each word slowly and clearly, and my magic rejoiced in my rage. Its dance was contained inside my head for now, but it was bouncing against the brittle walls of its box. “And stop trying to intimidate me with the uniform. My boyfriend was a detective with the Toronto Police.” I smiled—and it wasn’t a nice smile—when Omar’s eyes widened. “Yeah, I’m gay. Better stand back. Don’t want to get the gay cooties on you.” Quick as lightning, I reached out and swiped my fingers along his parka. “Oops, too late.”

Iskander groaned. “Wes, c’mon.”

“Touch me again.” Omar’s dark brown eyes glittered. “Do it.”

“Nah, I think I made my point.”

“Which was what?”

“That bigoted assholes like yourself are scared little boys who know the world has changed around them, and think the only way to control it is by trying to dominate everyone and everything.” My magic danced some more. Frantically. It would be so easy to reach out with it and teach Omar to be more careful about whom he messed with. But...no. No, I wouldn’t do that. That wasn’t me. I swallowed that urge and forced a cocky grin to my lips. “I mean, tell me I’m wrong. Tell me you wouldn’t have had me on the ground with cuffs around my wrists if I’d dared to touch you again?”

“This is the kind of influence we don’t want over our sons,” Omar said, his eyes firmly on me.

“It’s a good thing their uncle isn’t as mouthy as I am, then. In comparison, he’s practically a saint.”

For a second, I thought Omar was going to take a swing at me. His arms tensed up and his stance shifted slightly. Any hit he landed would hurt—especially because I wouldn’t be able to go ghost to avoid it. But my magic was there, ready, waiting, so I wasn’t sure if he’d even land the punch. Either way, I was fucked.

Except he spun on his heel and headed for the front door.

I let out a sigh of relief.

“You okay?” Iskander rasped. His voice was barely there.

“Fine, just...need a minute.” I shot him a wavery smile. “Going to walk it off.”

“Go. I’ve got the rest of this.” Omar had managed to get the lights from the second story down, at least, so all that was left were the remaining bear and moose figurines.

I slipped around the side of the house and headed for the backyard, thankful there was a gate set into the fence. I ducked past it and leaned my forehead against the house’s freezing brick, out of sight of the street. My magic burst out of its container and I let out a low moan, hoping none of the neighbors would see the luminescence of my skin in the fading afternoon sunlight.

That had been close. Far closer than I wanted to admit.

“What are you doing?”

I jerked my head up, scraping my skin, and stared at Omar—who stared back, his eyes wide as he took in the light emanating from my eyes and skin. This close, he wouldn’t be able to miss it.

Shit. Shit!

“What—what the—”

“You didn’t see anything.”

“The fuck I didn’t! Your—your eyes—and your skin! What the—” He reached for his sidearm.

My magic reached out for *him*.

“You didn’t see anything.” Instinct drove my words. I didn’t know what the fuck I was doing, but my magic seemed to, and as scared as I was of it, I was more scared of what Omar would do with what he’d seen. “You didn’t see *anything*.”

Omar’s hand fell away from his weapon, and his muscles relaxed. “I saw you.”

“Okay, sure. You saw me. But I was just coming down off the adrenaline spike, that’s all.”

“Adrenaline,” he repeated. “Yeah. You were scared of me.”

More scared of *me*, but sure. If that made him feel better. “Confrontation sucks.” I tilted my head. “Touch your finger to your nose.”

Slowly, and without question, he complied.

This was...new. And more than a little terrifying. I wasn’t sure I wanted the ability to influence someone like this.

My gut trembled and I swallowed hard.

“What did you see?” I asked.

“You, standing by the wall, coming down from the adrenaline.”

“Did I look weird?”

“You look young. Way too young to be a partner in Iskander’s firm.”

I wasn’t going to even go there. “But nothing else?”

“No.”

I’d changed his thinking. Or...maybe his memories.

Holy. Fucking. *Shit*.

I stepped back so the fence could hold me up and stared at Omar. He stared back at me, but in a blank-eyed kind of way. Almost as though he were an empty screen waiting for input. No, this was definitely not a good thing. But...

*But.*

I had an opportunity here. An opportunity to help Iskander. An opportunity I shouldn’t pass up.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I said, “Iskander is a good man. Solid, loyal, caring. He would be a good influence on your kids.”

Omar frowned. “No, he...he...”

“He would never hurt his family.”

“He would never hurt his family.”

“Including your sons.”

“He would never hurt my sons.”

“That’s right. That’s good.” I let out a slow, even breath and pulled my magic back. It went, reluctantly, back into its container.

Omar blinked and his frown deepened. “Are you all right?”

“Sure. Just...you know.” My smile didn’t feel steady.

“I’m sorry about that—what I said to Iskander.” Omar rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I can’t even remember why I did.”

“No?”

“I’ve got to stop working doubles.” He gestured to the rear door. “Mom’s got supper ready. We can tackle the backyard after.”

“Yeah. Okay.”

I couldn’t say what I ate—I was too busy watching Omar and waiting for the influence I’d exerted over him to fade or break or...something. But it didn’t. He smiled and laughed with his mother-in-law, and he was congenial with Iskander, which I could tell was throwing Isk for a loop. When the subject of Yasmin’s upcoming party was raised, and Iskander started to

politely bow out, Omar interrupted him and insisted it was a family affair, so the entire family should be present.

Very carefully, I laid down my fork before it could fall out of my nerveless fingers.

I didn't know if I should feel triumphant or nauseous. I'd done that. I'd fucked with his head and changed his thinking—for the better, there was no denying that. But still. Cold swept through me at the scope of it.

“Are you okay, Wes?” Yasmin asked. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

I swallowed a completely inappropriate giggle at that phrase and shook my head. “No, I’m fine. I think maybe I’m just chilled.”

“I’ll make some tea. Warm you up before you head back outside.”

I was pretty sure tea wasn't going to touch the chill in my gut. I needed answers, not a hot drink. But then, answers rarely fixed anything, either.

## *Chapter Eleven*

Even though it was late when I got back to Toronto, I hopped in the car to head to the hospital. Rosanna and Darrell were keeping a round-the-clock watch in shifts, and I'd texted Rosanna already to see if she was there. I figured she would be since Darrell had been there that morning when I'd visited. She met me in the waiting room outside the ICU and gave me a quick update along with a big hug. Nothing much had changed from when I'd been there earlier—Lexi was showing some improvement and the doctors were cautiously optimistic. I took it with a grain of salt since she hadn't woken up yet.

Rosanna pulled back to look at me with a critical eye. She flicked a finger at my cheek. "You're extra pale. What happened?"

I tugged her over to the quietest corner of the sitting area. "I don't know. I don't even know where to start."

Concern eclipsed the exasperated amusement in her expression and she grasped one of my hands. "Take a breath. Start at the beginning."

"My magic. It's—"

A low shout from the direction of the nurses' station caught my attention. Rosanna and I both rose to see what the problem was, but before we could take even two steps, a shriek froze us in our tracks.

"Oh my god, what is that?"

I darted toward the desk at the ICU as the commotion got louder, and louder. More voices, more shouting. Items clattering to the floor. Chaos gaining momentum.

A nurse stood on the desk, looking down at the floor, and she glanced at us as we appeared. "I think it's a rat?" she said in a shaky voice.

I shared a look with Rosanna. A rat in a hospital? I mean, it probably happened...but my gut was telling me it was something else. I could tell Rosanna agreed with me—power rose from her, a familiar feeling, and I welcomed it.

"Call Maintenance," I said to the nurse. "We'll see if we can corner it."

"Oh god, be careful. It was really big and I think it might be rabid." She crouched on the desk and reached for the phone.

There was a scream from deeper within the ICU and we darted forward. The nurse's usage of the singular pronoun was a good sign. I hoped, anyway. Except I'd yet to see one of these things on its own. Normally there was one, and then there were six, and then...

We came around a corner to the sight of another nurse smacking a small creature with a metal tray. It was definitely an imp. And bonus—its fixation on the nurse meant that Rosanna could use her magic. It worked fine to defend someone else. She muttered a soft word and the imp disintegrated into a puff of dust.

The nurse swung the tray once more before he realized the thing he'd been fighting was gone. "Where'd it go?"

"I think you scared it off," I said, sure to insert gratitude into my voice. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah—I'm good." He discarded the tray onto a cart with a clatter. "Wow. Just when I thought I'd seen it all. Rats?" He shook his head, then seemed to realize we were in an area we weren't supposed to be in. "Thanks for coming to check things out, but we're all okay. You can head back out to the waiting room now."

"I'm going to go check on my daughter, if that's okay?" Rosanna said. "Lexi Aster."

"Sure, of course."

We started back in the direction of the sitting area, and I waited only until we were out of earshot before hissing, "How the hell was it *here*?"

Rosanna gave me a worried look. "I don't know. They're finding a way through from the beyond."

"But how? Why?"

"The why might be simple—because there's a weak point and they want to exploit it. They're not intelligent creatures. They can't plot or plan."

"So they're not, like, the vanguard of an invasion or anything."

"No." She paused. "Or, not an intentional one."

Any relief that had sprung up at her initial, definitive denial washed away. "Oh." Lexi had said something similar, though—that the open weak points were just begging for things to come through.

"Your biggest challenge is going to be determining if there's one hole, or multiple holes, and then you'll need to find a way to plug them."

"And how the hell do I do that?"

“Magic.” She squeezed my arm in reassurance. “I’ll see if there’s a hole here and patch it. But you’ve got to find out if there are others, Wes. Because this is only the start.”

I let out a nervous laugh. “The start of what?”

“If the wrong things discover these breaches?” Worried lines etched into the skin around her mouth. “Something very, very bad.”

\* \* \*

I stepped into Hudson’s house in time to hear the shower shut off. It was nearly 7:00 a.m. and the sun was kissing the horizon—not risen yet, but it would be soon. My feet were dragging. Hudson had been out with Evan on a case way later than usual, and after the incident at the hospital, I’d gone home to my apartment to get myself together. Except Michael had been there—so I’d ended up going ghost and walking. Just...walking. The exercise hadn’t helped to get my thoughts in order.

I trudged over to the big window in the living room and pulled the blackout curtains closed in preparation for sunrise. Given Hudson’s little incident of not-burning a few days ago in midday sun, I didn’t think the glow on the horizon would bother him, but better safe than sorry.

I leaned my forehead against the thick fabric. Maybe it was the exhaustion making everything seem insurmountable, but I suddenly felt every one of my 110-ish years. How was I going to find the holes in the otherplane and stop imps—and worse—from coming through? And what about Aurora House? God, I’d barely thought about that in the days since Lexi was hurt. We needed to go back and actually complete the job Kee had hired us to do.

And then there was Lexi. My best friend, my platonic soul mate, unconscious and hurt and... I couldn’t do anything for her. What if she didn’t wake up? What if we never got to watch crappy movies again, or go on shopping trips where I’d give terrible advice?

There was Evan too. He was suffering because I’d shown him how I’d changed, and then demanded he keep it a secret.

Who the fuck was I? I didn’t want to be this person, the one who kept secrets from the people he loved the most, the one who hurt his friends with his idiocy. But I didn’t know how to stop. And if I told the truth...

What then?

“I thought I heard the door,” Hudson said from behind me. “Did you dig up anything on Silvia Samuels?”

The person who’d pawned the brooch. The person I hadn’t thought of once in the past two days because, hello, more important things to worry about.

“No,” I snapped.

“Look, Wes, I know you’re worried about Lexi, but maybe you could use a distraction, huh? Research would be a good—”

“Yeah, I’m *worried* about Lexi,” I snarled, spinning to face him. He wore only a towel and water dripped through his chest hair, but that wasn’t enough to mute my temper. “Worried enough about her and about Evan that I can’t fucking sleep.”

“Evan’s having a rough patch. He’ll be okay.” He approached me cautiously, like one might approach a wounded wild animal. “Did something happen?”

Did something happen.

Did *something* happen.

I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. My body was undecided too, because I barked out a laugh that quickly morphed into a sob, and I covered my mouth.

“Oh shit.” In an instant, Hudson was in front of me, drawing me into his arms and holding me tight against his broad, barrel chest. Never been more thankful for vampire speed. “Is Lexi—”

“No change,” I managed.

“Good. I mean—not good, but...you know.”

I nodded against his chest. His bristly hair rasped along my skin, damp and fresh-smelling. I fit so perfectly against him, it was like he was molded for me.

“What else?”

I sniffed. “There was an imp at the hospital. And I met Iskander’s homophobic brother-in-law.” Who maybe wasn’t all that homophobic anymore, thanks to me, but I didn’t share that. I gave him all the other details, though, from the warm cocoon of his arms. Leaving his embrace, even pushing back to look up at him, wasn’t an option.

“Shit, sweetheart. You had a rough day.”

It was so sincere, but such an understatement, that I chuckled. I mean, it wasn’t funny? But it sort of was. And I guessed that was a great illustration



of my mental space at the moment.

“Night,” I corrected with a sniff.

“Whatever.” One of Hudson’s big hands cupped the back of my head, stroking my short hair. “What do you need?”

That was an easy answer. “You.”

His crooked grin made an appearance. “That’s a given. Let’s go to bed.”

I let him tug me down the hall to his—our—bedroom, and didn’t protest when he gently removed all my clothing. He kept his touches practical, but soothing and plentiful. When we’d first been together, Hudson had learned to read my body as easily as the front page of the newspaper, and he’d rediscovered that talent over the past few months. He’d learned that there were times I just didn’t feel like a sexual being. Sometimes I did.

Honestly, I didn’t know what I felt right now.

I loved his touch, especially when he guided me to lie down, pulled off his towel, and stretched out beside me. When I shivered, he pulled up the sheet and comforter and scooted closer. He gave off enough heat to warm me, especially with the blanket. His rough, calloused fingers trailed over my skin, tracing the lines of my body—shoulder, arm, hip, chest, thigh, groin. There was a tingle there with that last, enough to make me let out a noise like a purr.

He leaned over and pressed tiny kisses to my jaw, my neck, and my collarbone. I lifted my head to give him access, half wanting the sharp sting of a bite, and half not. His wonderful hand coaxed my chubby into something more substantial, but I wasn’t completely hard, and his kisses started down my chest with a clear destination for his talented mouth.

It was easy for him to fit my entire dick in his mouth, since it wasn’t even close to full-mast, and the attention felt good. Warm, loving, gentle. But even though my cock slowly gained momentum—a purely physical reaction—my brain wasn’t on the sex train this morning.

I tapped his head and he looked up, those golden-brown eyes guileless and perfect. “Feels good,” I said. “But...can we just cuddle?”

He pulled off and planted a kiss to my mostly soft dick—which, swear to god, warmed me as much as anything else he’d done. It was a gesture of unconditional love, of acceptance, and I hadn’t known how much I’d needed that until he’d done it. More than sex, more than a blow job.

“Whatever you need.” He crawled back up the bed and assumed the big spoon position, and I sighed as soon as his arms settled around me and

pulled me tight. One of his legs wrapped around mine, the coarse hair teasing my smoother skin. His dick was a hard ridge against my butt, but it was just there—not needed right now, but still a reassuring indication that even if my sexuality could sometimes be complex and not the easiest to navigate, Hudson desired me, anyway.

I let myself bask in his love for I don't know how long, but my brain wouldn't quiet down enough to let me sleep. "What happens if she doesn't wake up?" I whispered.

"That won't happen." His voice was firm and full of conviction.

"But what if?"

"Then I hold you up for as long as you need me to."

"What if...what if she wakes up and she's different?"

Hudson kissed my ear. "That's always a possibility with brain injuries."

"I don't want her to be different."

"I know. But if she is, you're going to love the new her as hard as you loved the person she was. That's who *you* are."

"What if she doesn't remember me?"

"Then we'll write up a screenplay about it and make millions."

"Hud!"

"You're right—a novel might be better."

Despite the topic, despite *myself*, I laughed. "If she were here right now, she'd be coming up with titles."

"And they'd be terrible."

My grin was wide, despite the moisture gathering in my eyes. "I miss her."

He squeezed me hard, hard enough that breathing was an issue for a moment. I loved it. "She'll be okay, Wes. She'll be okay."

## *Chapter Twelve*

“Here it is.” Kee placed the cardboard box containing the not-lamp on their desk, the bell sleeves of their purple dress fluttering around it, and perched on the edge closest to me.

Coming back out to Aurora House on my own had been a test of will, but I’d had to do it—not just for me, to prove to myself that I couldn’t be scared off, but because Caballero Investigations had been hired to do a job, and we were going to do it, damn it. Iskander couldn’t accompany me since he was on another case. I could have waited until Hudson and Evan were awake, but this was a simple visit to pick up the not-lamp and give Kee an update. I could handle it on my own.

I resisted the urge to open the top flaps to look inside. “Thanks for not giving it to the cops.”

Kee shrugged. “I trust you guys to know what you’re doing.” Their voice softened. “How is she?”

“The surgery went well. Now we’re just waiting for her to wake up.”

They rubbed my shoulder. “And you? How are you doing?”

“Okay. Not great, but okay.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“Have you had any more, uh...disturbances?”

They gave my shoulder one last pat and straightened. “No. It’s been quiet.” They cast a glance at the box. “Do you think—was this thing causing it?”

“I don’t know. It was doing something, but I don’t know what.”

“It’s a beacon.”

I whipped my head around at the new voice to find one of the ghosts I’d seen before, the big burly guy, standing behind me. He wore coveralls over a cream-colored shirt that might have been white once, but years of wear and washing had given it a tint of yellow. His hair was a medium brown and touched the tops of his shoulders in a riotous, uncontrolled mass of waves. His beard had a more reddish tinge to it, and it was just as unkempt as his hair. He had white skin, and his cheeks and nose were red, as though

permanently sunburned. If his hair and beard had been white, he could have made a very convincing Santa Claus.

“It’s a what?”

“Wes?” Kee asked tentatively.

I held up a hand to quiet them. “Ghost,” I said over my shoulder.

“Holy shit.”

“A beacon.” The ghost inhaled deeply, his shoulders rising and falling.

“It was calling folks through.”

“Through...you mean from the beyond?”

“The beyond, heaven, hell, whatever you want to call it. That thing—” he nodded at the box “—is the devil’s own work, I guarantee it. I seen so many come through and then just...go.” He rubbed a hand over his face. “I don’t know how to stop it.”

“You were going to ask me for help. When I first saw you.”

“But I made you run, didn’t I? Scared some of the kids too, before. I’m sorry ’bout that, but I was tryin’ so hard to get somebody’s attention...” He sighed. “That’s why Charlie talked to you the next time.”

My heart tripped a beat. “Where is Charlie?”

He shook his head. “Gone. She resisted hard, but...”

“Oh god.”

He huffed out a humorless chuckle. “God ain’t got nothing to do with what’s happening here. This is my home—peaceful and quiet, even with all these kids around now.”

My eyes widened. “You mean that, don’t you? This was—is—your place.”

He grunted. “Built it with my own two hands, didn’t I?”

Over my shoulder, I said to Kee, “What’s the name of the original owner of the farm?”

“Uh—shit, it was...” They snapped their fingers. “Malcolm MacKinnon.”

The ghost smiled, showing off not-so-straight teeth. “I go by Mac.”

I returned his smile. “Nice to meet you, Mac. Kee, say hello to the guy who built your farm.”

Their eyes widened. “Uh...hi.”

“I ain’t sure if she’s a he or he’s a she, but tell ’em I’m happy with what’s been done. Everyone should have a place, ’specially kids whose own family don’t want ’em. You can’t help none who you love.”

“Kee is genderfluid. They use the pronoun ‘they,’” I said with a smile. “I’m glad to hear you’re happy with Aurora House.”

“Yeah, I am. So you’re gonna find out what’s going on?”

“I’m going to do my best. Listen, if you feel the urge to, uh, go somewhere...”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be here,” he said, and disappeared.

“He’s gone,” I told Kee.

“That—that was wild,” they said breathlessly. “That was actually Malcolm MacKinnon? And he was okay with all the queer kids in his farmhouse?”

“Sounded like it.”

“Wow. Just...wow.”

That about covered it. And while Kee was caught up in the wonder of it all, I couldn’t help but reflect on the sadness and exhaustion I’d heard in Mac’s voice. The beacon—or whatever it was—and everything it was putting into motion was taking its toll on Mac. He might be dead, but he was still a person.

And he needed our help as much as Kee and the kids did.

\* \* \*

Hudson’s garage workshop was the perfect place to examine the not-lamp. With his monster car at my back, I put the box containing it on the workbench and grabbed a pair of heavy-duty gardening gloves from their place on the pegboard. I pulled them on and carefully opened the flaps of the box, as though the thing might jump out at me.

When dealing with magical things, you never knew.

I lifted it and nudged the box out of the way, then placed the not-lamp upright on the bench. It swayed for a moment when I let go, but didn’t fall over, and I leaned back to eye it from top to bottom.

The initial observation that it looked like a basement craft project still stood. I didn’t know if it had started out life as an actual lamp or if it just happened to be built in that general shape, but it was covered with buttons and what I could only surmise were tiny radio dishes...or something that looked like them. As though it were a miniature antenna. Which made sense, considering what Mac had said about it being a beacon.

I picked up a screwdriver and used it to poke the tiny dishes. Nothing happened—there was no resurgence of the blue sparks that had burst forth when Lexi brought her hand close to the device. I considered mimicking what she'd done to see if I got a reaction, but decided not to since I was all alone out in Hudson's garage. If anything happened, it would be hours before either Hudson or Evan awoke, and probably longer still before they found me.

One last thing to try. I slipped into the otherplane, expecting to feel the same resonance I had in the hayloft...but it was absent. There was no power running through it anymore, nothing was emanating from it, and I saw no indication that it had ever been anything other than dead and de-energized.

With a sigh, I reentered the living plane. I clearly didn't have the skills needed to unlock the secrets of this thing. I needed Lexi.

I crossed my arms and closed my eyes, fighting off the pain in my heart. What the hell was the point of my roided-out magic if I couldn't heal Lexi? If I couldn't figure out what this damned device was? If I couldn't snap my fingers and close these damned rifts the imps were coming through? The only thing I'd managed to really fix was Omar's homophobia—which had been an experiment that shouldn't have worked, and something I still wasn't sure I was okay with.

But maybe...maybe in that case the ends justified the means. If it made for a happier relationship for Isk and his family, wasn't that worth it?

And what if I could help Evan in the same kind of way?

My eyes popped open at the thought. I—I could. I was pretty sure I could. It would be similar to what I'd done to Omar, nudging and molding his memories. I could erase what Evan had seen me do, and especially how I'd reacted. My demand for him to keep it a secret wouldn't exist. He'd be free of that burden.

I could take care of it. I could.

And if I did, it would be *one thing* I'd been able to make better on purpose.

I left the garage, entered the house through the side door into the kitchen, and headed downstairs. I had no illusions that this was going to be easy—part of what I'd done to Omar was use my voice to give form to my magic. Since Evan was asleep, I'd have to take a different tack. Not sure what, but I'd figure it out. Because it was the right thing to do.

I paused at the locked door to the bedroom in the basement, my hand hesitating over the electronic combination lock. This *was* the right thing...wasn't it? It would help him, I knew it would. But...consent. I didn't have it. Even if I asked, I probably wouldn't get it, because who wanted someone messing with their brain? Still...it would *help*. It would erase the reason for this downswing. And shouldn't that be my main concern? Protecting Evan? Making up for my mistake?

A scratching sound on the other side of the basement caught my attention. Normally, I'd think it was a mouse seeking out shelter for the winter. But with everything that had happened...

I smelled something too. Something like...rotten eggs. The odor was familiar, but I was too focused on tracking down the sound to think about it. I wrinkled my nose and stepped away from Evan's door, heading in the direction of the scratches. I swear to god, if it was imps again, I was going to lose my shit.

I rounded the corner into the alcove where the furnace was located, and—damn it—spotted a now-familiar miniature horror lurking in the shadows. The imp chomped on a metal pipe, its mouth stretched wide in a macabre grin, and I don't know what the hell its teeth were made of, but there were sparks.

Just as my brain categorized the smell.

Natural gas leak.

“Oh, f—”

The explosion happened in slow motion. I watched the spark and natural gas mate and birth a tiny fireball, growing, growing, expanding into a murderous force that would take the lives of the men I loved—one as a partner, and one as a little brother.

No. This wasn't how it ended. Not after everything else we'd survived. I refused to be taken out by a glorified rat-bat too stupid to know you don't eat natural gas lines.

I threw open the box of magic in my head and *reached*. Escape. That was my only thought. My magic latched on to Hudson and Evan, and I pulled on that part of me that allowed me to haunt someone, to teleport through the otherplane to somewhere else in the living plane.

Even as I acted on instinct, the logical part of me screamed this wouldn't work. I could haunt only people, not places. I could move only myself

through the otherplane, no one else. There was no possible way this was a viable solution—

Except it was.

I blinked hard against the midafternoon sun glinting off snowbanks in Hudson's front yard. Hudson stood beside me, swaying on his feet. Evan was on the ground, his limbs arranged haphazardly, as though he'd fallen, and he looked like he was mostly asleep. The house was still intact—how the hell—

The boom of the explosion knocked us off our feet. Glass sprayed around us and smoke and debris flew into the air. I rolled to the side and covered my head as pieces of wood and metal fell from the sky. Something hit my back, but the pain was muted, and I wasn't sure if that was because whatever it was hadn't hurt me or because I was in shock.

I'd teleported them. It shouldn't have been possible.

"My—what the fuck, my *house*!" Hudson tried to push to his feet, but I grabbed at his ankles. I couldn't see what was left of Hudson's house through the smoke, but given the debris still falling from the sky and the pulverized brick dust strewn across the street, I was going to guess it wasn't much.

Blood trickled down his legs—holy shit, he was wearing only underwear—from a multitude of tiny cuts from flying glass. Something dripped into my eye and I realized I hadn't escaped the explosion unscathed, either.

"Hud!"

"My research!"

His house was gone and he was worried about his fucking research? He'd been looking for one of his sire's lieutenants—the only one who hadn't been there when Hudson killed his band—for twenty years, but Jesus. His life was worth more than that.

Digging my short fingernails into his skin, I yanked back on one foot. Gone was his usual predatory grace—it was the middle of the fucking day, and he wasn't supposed to be awake, so that was no surprise. I didn't expect him to fall on top of me, though. His elbow cracked against my temple, and black spots danced around my vision.

Or had they already been there? Magical exhaustion burned through me. I didn't want to move. I didn't want to talk. I didn't want to think. Smoke burned my throat and I coughed weakly as Hudson rolled off me.



“Uh...it’s daylight.” Evan said. He sounded shaky. Scared. “It’s daylight and I’m not feeling sick. Why aren’t I feeling sick?”

Hudson sat up and looked at his flaming house again before rubbing his hands over his face. “How the hell did you get us out?” Before I could decide if I was going to answer, his hands were on my T-shirt, grabbing it and jolting me up as he glared. I had no doubt part of that glare was powered by concern, but a good chunk was a cop—ex-cop—who needed answers. I braced my hand on the concrete and sat up, my head spinning from Hudson’s rough treatment and everything else.

“Magic,” Evan supplied.

Hudson glanced at him and shook his head. “There’s no way—Wes isn’t that powerful.”

Sirens sounded in the distance.

“Fuck.” Evan sounded as exhausted as I felt. “Tell him, Wes.”

The smell of burning wood and plastic permeated everything, clogging the back of my throat. Bits of stuff were still cascading down around us—lighter things, like foam from furniture, smoldering clothes, and charred pieces of paper. The fire roared and crackled, an innocuously happy sound given what it was doing. What it was destroying.

My silence snapped something in Evan. He roared, “Fuck you, Wesley! You tell him—you tell him now. Tell him what you did. Tell him what you made me promise.”

Oh god.

“My—” I turned my head to the side, but Hudson gave me another shake. “My magic is...big. Bigger.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“I can...do things. More things than—more things than I should be able to.”

“He made Scott float and held him against the ceiling—the fucking ceiling.” The words rushed out of Evan as though a dam had been cracked and everything could now flow.

“Since when?”

I swallowed. “Since the crown.”

“Jesus—Jesus Christ.” Hudson stood and stumbled back, almost as though he didn’t want to touch me anymore. I fell back, barely catching myself on one arm. He shoved a hand into his hair as he paced away a few steps. “Jesus *Christ*, Wes. Why didn’t you say anything?”

That reaction, right there, was why I hadn't. That subtle rejection. That look of disbelief and betrayal. I'd never wanted to see it. Feel it.

But Hudson might as well have slapped me.

This was it. This was what would break us.

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## *Chapter Thirteen*

Hudson didn't talk to me. All the way through going to the hospital and being officially declared whole and hale, if exhausted, through having the cops question us in the little ER cubicles, through the story that I'd woken up and smelled the gas and gotten Hudson and Evan out before the house exploded, through getting dressed in the donated clothing, through getting a ride over to the office, he said nothing. Not to me, anyway. He spoke to the cops and shared some quiet words with Evan, but I got nothing from him.

The Hudson I'd dated in the eighties could be cold and emotionless, but the silent treatment wasn't his thing. We'd fought—too often in the last year we were together then—loudly, fiercely, getting everything, or mostly everything, out into the open.

This was new, and I didn't like it. He was angry. Furious. I got that. But I felt shut out like I'd never been before. I felt like this life I'd cobbled together, this family, was about to shatter.

The sun had set when we piled through the door into the office. Iskander was there, expecting us, since Hudson made a phone call to him earlier. He watched Hudson and Evan with curious eyes, noting that neither of them seemed to be showing any ill effects from being awake during the day and out in the sunlight.

"You're okay?" he said as we settled into various pieces of furniture. "Not burned or...or anything?"

"Wes got us out before the fire could hurt us," Evan said tiredly.

"And the sunlight?"

"Apparently no longer an issue." Hudson collapsed back onto one of the armchairs we kept in the sitting area.

"What? How?"

"We found out the day Lexi got hurt that the sun didn't bother me anymore. I thought it was because I was older—but Evan didn't have any trouble today, either. So the only thing I can think of is that it's because of Wes's blood."

Hudson sipped from me regularly when we made love. And Evan had been spoiled for regular human blood when he'd drunk mine the first night

he'd awoken as a vampire. Mine was, apparently, extra special.

"So what the hell happened?"

I wanted to curl up on my side on the couch, facing the back of it, and escape into unconsciousness for a while. Maybe I thought about it too loudly, because Hudson grunted and glared at me.

"Tell him."

Reluctantly, I did. From the changes after I'd used the crown, to finding the imp munching on the natural gas line. By the end of it, Isk had moved to one of the desks and was sitting behind it, his face blank with shock.

"Holy shit," he muttered. He blinked a couple of times, then focused on Evan. "And you knew?"

"Only for a couple of days. Since...you know." Evan shrugged. "Wes didn't want me to tell."

"See, that's what I don't get. Why the fuck wouldn't you tell us?" Hudson demanded, his fingers gripping the arms of the chair so hard his knuckles were white.

I shrank in on myself. There were any number of excuses I could give, but it all boiled down to one thing. "I was scared."

"Of what?"

"This. You. Your reaction."

"I wouldn't have had a reaction if you weren't keeping secrets!"

"No? Think so?" I released my ever-present hold on the magic in my head. It was sluggish to respond, but it was still there—still huge and ill-fitting. It flushed my skin with power, and I knew the instant it was reflected as cold, icy light in my eyes. "So there's no reaction to this, then?" My magic reached farther, grabbing loose items on the desks and lifting them into the air. "How about now?"

Something flitted across Hudson's face—an emotion I'd never wanted to see in his expression because of me.

Fear.

It was there and gone in a second, but it didn't matter. The fact that it had been there at all told me everything.

I stuffed the magic back into the box. "Sorry," I murmured.

"Omar," Iskander said suddenly. "You talked to him alone and then—he changed his mind about me completely."

I bit my lip. "He saw my magic. I didn't realize I could—could do that."

“You messed with his head. With his memories.” Iskander’s eyes hardened. “Just like the demon did to me.”

Oh shit. I hadn’t exactly forgotten that Iskander’s memories had been futzed with in the demon’s attempts to get to me in the spring, but I definitely hadn’t made the connection between what I’d done to Omar and what had been done to Isk. “I didn’t—”

“What were you doing in the basement before the explosion?”

Fuck. Iskander was too good of an investigator. Of course he would pick up on that—Hudson’s laundry room was on the main floor, and his tools were all out in the garage. There was no reason for me to go into the basement unless it was to see Evan. And why would I see Evan when he was sleeping?

“Wes? What the fuck were you doing in the basement?” Iskander’s eyes glittered with anger and something else. Something damned close to disgust. “Were you going to fix Evan’s thoughts too?”

“It was my fault,” I managed, even though my mouth had gone dry as dust. I tried to clear my throat but it didn’t help. “I shouldn’t have—shouldn’t have asked Evan to keep my secret.”

“No, you shouldn’t have,” Evan put in.

“And—and I thought—I thought if I—”

Evan shoved to his feet. “You’d protect your secret forever.”

“No!” I leaned forward and cupped my head in my hands. “No, that’s not—I swear. I wanted to take away the pain that I—”

“By stealing from me?” Evan let out a humorless puff of a chuckle. “Oh right. You’re a thief.”

“No. Evan, I swear—”

“I need to not be here right now,” he said to Iskander.

Isk gave a tight nod and held out a hand to invite Evan upstairs, into Iskander’s residence. He shot me a look that promised some sort of retribution, but Evan walked away without looking back once.

And then it was just Hudson and me. In stony, cold silence.

I don’t know how much time had passed before Hudson spoke. “Were you going to fuck with his memories?”

“I wanted to help.”

“No—Evan was right. You wanted to protect yourself. Because if you’d wanted to help, you would have told us everything.” His voice softened—

but not in a tender way, in an *I'm so hurt I can barely breathe* way. "How could you, Wes?"

Something in my chest cracked, and the breath I heaved in was painful. "I was going to tell you. The day after, when I realized things were weird. But you were so excited about retiring and making plans and—"

"Excuses."

"Yes! I know! But I was *scared*."

"I thought you trusted me."

"I do."

"You don't," Hudson growled. "How can you say you do, if you thought I'd walk away because your magic got jacked up? Huh, Wes? Tell me."

I shook my head.

"You can't, because I'm right. You don't trust me."

A sob caught in my chest, because fuck him to hell, he was right. I didn't. We'd found each other again, we'd rediscovered the love we had—or maybe it was new love built on the foundations of the old—but we'd broken up once. The precedent was set. Back then, he'd shown me that his priority wasn't me. It had never been me. And his words and promises that that was true this time couldn't battle the doubt and worry living in my head and heart.

I swept at the wetness on my cheeks and blinked hard. "I don't."

Hudson reeled back as though I'd struck him.

"But you don't trust me, either," I said. "What happened to me being a partner in this investigation firm?"

"What are you talking about? You *are* a partner."

"You don't treat me like one. You talked to Iskander without me. The two of you made decisions without me. You dismissed the idea of a job at the group home at first."

"I apologized—"

"You did. But it doesn't change the fact that you haven't once considered my input."

"That's not true. We ended up taking the job at Aurora House, didn't we?"

"Only because *you* decided to."

Hudson jerked a hand through his hair. "How is this at all related to you keeping a big fucking secret?"

"What errands have you been running?"

He froze, mid-hair-swipe. “Huh?”

“Your errands.” I squinted at him. “Any tie to you wanting to rush into a burning house to grab your research notes?”

He met me glare for glare. “That’s not the same thing and you know it.”

“Then why not be open about it? I thought you had put the search aside.”

“I never said that.”

“You implied it.” My breath caught. “Isk knew, didn’t he?”

He turned away.

I shook my head and slowly regained my feet. “So I didn’t trust you with my secret, and you didn’t trust me with yours. Doesn’t say much for us, does it?”

As I reached the door, Hudson said, “Where are you going?”

I almost said *home*, but if I was honest with myself, *home* meant Hudson’s house, and it was gone. Destroyed. “My apartment,” I said instead, and hesitated. “You could—”

Before I could finish my offer, he said, “I’ll be fine here.”

Cold slithered through me at his rejection. I told myself as I opened the door that I resolutely was *not* waiting for him to call me back.

Good thing, because he didn’t.

\* \* \*

Michael was waiting for me when I walked into my apartment, because of course he was. He was extra glitchy with jerky movements that threatened to give me vertigo, and even though I could see his mouth moving, all I heard was random noises that made no sense. I could usually figure out what he was trying to say, but tonight all I wanted was to be alone.

I reached into my liquor cabinet and pulled out a new bottle of Jack, my buddy. By the time a quarter of it was gone, Michael had shut up. I could still see him, though, and I hadn’t drunk enough that I couldn’t interpret the pity in his expression.

I narrowed my eyes. “Don’t fucking look at me like that. After the day I had, I’m damn well allowed to drink.” Lifting the bottle to my lips, I proved the veracity of my words. The alcohol burned my mouth and my throat, but settled into my chest in a nice, warm ball. “You don’t get to judge me. You don’t *ever* get to judge me.”

Michael's mouth stayed closed, so at least my pickled brain didn't have to try to decipher his words.

"Hudson's scared of me." The confession poured out, lubricated by Jack. "I saved him and Evan with my super-duper magic, and he's *scared* of me. Not that I can blame him," I added with a huff of a humorless chuckle. "I mean, what the fuck? Why am I like this?"

Michael opened his mouth but nothing came out, and a moment later he was gone.

I lifted my bottle in a mock salute. "Yeah, thanks for nothing," I shouted, then took a hearty swallow.

I didn't remember going to bed, but that's where I woke up. The first thing I focused on was the half-full bottle of Jack sitting on my nightstand, and the previous day came rushing back with all its awfulness. I groaned and shoved myself up. My bladder let me know gravity was indeed a thing and I stumbled into the bathroom. When I finished up, I was tempted to pick up where I'd left off—there was half a bottle left, after all. Instead, I picked up my phone to see if there was any news about Lexi.

There wasn't. I should be used to the "no news is good news" thing by now, but I wasn't. Beyond that disappointment, I had sort of thought Hudson might reach out—but no. There was nothing. No calls. No messages. No emails.

I sat hard on the bed and stared at the lack of indicators on the device. No one had reached out. Not even to check in.

Seriously—what had I expected?

I had fucked up. Royally and completely. I'd pushed Evan into a low point. I'd shut Hudson out, when we were supposed to be all about letting each other in. And yeah, he wasn't blameless, but I couldn't justify my actions by pointing at his like a toddler and using them as an excuse. My choices were on my head, and I'd made some truly shitty decisions in the past few months.

But the fact that *no one* had reached out...

I tossed the phone onto my nightstand, flopped on my side, and pulled the covers up over my head.

That phase lasted a couple of hours, until I couldn't stand my own stink anymore. I needed a shower. I pushed myself out of bed and tried to pretend it was like any other day—pointedly ignoring my phone. Under the spray of water, I considered my options.



One: I could return to my cocoon, smelling all fresh now, and continue to ignore the world. Tempting, but hiding—running—had never worked for me before.

Two: I could reach out and force a conversation with...someone. Hudson, maybe. Or Iskander—he might be a better choice. Except the last I'd seen of him, he was in full-on *rawr* protector mode over Evan, so maybe not. Besides, nothing good ever came from forcing something.

Three: I could apologize. I mean, that was a given. I was going to do that. But I was pretty sure I needed to wait more than twelve hours for their tempers to cool. If I hadn't heard anything by this time tomorrow, I'd head over to the office and try to get one of them to listen to me.

Four: I could get some work done. Not in the office, but I could still do some research. Answer some questions I hadn't had time to answer.

Yeah, okay. I could do that. It was something tangible, something that needed to be done. As an added bonus, it would be the right sort of distraction to get me out of my head.

But first—coffee. Maybe a bit of food.

Then I'd dig up everything I could to present it as a peace offering.

Four hours later, I was battling watery eyes, a sore back, and a stomach that protested the amount of coffee I'd dumped into it...but I'd made progress in gathering info on Silvia Samuels, the woman who'd pawned the brooch. I pushed back from my laptop and stretched, rubbing my eyes with one hand.

My phone rang, making me jump. It was Rosanna. Heart in my throat, pretty sure there were only two reasons she'd be calling me, I answered.

"Wes?"

I couldn't tell if that was excitement in Rosanna's voice or tears. For a moment, I hung suspended in some weird sort of limbo, terrified of the next words that would come across the line.

"She's awake."

## Chapter Fourteen

I didn't think I'd seen so wonderful a sight before as Lexi's open, watchful hazel eyes. They looked sleepy, not entirely focused, but goddamn—they were *open*.

"Hey," I said from the doorway. My voice cracked.

She waved me in with her good hand and patted the bed. I sat down, then bent over to kiss her cheek.

"How are you?" she said, her voice low and raspy from disuse.

I chuckled. "Doing better than you."

"Ass."

"Doctor been to see you yet?"

"Think so. It was hard to follow what she was saying. They're moving me out of the ICU, though."

"That's good."

"Gonna get me up and walking in a bit."

"That's...fast." I frowned. "You think?"

She grunted. I wasn't sure if it was in agreement or not—Lexi was usually a lot more talkative, and I wasn't practiced in her nonverbalisms like I was in Hudson's.

"How are you feeling?"

"Fuzzy. Sore. Want to go home."

I brushed the back of my finger along her cheek. "Yeah, but the hospital's the best place for you right now. Get you all healed up."

"Mom said someone shoved me and I fell?"

"You don't remember?"

"Nah." Her eyes drooped. "Prob'ly for the best, huh?"

"Yeah. You don't need to worry about it. Just focus on getting better."

"Okay."

That right there was the biggest sign Lexi wasn't herself. Telling her not to worry about something was usually the best way to get her to dig into something to find out all the whys and whats.

A soft tap on the door had me looking up. A nurse in pastel pink scrubs was there, smiling gently. "Ms. Aster? Time for some tests and then we'll

be moving you to a regular room.”

I kissed Lexi’s cheek again. “I’ll be back.”

“Promise?”

“Absolutely. I’ve got to fill you in on all the fun you’ve missed.” Go, me. I managed to say it without any hint of sarcasm.

She smiled and let her eyes slip closed. “I’ll hold you to that.”

“Good.” I squeezed her hand and left the room.

Rosanna and Darrell were in the waiting area, where they’d been when I arrived. Iskander had joined them at some point while I’d been in the room with Lexi, and he was sitting across from them and leaning close, probably so they could hear his low whisper of a voice. I don’t know what I expected when I walked up to them, but the blank look I got from Isk wasn’t it.

It stabbed me like a knife.

“Hi.” My hands twisted awkwardly in front of me. I wasn’t sure what to do with them. “They’re, um, doing some tests and then moving her to a new room.”

Rosanna rose and enveloped me in a hug, and Darrell was right there too, slapping my shoulder in a celebratory kind of way.

“She’s going to be okay,” he said in his deep, no-nonsense voice.

“I’ll let the guys know,” Iskander said.

Rosanna looked from me to Isk, her eyebrows raised in a silent query. Iskander gestured to me, in almost a mocking sort of way—though I could have been misinterpreting that, given where my head was. I sighed, exhausted by the idea of explaining it again. Because I didn’t know how to explain it.

“My magic is...uh. Increased?” I rubbed the back of my neck. “These past few months, since the—the—you know.”

“Since the crown,” Rosanna said.

I let out a breath. “Yeah.”

“And let me guess—you didn’t tell anyone.”

Iskander pointed at her and mouthed, “Bingo.”

“Oh, Wes.” She pulled me close again and kissed my cheek. “You always did make things more difficult than they needed to be.”

I grimaced and shrugged, because she wasn’t wrong.

She drew back. “You want me to help you with some meditation? Control?”

“Control isn’t a problem.” If it had been, I would have spoken up. Probably. “It’s a lot. It doesn’t fit anymore.”

She frowned. “That doesn’t sound like magic I know.”

Darrell nudged her shoulder. “Because you’re a witch. Wes isn’t. That’s got to have something to do with it, right?”

“Maybe.” Her eyes grew unfocused, which reminded me so much of Lexi when she was planning how to research her way out of a puzzle. “Let me do some digging.”

“Thanks.” I offered her a small smile, then turned to Iskander. “Can I, uh, talk to you for a second?”

He lifted one brow, but nodded over to the opposite corner. Once we were there, I pulled out my phone with my notes on Silvia Samuels, but instead of saying anything, I stared at them for what felt like a full minute. My heart was somewhere close to my throat, and my breath was starting to come hard and fast. With an effort, I calmed it, inhaling deeply and refusing to give in to the urge to panic.

This was Iskander. My friend. One of my business partners. And yeah, sure, he might hold the future of my friendship with Evan in his hands, because damn, protective much...and maybe even the future of my relationship with Hudson, now that he and Hudson were besties and he could maybe influence him to drop me like a hot coal...

Okay. None of those thoughts were helping.

“Do you still want me as a partner in the firm?”

Isk jerked back like I’d slapped him. “What?”

“I could sell my share. If you need me to. I mean... I fucked up, and you don’t—you don’t like me much right now, and—”

“I’m pissed at you, yeah. I think you—” He cleared his throat. “You made some shitty decisions. You almost made shittier ones. You messed with my brother-in-law’s brain. And—” He paused to swallow and take a breath. “And you hurt Evan. Like, a *lot*.”

“I know.”

“But none of that’s business.”

“Yeah?” I said, looking up and knowing hope was probably etched across my face. Also, I felt so young. Young and stupid. I remembered what Hudson had said to me when we’d first reconnected months ago—that I was stuck, unevolving, forever locked into the mind-set of a twenty-three-year-old.

“Yeah.” Iskander’s lips twitched into something that might have been a smile. “What’ve you got?”

My phone’s screen had gone dark by now, so I nudged it awake. “I looked into Silvia Samuels, the person who pawned the brooch. She’s dead.”

“Damn. How?”

I made a face. “She froze to death in her apartment.”

“Dear god.”

The papers had articles referring to the event for weeks, stories I vaguely remembered reading at the time, about six years ago. It was the sort of “it bleeds, it leads” story that newspaper editors salivated over. Add to it that she’d died during a particularly frigid cold snap, in a city that was no stranger to winter and epically low temperatures? And the fact that her landlord was immediately under scrutiny due to rumors he’d shut off the heat to her apartment because she hadn’t paid her rent in three months?

Oh yeah, the papers practically had an orgasm over the scandal.

“She was in her late sixties with no known family. Apparently she was an, uh, entertainer in her youth.”

Iskander arched a brow. “Burlesque? Prostitute?”

It was a good guess, because if she’d been an actor, that’s what they would have called her. “No idea. I couldn’t find those details. But I did see a comment from a friend of hers that Silvia had pawned the brooch to help raise enough money to get caught up on her rent.”

“That’s awful.”

“Right?” I closed my notes app. “It’s all gross, but it doesn’t explain why a ghost suddenly decided to retrieve Silvia’s brooch now. I mean...was it her? And if so, why?”

“It’s good work,” Isk said. “Take a break, let it percolate. Go back to it later. I’ve got something else you can look into.” He pulled out a piece of paper from the inside pocket of his jacket and handed it to me.

I unfolded it, revealing a black-and-white image and some text. It took me a minute for my brain to pick out the patterns in the image, but when I did, a creepy old Victorian house jumped out at me. The text was easier to understand.

*Investigate the things that go bump in the night!*

*The Ghost Squad is looking for new members. No experience required. Just an open mind and a steady soul. Meetings on Friday nights.*

*You're not afraid, are you?*

"Where'd you get this?"

"Evan and I went for a walk on campus last night. He wanted—"

Iskander broke off, looked at his feet, and started again. "He wanted to get a glimpse of Scott, make sure he was okay."

"I didn't hurt him."

"You did. Not physically, maybe. But..." Isk tapped his temple.

Yeah, okay. Point. I sighed. "Did he see him?"

Iskander made an affirmative sound. "But he couldn't bring himself to say anything to him." He flicked a finger at the paper. "We found that on a lamppost."

It was somewhere to start, I guessed. Nothing on the sheet of paper tied the ghost-hunting group to Aurora House, but the kid who'd shoved Lexi had been young, and definitely not a resident. Even if he wasn't a part of this Ghost Squad, I didn't imagine the ghost-hunting community was that huge. Maybe one of the members knew him.

At the bottom of the sheet was a number to text for information on the next meeting. "Think I should check it out?"

"I think you and Evan should."

I jerked my gaze up. "Evan's not gonna want to go with me, are you kidding?"

"Evan was a university student a year ago. When was the last time you were a student?"

Goddamn, another point. Good thing we weren't keeping score. "He's still not gonna want to go with me."

"Avoiding each other isn't going to help either of you." Iskander's voice faded with each word, and I knew he'd about used it up for the time being. I could be an asshole and keep arguing...or I could admit he was right. Again.

"Okay. I'll text and get the info."

"Evan'll meet you at your place," he whispered.

I considered that for a moment and shook my head. "No, at Hudson's. We should try to get the not-lamp out of his garage. Someone might recognize it, or know who made it."

"Good idea."

"This'll be fun," I said, trying to inject some enthusiasm into my voice.

By the roll of his eyes, I could tell my effort was less than successful.

\* \* \*

After texting the number on the flier and getting the time and location of the meeting—and hoping this would be a lead that would pan out and help us track down the kid who'd hurt Lexi—I had a quick dinner and slipped into the otherplane to make my way over to the remains of Hudson's house. I could have driven, but then I would have had to find a parking spot and hope that no one recognized my car and...walking was just easier.

The otherplane did nothing to hide the horrible state of Hudson's home.

There was rubble everywhere. Broken bricks, shattered wood, torn and charred roof shingles, and bits and pieces I couldn't even identify. The steel fence that surrounded Hudson's property was no longer quite straight—it had bowed outward from the force of the blast. A piece of metal was wrapped horizontally across the fence and it took me a few minutes to determine it used to be the curtain rod on the picture window at the front of the house. Yellow police tape fluttered around it, and warning signs had been posted by the city to inform people of the danger of the scene. Huge icicles hung from the remnants of the structure, no doubt from the firefighters' hoses as they tried to put out the flames. It was a good thing no one had been injured in the blast—not only because it would have been one of my family hurt, but because investigators would probably still be on scene.

I couldn't see every detail of the damage in the wan illumination of the streetlights, but I could see enough to know that there was no repairing the house. Once the city and utilities inspectors were done investigating the explosion and its cause, it would be torn down. Hudson's sanctuary—the one he'd customized exactly how he wanted and needed it—would be no more.

“Fuck,” I whispered, slipping back into the living plane and placing a hand on one of the fence posts. The cold metal burned my hand, reminding me I hadn't grabbed gloves before I left my apartment.

“I didn't think it could look worse than it did right after,” Evan said from beside me.

I managed not to start at the sound of his voice, even though I hadn't heard him approach. “I'm not sure if I want to cry or throw up.”

I cast a glance at Evan in time to see him shrug. His mouth was turned down and his gray-blue eyes were dull, with dark bags underneath. He wore

no toque and his jacket was open, despite the below-zero temperature. Only the reddened tip of his nose showed he felt the cold at all.

“It sucks” was all he said.

“Can you see if the garage is intact?” I’d probably still try to find the device even if it wasn’t, but if the garage was at least partially standing, it would be easier.

Evan craned his neck. “I think so.”

“Let’s go, then.”

I stepped back into the otherplane and walked through the fence. Behind me, I heard a grunt of effort, then the sound of feet landing in the snow. When I turned, all I could see was the spiky, horrible shadow figure of a vampire in vamp-mode—something I still wasn’t used to. I shook off the discomfort.

When we reached the garage, I reentered the living plane and shuddered as the cold seeped into my bones again. The wall closest to the house was caved in, as though something large had crashed through the roof and taken out a chunk of the wall with it. Including the door. Of course this couldn’t be easy.

Evan peered into the hole and groaned mournfully. “Oh no.”

“What?”

“The fridge took out Hud’s car.”

“The fridge did? Like from the house? Are you serious?”

I poked my head around Evan to get a look, but it was tough to see in the dark. Pulling out my phone, I engaged the flashlight, and let out my own groan as I surveyed the damage. Hudson’s red beast of a car was all but crushed under the stainless steel fridge, which must have flown through the air like a missile.

Goddamn it, he loved that car.

The force had slammed the muscle car into the workbench on the other side of the garage, and the trunk was shoved up against the car-sized door. The only way in was through the hole left by the fridge. Getting through would be easy enough for me, but not for Evan.

“Wait here.”

He bristled. “Like hell.”

“Don’t be stubborn just because you’re pissed at me.”

“Pissed at you?” Evan glared. “I think what I’m feeling is a little more than *pissed*.”



I flicked off the flashlight on my phone and turned to face him. Without the light, I could barely make out the expression on his face, but the slight glimmer of his eyes turning gold told me his emotions were high.

"I'm sorry."

Evan didn't say anything.

"I should never have demanded you keep my secret for me. I plead temporary insanity." When he still didn't say anything, I continued in a more somber voice, "I mean it, Evan. I'm sorry."

"I heard you the first time."

"Okay." I hunched down as the wind whipped by us and shoved my hands in my pockets. "So...this is where we have a conversation about...stuff."

"I'm still waiting for you to say anything worthwhile."

Oh. Ouch. "I'm not sure what else there is for me to say. I mean, I can keep talking, but it all sounds like excuses in my head, and I—I don't want to do that. Try to explain it away."

"I don't think you can. You were going to mess with my *memories*. How could you even consider that?"

This time, when I hunched down, it had nothing to do with the cold and everything to do with shame. "I don't know."

"Like, what if you fucked up? What if you took all my memories? Fucking Christ, Wes. You could have taken away everything that makes me *me*."

I—I hadn't even considered that. I'd been so focused on what I thought was the right thing to do that it hadn't occurred to me that I didn't really know what I *could* do, or what my limits were. So much could have gone wrong, and the fact that was only now sinking in—and only because Evan had said it—made me want to throw up.

Who the fuck was I?

"You're right," I whispered. "I wanted to help but—"

"I don't need your help. Got it?"

"I—"

"No. I want you in my life, I want you as—as a brother, but I don't need you to fix me. I don't need to be fixed, period."

"Your depression—"

He shook his head. "Is a part of who I am. Just like your ability to make the shittiest decisions is a part of you. Is it my favorite part? Hell no. But

you can't wave a wand or a hand or whatever and make it go away. *I* have to deal with it."

"I..." I swallowed and looked away. "I wanted to fix my mistake."

It sounded weak, even to my ears, and Evan snorted. "Yeah, well, you can't."

Before I could say anything more, he started climbing through the hole in the wall. With a sigh, I stepped into the otherplane and floated in behind him, trying not to make contact with Evan's body so he didn't get chilled by my presence.

I made it inside before he did, rematerialized, and turned on my phone's flashlight again. Evan scuffed across brick, and swore, but he eventually made it inside too. We both paused as the wind picked up and the structure groaned, and I cast a worried look at him.

"If it sounds like it's going to come down—"

"Vampire speed. It's a thing." He braced his hands on the roof of Hudson's car and tried to peer over it. "Can you see it?"

I angled my flashlight to illuminate what was left of the workbench. "No. Wait—yeah. Shit. I think it's partially crushed."

Evan jumped so he could see over the car's roof. "Still enough there that someone might recognize the handiwork."

I stepped into the otherplane again and slipped through the tail end of Hudson's car so I could get close to the bench. I'd hoped there would be enough room for me to rematerialize and grab the device, but between the weird angle of the car, the fridge-missile, and the remains of the bench itself, there wasn't. I slid partway back into the living plane and reported my findings to Evan.

"Seeing you like that freaks me out." He shivered. "And your voice is—"

"Can we focus, here?"

"Right. I can probably move the car a bit."

"Uh—really?"

He rolled his eyes. "I can't pick it up and throw it, but I'm pretty sure I can slide it sideways."

I glanced at the roof as the wind made everything groan again. "Think it's safe?"

He snorted. "No. How badly do you want that thing?"

I eyed what was left of the not-lamp. "Pretty badly. It's the only real-world evidence we've got that something weird is going on."

“Then here we go.”

Evan grabbed the rear bumper and quarter panel of the car on the side facing the ruined wall, and pulled. He gritted his teeth and the veins in his neck stood out. Blood rushed to his face as he put all of his strength into moving the car. His booted feet slipped, but he caught his footing again and continued pulling.

Just as I thought the metal of the car would give out, the rear end slid sideways a centimeter. Then another. He let out a cry from deep in his gut and yanked harder—and suddenly there was enough room for me to rematerialize fully. I did, and caught the not-lamp as the car moved enough to free it from where it had been trapped between the bench and the vehicle.

Evan stopped pulling and stood up straight. “Did you get it?” he asked breathlessly.

The ceiling above us didn’t groan this time—it screamed.

“Shit—catch!” I tossed the not-lamp at him and dove back into the otherplane just as the garage collapsed. I caught a glimpse of Evan sprinting out the wrecked wall before my vision was obscured by wood and dust falling down all around me.

I had a moment of panic—because for all that I could become insubstantial and move between the living plane and the otherplane, I was still human. Mostly. So I forgave myself for raising my hands over my head for protection and was thankful no one was around to see a ghost being so foolish.

Gathering my wits, I walked out of the garage—or what was left of it—and joined Evan on the other side of the fence. Lights had popped on inside the houses next to Hudson’s, and I had no doubt there would be more emergency crews on scene soon.

But we had a minute. “Did you get it?”

Evan held up the mangled not-lamp. It was about half the size it had been originally. “Got it.”

“Holy shit.” Adrenaline and the close call were making me a little giddy. I pulled a cloth shopping bag from the inside pocket of my jacket and shook it out for him to place the device in. “I can’t believe we just did that.”

“What, retrieved the thingy or broke Hudson’s garage?”

“Both.” A chuckle escaped me, and one escaped Evan, and pretty soon we were giggling like drunk teenagers as sirens howled into the night.

“Are you going to tell Hudson we killed his car?” Evan said as we started walking away from the scene.

“The fridge killed his car.” I held back a laugh, but it came out as a snort. “We just buried it.”

The sirens got louder. Evan’s eyes glinted. “Race you to the bus stop?”

“You’re on.”

\* \* \*

Once we got to the downtown campus of the University of Toronto, Evan proved he hadn’t been a student too long ago and led me to the building we were looking for, and down to the basement where the Ghost Squad meeting was held. I wondered if they’d chosen the locale based on what was regularly available, or for its ambience. Either way, they’d done a good job of finding one of the creepiest rooms for their meeting, so kudos to them. It looked like an old classroom, and the musty odor suggested it wasn’t used often—either that, or it was a lot older than I thought. There were rows of folding metal chairs set out, with a desk at the front of the room. A whiteboard stretched across the wall behind it and someone had drawn a cartoon ghost and the words “GHOST SQUAD!” beside it.

There were about fifteen people already present, scattered in the rows of chairs or mingling at the side table where a couple of two-liter bottles of pop had been set out with plastic glasses and various unhealthy snacks. It was more people than I expected, even with the proliferation of ghost-hunting “reality” TV shows these days. I tracked one of the attendees as she walked by with her phone held out in front of her, an antenna extended from a port. It beeped steady and slow—until she happened to turn it in my direction. Then the thing went nuts. She stopped and looked up at me with hope that quickly turned to disappointment.

“You’re not a ghost.” She pouted.

“Not currently, no.”

She removed the antenna and reinserted it, and then moved on.

“See him?” Evan whispered.

“Not yet.” I’d always known it was a long shot we’d find the guy who’d attacked Lexi and me, but I’d been hoping. Maybe more people would show up. And there was always the not-lamp—someone might recognize it.

“Hey, hi! Welcome,” another girl said as she spotted us and bounced in our direction. “Are you Wes and Evan?”

“Rhett?” I clasped her offered hand. “I’m Wes, and this is Evan.”

Evan smiled and shook her hand too. “Nice to meet you.”

“We’re so excited to have new people join us. Have you been hunting long?” She moved deeper into the room toward chairs near the front and we followed her.

“Actually, we, uh—”

“We’re supernew,” Evan gushed as we sat down. “But I mean, we binged every episode of *Ghost Cops*. So that’s got to count for something, right?”

“That’s such a stupid show.” That pronouncement came from a guy slouched a few chairs away. “*Paranormal Extreme* is so much better.” He craned his neck to get a look at what was in my bag. “Whatcha got there?”

“Just something we’d like to talk to the group about,” I said, shifting it so Mr. Nosy couldn’t get a good look.

“Oh?” Rhett said. “We should have some time before we wrap up. Would that work?”

“That’d be great,” Evan assured her, his smile wide...

...and his teeth slightly sharp.

I nudged him with my elbow, hard, as Rhett turned to talk to someone else.

“What?” he demanded in a whisper.

“Teeth,” I said as quietly as I could.

He investigated his fangs with his tongue behind closed lips and murmured a curse.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine. Just, you know...” He shrugged. “Worked up, I guess.”

After the adventure we’d just had at Hudson’s, I didn’t doubt it. Though I thought the subway ride would have been enough to calm him down. “If you need to step out for a bit—”

“I’m *fine*, Wes.”

I lifted my hands in a gesture of surrender and turned my attention to Rhett, who’d stepped up to the front of the room. “Welcome, everyone!” she said cheerfully. “I hope you’ve all had a spooktacular week!”

A few groans peppered the audience.

As Rhett launched into her spiel about the group and how they needed to raise money for something, I looked around without being too obvious about it. I cataloged faces and tried to match body shapes to my memory of the kid in the barn. He'd had dark hair and he was white—so that fit about sixty percent of the males in the room. The one truly identifying mark he'd had was the splash of ink on his neck, a tattoo of indeterminate design. But I thought—I hoped—if I saw it again, I'd recognize it. Unfortunately I couldn't see any visible ink on any of the guys in the room.

After a few minutes, Rhett invited a girl named Tiffany to the front to present a product review of some ghost-hunting equipment. She turned out to be the girl I'd disappointed with my earthiness earlier, and the product she was reviewing was the antenna thing she'd had stuck in her phone—apparently it was a mobile electromagnetic field reader.

Tiffany was about to launch into her final conclusions when the door behind us opened. Like everyone else, I turned to see the newcomer—and froze.

Because it was *him*.

The kid was shorter and leaner than I remembered. He wasn't wearing a dark hoodie this time, but a nicely tailored, very preppy sky-blue cashmere sweater and collared shirt combo. His winter jacket was slung over one arm and he wore a smile, casual as you please, as though he hadn't put my best friend in the fucking hospital.

"Wes," Evan hissed. "Dial it back. You're making my hair stand on end."

"What?" Oh—my magic.

I continued to watch the kid move into the room, and with each step he took closer to me, I reined in the power that wanted to escape and hoist him up to the ceiling, like I'd done to Scott. He didn't even notice me as he passed Evan and me—which was good, I supposed. But it still made me want to force his attention and make him regret what he'd done to Lexi.

I took a breath and drew the magic all the way back. Terrifying the kid wasn't the plan. We needed information more than I needed revenge.

Maybe if I kept repeating it to myself, I'd believe it.

Rhett greeted him with a squeal and a hug before she turned to the man who accompanied the kid. A man I hadn't even noticed. He was older, in that indeterminate age between thirty and forty-five, with short dark hair and glasses with thick black frames. He had a mustache that should probably have been put out of its misery long ago, and he wasn't nearly as

nicely dressed as the kid, wearing an untucked dress shirt and a tie, with high-top sneakers squeaking across the floor. The outfit might have been cool fifteen years ago, but it looked old and ragged now.

“Professor Salzwedel!” Rhett bounced on her toes.

This guy was a professor? I cast a glance at Evan, who shook his head a little, as confused as I was.

“I’m so glad you were able to make it. I know you’re busy.”

“Happy to be here, Rhett. Sorry we’re late, but one of our experiments ran long.”

“It’s no problem. Tiffany was just wrapping up, anyway.”

That was news to Tiffany, apparently. “I—But I—”

“Everyone,” Rhett said over Tiffany’s protests, “this is Professor Arwin Salzwedel. He teaches philosophy here at U of T, but he’s also a renowned ghost hunter with ten years’ experience. Would you tell us about one of your hunts, Professor?”

“The Casa Loma one!” someone shouted from the audience.

The professor moved to stand in front of the group and rested his butt against the desk. I had expected him to be stuttering and shy, but he looked completely at ease in front of the group. “I told that one last time.”

“But it’s great!”

“It is, isn’t it?” He grinned. “But I’ve got a better one.”

He launched into a story that enraptured everyone in the audience—except Evan and me. I didn’t know why, but I’d taken an instant dislike to the man. He wasn’t exactly sleazy, but there was something about him that screamed slick and manipulative, and the way he worked the crowd did nothing to dispel that impression. It was more like a performance than a scientific recollection—he sure as hell knew how to keep a crowd entertained and, even more importantly, invested.

“Everywhere I turned, my EMF went off. The air around me was cold, frigid, and the hair on my arms stood up. I knew they were all around me.”

“Were you scared?” This from the guy who’d professed his love for *Paranormal Extreme* earlier. He was actually leaning forward, his butt on the edge of his chair.

The professor waved a hand. “No. They’re only ghosts.”

I lifted a brow.

“Echoes of energy,” he continued. “That’s all. They can be attracted to certain types of energy, but they’re not intelligent.”

What the hell?

Before I could rethink it, my hand shot up.

“What are you doing?” Evan whispered.

“Asking a question,” I shot back, then smiled at the professor when he indicated I could go ahead. “So you don’t think that spirits are fully manifested personalities, but echoes of actions and emotions?”

“We’ve all seen movies like *Casper the Friendly Ghost* and *Beetlejuice*, right?” Salzwedel said, pushing off the desk. He grinned at the good-natured heckling from the audience at his reference to *Casper*. “Hey, I enjoyed that movie! Anyway—my point is that in those movies, ghosts are people, with very human emotions and wants and desires. Thinking of ghosts as people makes for a great story. But that’s all it is—a story. Ghosts don’t have personalities, or wants or needs or anything else. They’re simply echoes. Like...a song etched into the vinyl of a record. The intelligence that created that music is long gone, but the music remains.”

I frowned. “So you think of them as...things?”

“Exactly.”

Oh, he was so full of shit. “Then how do you explain ghosts that share information?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You know, when a ghost does communicate.”

His patient, indulgent smile was starting to piss me off. “You mean through a medium or psychic.”

“Sure.”

“As the kids say nowadays, it’s all bullshit.” His smile widened at the laughter that rippled throughout the room. “Seriously, though—anyone who claims to speak to ghosts is lying to you. I’m willing to concede that some people out there have extra sensitivity to shifts in energy, and maybe their brains are programmed to interpret those shifts as information, I don’t know. But they’re not talking to ghosts, because ghosts don’t have the capacity to break out of their prescribed actions.” And with that, he jumped back into his stupid story.

Between the shitty attitude about ghosts and his slick showmanship and Lexi’s attacker’s ongoing coziness with a girl sitting in the front row beside him, my temper was stretched to its breaking point by the time Salzwedel opened the floor for questions. I waited until the questions seemed to be dying down, then lifted my hand.



“Yes? I’m sorry, I didn’t get your name before.”

“It’s Wes.” I bent down to retrieve the device from my bag, then stood and held it up. “Do you know what this is?”

I’d mostly thought to hold it up on display to get the kid in the front row off-kilter—and it worked. He was looking at me with wide eyes and an open mouth. But the professor going stock-still wasn’t something I’d expected. He shook it off quickly and offered a laugh. “It looks like a lamp.”

“That’s what I thought when I first saw it!” I said, false brightness in my tone.

“And where was that?”

“Aurora House. That’s an LGBT youth home, up by Nobleton? I’m friends with the person who runs it.”

“I see.” It might have been my imagination, but Salzwedel looked a little pale under the fluorescent lights. “What do you think it is, if not a lamp?”

“Well, see, Aurora House is having problems with ghosts lately.” I hoisted the device a little higher. “One of them told me to check out the barn.”

“One of...the ghosts did?” Salzwedel’s false smile turned into a smirk. “I see.”

“Yeah. So I thought this sounded like a good group to bring it to, to see if anyone has any idea what it is.” I looked around, but most of the attendees were shaking their heads or looking at each other and murmuring quietly. Then I focused on the kid in the front row. “How about you?”

“M-me?” He glanced at Salzwedel. “No, I—”

“You sure? Take a real good look at it.”

“I—I’m sure.”

“Okay.” I gave him a wide, friendly smile I didn’t feel. “Oh, hey. What’s your name again?”

“Ben Clarkson.”

The professor moved away from the front of the room to stand near Ben and laid a hand on his shoulder. “You’re making everyone very uncomfortable, Wes.”

“Yeah? Sorry not sorry. That was totally my intention.” I ignored Evan’s hand tugging on my forearm. “See, when we found this, I was with my best friend in the hayloft of Aurora House’s barn. We were trying to figure out

what it was, when someone ran at us from the shadows and shoved my friend. She fell off the hayloft and fractured her skull.”

Murmurs rose around me, but I kept watching Ben. He’d grown even paler, but I had no sympathy.

“She just woke up after being in a coma for most of the past week. You’re lucky, Ben—this could have been a very different conversation.”

“Rhett, I hope I’m not overstepping, but I think our guests aren’t the fit we’re looking for in this group,” Salzwedel said, his eyes still on me.

Rhett roused herself from her spot at the side of the room. “Uh, no. I mean, yes, Professor, I think you’re right.”

“No worries. I’ll hang on to this, though.” I grabbed the bag at my feet and shoved the device inside, then held up a Caballero Investigations card from the inside pocket of my jacket. “I’ll leave this, in case you want to reach me. Have a good night, everyone.” I dropped the card on my chair, and Evan trailed me to the door.

Just before we reached it, I spun around. “Oh yeah, Arwin? You’re full of shit.”

I shot him the bird and smiled as the door closed on his scowling face.

## *Chapter Fifteen*

“You just had to provoke him,” Evan said, shaking his head, as we walked through the U of T campus back toward the subway station on St. George Street.

“Not provoke so much as...sneer.”

“It would have been better if they didn’t have any hint that we were on to them.”

“Yeah, well.” I lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “I couldn’t not say anything, you know?”

“I know.” He was quiet for a few steps. “How’s she doing?”

“She’s awake, so a hundred times better than yesterday. I haven’t heard any official medical pronouncements, but...” I let out a relieved sigh. “She’s awake.”

We were about to step into the subway station when Evan paused and perked up, like a hunting dog. He even tilted his head. I was about to poke him about it when he said “Shit!” and started off down the street at a run.

I watched him, stunned for a second, before I raced after him. There was no way I could catch up, not when he poured on vampire speed like that, but I could at least try to keep him in sight. He rounded a corner a couple of blocks north, and when I followed a few seconds later, it was to find him frozen on the sidewalk, staring at a large Queen Anne-era brick house.

People flowed from it, some screaming, some crying, many—way more than I wanted to see—covered in blood. They stumbled and tripped in their haste to get away, and ran down the street as though something was going to chase them any minute. One girl staggered around the yard, disheveled, her bloodied hands holding together a shredded sweater. It didn’t seem like she knew where she was. Before I could make my way over to her, someone shoved me aside, hard—and then there was another scream from inside the house.

I grabbed the next kid who tried to push by me. “What’s going on?”

“It’s a—a d-dog,” he managed. “A giant dog. Attacking people! Oh god.”

“Okay, look, see that girl?” I grabbed his chin to direct his gaze at the girl with the wrecked sweater. “Make sure she gets somewhere safe and call

nine-one-one. Can you do that?”

He nodded against my grip and I let him go. He raced over to her and guided her away. One task down...god knew how many more to go.

“A dog?” Evan frowned at the house. “Shit—this is Scott’s frat house.”

“Seriously?” I jogged after Evan as he headed for the stairs, sidestepping fleeing students.

“Yeah.”

I didn’t know what to make of that coincidence, but another scream echoing through the house told me now was not the time to worry about it.

The frat house was one of those massive old homes that would have made a stately and posh residence...if it hadn’t been infested with generations of young men. Stray beer bottles and cans scattered everywhere said a party had been underway. There were dents in walls, scuffs and scratches on the wood floors, and cheap attempts to camouflage other damage with posters and crappy paintings. Beer pooled here and there from full cans that had tipped over, and in a few spots I spotted much darker and disturbing stains. We raced toward the screaming and skidded to a stop in the large kitchen.

“What the fuck is that?” Evan breathed.

It was...a dog. Except, not really. It looked like a mastiff that someone had decided halfway through should maybe be a lion...but no, wait, a bear would be better. The end result was a squat, ugly creation that had the worst aspects of all three animals. And lots and lots of teeth. Its eyes glowed red in its cracked brown leathery hide, and its entire focus was on the three imps jumping around the kitchen like it was their personal playground.

Lucky for the two girls and one boy who were hiding under the kitchen table.

One of the imps danced too close to the table and hit one of the chairs, and the redheaded girl shrieked as though it had cut off her leg on the way by. It was only a matter of time before the imps and the not-dog got tired of their game and turned their attention to the kids.

Yeah, that wasn’t happening.

I stepped forward, waving an arm. “Hey! Hey, ugly!”

Evan made a grab for me and missed. “What the hell are you—”

“Get the kids out,” I ordered and shoved my bag at him.

He grabbed it automatically. “Wes—”

“Do it!” I slapped the island. “Hey, shit-for-brains! Yeah, you! Look at me, you ugly son of a bitch.”

My insides quivered as the not-dog turned to look at me. Its eyes burned like red-hot coals, and I suddenly had an oh-shit moment. I had an instant to realize this was not one of my better ideas—before the thing lunged at me.

Instinct tugged me into the otherplane long enough to avoid the not-dog’s attack. I reappeared a few steps away from it, and didn’t waste time celebrating the fact that I hadn’t been eaten. “Here I am, you idiot. Come on. Think you can get me this time?”

It growled, a low, rumbling sound that reminded me of rocks in a tumbler. Then it spun, faster than I thought possible, and leaped at me again. This time I felt the barest brush of air as I exited the living plane—which meant the damned thing got way too close.

I rematerialized to see Evan exiting the kitchen behind the three kids. “C’mon, Wes. I don’t want Hudson to kick my ass,” he shouted.

“Go!” I had to flash into the otherplane again to avoid the not-dog, and when I rematerialized, Evan and the kids were gone.

Good.

Now the question was, how the hell was I going to defeat the imps and the not-dog?

Well, I mean, my magic, obviously. But how? I could probably grab it like I’d grabbed Scott—but then what? Pull it apart? Ew, god, gross. No—no dismembering of demonic things. With my luck, it wouldn’t kill it anyway but reform into two not-dogs. But I could get rid of the imps like that. I grabbed one of them with my magic and slammed it into the wall. It poofed into a bit of dust. The second one met the same fate, but the not-dog got the third. It screamed as the larger creature ripped off its wings, then its head.

I gagged.

Now it was just me and...this *thing*.

“Nice doggie,” I said, keeping the kitchen island squarely between me and it, trying to buy myself time to *think*. Maybe if I grabbed it and slammed it against the wall enough...

Wait—I was thinking like it was part of our plane. It wasn’t. It shouldn’t be here. So maybe that was the key—sending the not-dog back through whatever hell it’d come from. Which meant finding the rip it’d come through.

I half faded, staying visible to keep the not-dog's attention while still being able to sense the otherplane. Rosanna had said there was a tear—or multiple tears—and that was how the imps were getting through. And I guess the not-dog was the first larger creature from the beyond to come check out our plane—or at least the first one I'd seen. I really, really hoped there weren't more out there staying under the radar. It was terrifying and horrible. I could go the rest of my immortal life without finding out what would venture through the planes next.

Okay—yes, there. I could sense an anomaly in the otherplane, a wound in the skin of its existence. It was...upstairs. Closer to the front of the house.

Wait—wasn't that the room Evan had been passed out in?

The not-dog sailed through my insubstantial form and crashed into the cabinets on the other side of the kitchen. I shoved the puzzle of the location aside for the moment—it was irrelevant. The point was, I could sense the tear, which meant I could—hopefully—shove this unwelcome guest back through it and stitch it up.

I started for the stairs, walking backward so I could keep an eye on the not-dog and make sure it was stalking me. It did, its steps slow and sure. It lunged at me twice more, but its lack of success didn't seem to faze it. Once I reached the room with the tear, I faded fully into the otherplane and witnessed the tear up close and personal.

It...pulsed, like a dark heart, inverted and perverse. Unlike when I'd banished the demon into the beyond, I didn't have a stream of magic helping me with momentum. So I gathered up my magic and threw it at the not-dog to capture it.

Except the not-dog tore it into pieces.

"Goddamn it." I reached for more magic, stronger magic, and my power responded. This time, when I grabbed the not-dog, it was from all directions at once. I yanked it into the otherplane and forced it into the tear.

Which had grown larger?

The not-dog's snarls cut off as it passed through, and I breathed a sigh of relief. With metaphysical hands, I pulled the two edges of the tear together, and paused.

What did I do? Just envision a thread sewing the edges shut? Or superglue? Or—maybe the will to close the tear was enough. I stared at the wound, still pulsing even though it was closed, and imposed my thoughts on it.

It would close. It would heal. It wouldn't open again.

Slowly, so slowly, the pulsing died down, the sense of brokenness washed away, and all I could sense was a scar.

I blew out a breath and reentered the living plane. It felt like the fight had taken hours, but the sirens and screeching of tires outside told me it had been only minutes. I wiped my brow, then froze.

This was definitely the room where I'd found Evan. And where I'd hoisted Scott to the ceiling with my magic.

I'd used my roided-out magic at Hudson's.

At the hospital.

At the café.

At the office too—but the office was under a protection spell Lexi had cast when we'd moved in. Coincidentally? No imps there.

But imps had appeared everywhere else I'd used magic.

"Oh fuck," I breathed.

\* \* \*

I didn't share my suspicion—my fear—with Evan. We blended into the crowd gathered outside the frat house, then rushed back to the office. The lights were off at Caballero Investigations and the blinds drawn, so I assumed that Iskander and Hudson would be upstairs. Or out on assignment. Either option worked for me right now. We headed around to the back entrance, rather than stomping through the office itself, and went upstairs.

Iskander and Hudson were in the living room, huddled over the coffee table and working on something. They looked up as we entered, and I held up a hand to forestall any questions. "I need a minute."

"Hudson's room," Iskander said, nodding his head in the direction of the hallway next to the kitchen.

It was the second door on the right—it felt just like him. I slipped inside and sat heavily on the bed, leaning forward to cup my head in my hands. I wasn't a praying kind of guy—I didn't believe in God—but right then, I was tempted to send up a plea that what I was thinking was wrong, wrong, wrong.

After a minute or two of my brain-wheels spinning without any traction, I looked up. "Michael?" I called softly. I didn't know if he'd hear me, or if he

was around, or if he was even real. But if anyone would have answers...

I stood. "Michael, please. I need your help."

He flickered into sight, as glitchy and weird as ever. "Wes—"

"Is it me? My magic? Is that what's causing the tears and the imps and shit?"

His nod was jerky. "Ye—"

It felt like someone had socked me in the gut. I bent over, trying to catch my breath. "Fuck!"

"You s—fuck a lot—than you used to."

"It's the twenty-first century. *Fuck* is practically a punctuation mark." I stopped my pacing and pressed my forefinger and thumb into my closed eyes, hiding for a moment in the sparks dancing in my vision as a result of the pressure. "How do I fix it?"

Michael glitched from the opposite side of the bed to the foot of it. "—can't—"

"No, there *has* to be—"

A knock on the door cut me off and it popped open. "Everything okay?" Hudson asked.

For a second, I just took in the sight of him. It felt like it had been weeks since I'd seen him, and at that moment, I wanted nothing more than his arms wrapped around me so I could feel safe and secure again. And maybe shove these stupid suspicions aside until I could convince myself they weren't real.

"Yeah, I'm..." I glanced back at Michael, who was looking at me with an expression I couldn't quite read. Resignation, maybe. Like he was expecting me to deny his presence and continue on with the little lies and omissions that had colored my life for the past few months.

I let out a sigh. "I'm arguing with Michael."

Hudson frowned. "Michael? Who's Michael?"

"You know. *Michael*."

His frown deepened, then his expression shattered into a combination of shock and anger. "Wait—Michael? *The* Michael? He's here?" His eyes sparked gold and his fangs started to drop. "Show yourself, you asshole."

Michael opened his mouth and disappeared, as though someone had flipped a switch.

"He's gone," I said.

"Why was he here?"



“In general? I have no idea. I thought I was hallucinating the first time I saw him.”

Hudson moved farther into the room, closed the door behind him, and crossed his arms. “When was that?”

“About a month after—after the crown.”

He leaned against the door and let his head thunk back on it. “You didn’t think that was something I should know?”

“At the time? No.” I swept a hand through my hair. “You were getting started on your courses and I—” I sucked in a huge breath and let it out slowly. “Look, the point is that he’s been trying to tell me something, and I think I know what it is now.”

“What?”

“I’m—” *Fuck*. “I’m the cause of the holes in the otherplane that the imps and...things are coming through.”

He pushed off the door and frowned at me. “No, you can’t—How? It doesn’t make sense.”

“Yeah, it does.” I swallowed past a tight and dry throat and nodded as I sat on the bed. “I’m the reason Bhavana had to close her café, and why—why you lost your fucking house.” I swept the back of my hand across my eyes. “I’m so sorry, Hud. I didn’t know. I swear.”

He joined me on the bed, his knee bent like mine so they were touching—then reached out and entwined our fingers. God, I’d missed his touch.

“Okay. Break it down for me. The Candra Café.”

“I stopped someone from slipping on a spill of coffee. I didn’t want Bhavana to get sued.”

“Okay. Hospital.”

“I tried to heal Lexi. It didn’t work.”

“My house.”

“Sometimes the magic has to come out.”

“Where else?”

“Iskander’s mom’s house.”

“I’ll tell him to get Rosanna out there to make sure everything’s okay. Anywhere else?”

“Aurora House. I was playing with it there—nothing big. Making a nail float, for Christ’s sake.”

“No imps there.”

“No, but there are more ghosts than there should be, so I don’t know. Maybe the holes are smaller and that’s all that can squeeze through.” I scrubbed at my face. “I’ve used it at my apartment and the office too, but they’re both protected. I think that’s maybe why nothing has happened there.”

“Maybe.” He had his cop face on, the blank expression he wore when he was puzzling stuff out, but he shed it to offer me a quick smile. “We’ll solve this.”

I bit my lip. “We will?”

“Yeah. Of course we.” Hudson looked at our intertwined fingers—he hadn’t let go, and neither had I. Letting out a sigh, he said softly, “You hurt me, Wes.”

“I know, I’m sorry—”

“Let me finish.” He squeezed my hand. “I understand being afraid to reveal a secret in case you get rejected.”

Oh...yeah, I guess he would. “You didn’t want me to know you were a vampire.”

“Exactly. So I...I get that. But I thought when we agreed to try this again, we’d turned a corner. We’d started to build a new foundation.”

Oh Hudson, he of the mixed metaphors. I kept my smile to myself, but seriously, his awkward heart-to-heart communications skills were one of the things I adored about him.

“But...yeah.” He let out a long breath. “Come with me.”

I stood when he did. “Where?”

He pressed a kiss to my forehead. “You’ll see.”

## Chapter Sixteen

I wasn't sure what to expect when we got into Hudson's rental—a black SUV totally unlike his beloved red muscle car beast—but heading into the darkness north of TO wasn't it. I cast more than one questioning glance in Hudson's direction, but all he said was “Be patient.”

Uh-huh. He *did* know me, right?

Away from the overwhelming brightness of the city's lights, the sky was beautiful. I'd forgotten how rich the stars were—it was clear, and cold enough to freeze my balls off, but the stars twinkled like happy, shiny beacons of possibility. Some of the weight on my shoulders eased. It didn't go away—there was no escaping the fact that I had somehow caused the tears that were letting creatures from the beyond through to the living plane. But regardless of the purpose behind bringing me out here, Hudson had done me a favor by giving me some space to breathe.

He was good at that, though I hadn't realized until well after our few impromptu camping trips to Algonquin Park that they'd been as much for my benefit as his. At that thought, I turned around to scope out the back of the SUV.

“What are you looking for?”

“Camping gear.”

“Yeah? Want to head up to the park?”

I squinted at him. “It's January.”

“I bet we could get a great deal on a campsite.”

Despite the events of the past few days, I found myself smiling. “Pass.” Thinking about Hudson and cars reminded me, though... “Uh, so. You know Evan and I went back to your place tonight, right?”

“Iskander filled me in.”

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but...your car didn't make it.”

“Yeah, I figured.”

“Yeah.” I cleared my throat. “Shame.”

He glanced at me. “What did you do?”

“Nothing! Well...not much. The fridge already took it out.”

“The—Wes.”

“The garage collapsed. But your car was already dead, I swear.” I paused. “On the plus side, we retrieved the not-lamp.”

He grunted. All right, maybe that wasn’t such a plus side.

After about an hour of driving, Hudson pulled into a dark parking lot next to a rowdy bar at a crossroads in the middle of nowhere. It didn’t look like Hudson’s kind of place. He liked pubs—dark, quiet places to unwind after a long day. This place? Music flowed into the night whenever someone opened the door, and it was covered in neon liquor signs and other lit-up advertising. A larger sign in lime-green neon illuminated the name THE NIGHT LIFE letter by letter before flashing obnoxiously. It reminded me of the old-time taverns from my youth—only a lot louder and way more gaudy.

“You sure know how to show a guy a good time,” I said dryly.

His crooked half smile made an appearance, but he didn’t say anything.

“So what are we doing here? I mean, I assume there’s something more to this place than meets the eye, because if you wanted to go bar hopping, we didn’t need to come all the way out here.” I squinted. “Where the hell are we, anyway?”

“A bit south of Zephyr.”

“Huh.” That didn’t help—I hadn’t even known there *was* a town named Zephyr around here.

Hudson tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. “My errands lately?” He nodded at the bar. “Nash, Pike’s lieutenant, bought this place a couple of months ago. It’s a vamp bar.”

My back stiffened at those two names. Pike was Hudson’s sadistic sire, the vampire who’d turned him against his will while he was working undercover twenty years ago. And Nash... “The guy you’ve been tracking since you killed Pike’s band?”

“Yeah.” He let out a breath. “Okay. I know I implied I was done searching for him. But then one of my leads panned out, and I got another, and another and—” He gestured at the bar. “I couldn’t let it go.”

“Why not?”

He stared at the building, but I don’t think he was seeing it. “They stole my life from me. They made me into—into this.”

Carefully, cautiously, I laid my hand on his arm, hoping he wouldn’t pull away. “I know.”

He shook his head, but he didn't try to dislodge my touch. "You know what I've told you. You don't know—" His voice broke. "You don't know what it's like to know—to *know*—that you are not the same person you used to be. Everyone changes, everyone...grows up, evolves, I guess, but to have a change forced on you...to know that you've done things you can't remember and to be—be glad you can't remember because the flashes you get are bad enough—"

My throat ached and I clutched at his arm. "Hud—"

"He was a part of that." His voice was strangled as he nodded at the bar.

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "I've come out here a few times and sat right here, watching, trying to figure out if going in would be a good idea or the worst."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

He let out a huff of a chuckle. "Because I was pretty sure you'd tell me to give it up. Let go."

He wasn't wrong. I'd never thought his obsession with Nash was healthy, and I could see now, clear as day, that the conclusion of Hudson's search was tearing him up. But that's not what he needed to hear. "What do you need?"

"I don't know."

"No—think about it. What do you *need*? Not want." Because I was pretty sure part of him—the animalistic part he insisted lived inside him, but which I'd never feared—wanted to rush in there and challenge Nash. Demand some sort of payment for everything he'd stolen from Hudson. But was that what he needed?

"I need—" He paused. "I need to see him. To know it's him. And... I need him to see me, to know that he and Pike and the others didn't break me."

"Okay." I gave a decisive nod. "Let's do it."

"What—now?"

"We're here. Might as well."

"Jesus Christ," he muttered, swiping his palms on his pants. "O-okay. Yeah. I can do this."

"Damned straight you can."

Before he could think twice, I popped open my door and hopped to the ground. An icy wind whipped through the parking lot, bringing with it a

hint of pot smoke, and I hunched my shoulders. Hudson appeared at my side in short order, and his broader frame blocked some of the wind. We marched up to the door, and I caught his gaze as we reached it, a silent *Good to go?*

He nodded.

The interior of the bar was as boisterous as the exterior had suggested. Country-rock music blasted through it, a buzz of conversation underneath. And laughter. As I looked around the place, the thing that hit me hardest was that everyone seemed to be having fun. Joyful, happy, unwinding kind of fun. People were dancing and drinking, but eating too. Clearly this wasn't a drink-and-be-broody place. My single previous experience with a vampire bar hadn't prepared me for this. Mind you, that one had been a dark-and-dingy dive in the middle of Toronto's Little Italy, not this country-style hot spot in the middle of the woods.

We checked our coats and headed for the bar. When Hudson got the attention of the bartender, he ordered a beer for himself and a white wine for me—it was a small gesture, but one that warmed me. I drank beer, but I preferred wine, and the fact that he remembered that when he was so wound up...

Once we had our drinks, we turned to examine the rest of the bar. I spotted tables in the back—the stand-up type. They were all taken, without exception, by smiling, laughing people. The dance floor in front of us was bouncing, and it presented the one clue that at least some of the patrons weren't completely what they appeared to be. In among the enthusiastic line dancers—this was a country bar, after all—and the more modern jiggle-and-sway sort of dancers, a few pairs were spinning in steps that I hadn't seen since I was a child.

But the vibes—the vibes were incredible. This was a good place.

Hudson sipped his beer slowly as he took in everything I had—more, probably, since he was the trained investigator and all. “This is...not what I expected.”

“Understatement.”

“Pike's place—it was never like this. None of the vamp bars I've visited have been.”

“That's because they were all shitholes, Havoc.”

We spun at the soft voice spoken almost in our ears, from behind the bar. The man standing there—well, I guessed immediately he wasn't human.

There was a grace in him, an assurance that Hudson often had, something that originated in his predatory nature. He was tall, at least as tall as Hudson, but not nearly so wide. Still muscular, but leaner. His hair was long on top and shaved on the sides, and dyed fire-engine red, though the stubble above his pierced ears was coming in black. His hooded eyes were amber, a shade or two darker than vampire gold. He had a tawny complexion, with a sharp jaw and the cheekbones of a male model, and his nose was a tad too strong, a tad too large for his face. It made his beauty human.

“Nash,” Hudson growled.

“Last year, maybe. That name got old. I thought it was time to reclaim myself.” He held out a hand. “Ren Oshiro.” When Hudson scowled at him, Ren laughed. “Oh, it’s going to be like that, is it, Havoc?”

“You know that’s not my name.”

“I kind of like it, though. You ended up living up to it.” He slapped his hands against the bar in a quick drum pattern, his smile never dimming, and ended with a decisive smack. “Come on. Let’s go somewhere we can talk.”

“Here’s fine.”

“Not unless you want everyone knowing your business.” Ren smirked. “This place is filled with nosy-ass bastard vamps who are listening to every word we say.”

I noticed a few heads turn away when Ren said that. Hudson must have too, since his scowl deepened and he agreed.

Ren waved us over to the end of the bar, then lifted the pass-through. “My office is in the back.”

We passed a bustling kitchen and Ren called out to someone working the grill. Thumbs-ups were exchanged and we kept moving. Eventually we reached a narrow set of stairs leading up to a closed door. Behind it was a nicely furnished, modern-looking office. No dark, ornate wood desk or massive leather chairs. The room was painted in a light gray, with a shiny white desk that looked more like acrylic than wood. A shaggy ivory carpet covered the wood floor between a set of lime-green leather chairs and a yellow couch.

“Colorful,” Hudson quipped as we entered.

“I like to bring the outside in,” Ren said over his shoulder. “Have a seat, make yourselves comfortable. Can I get you anything else to drink? I’ve got a nice vintage—”

“No.”

“—sauvignon blanc,” Ren finished with a chuckle. “What did you think I was going to offer?”

Ren was smooth, and smart, and too friendly to be real. I had no doubt he had originally been going to offer Hudson blood, but switched tactics midsentence. The fact that he’d done so seamlessly made me notch his danger level upward. The happy demeanor had to be a façade.

“I’m good, thank you.” I lifted my barely touched wineglass as proof.

“Well, then.” Ren settled into one of the chairs across from our seats on the couch. “It’s been years, hasn’t it?”

“About twenty-one.” Hudson leaned back, one leg crossed over the other and his beer bottle resting on his knee. His other arm stretched across the back of the couch, almost touching me.

“That long.” Ren whistled. “I’m glad you finally decided to venture into my bar tonight. And with such delightful company. I’m afraid I didn’t get your name.”

I sipped my wine. “That’s right, you didn’t.”

“You knew?” Hudson said. “That I’d found you?”

Ren laughed. “That you were sitting in your car in the parking lot, trying to find your balls? Yes, I knew. Of course I knew. Did you think those leads magically panned out, Detective? Oh—wait, you’re not a detective anymore, are you?”

“Still a detective,” Hudson growled. “Just not a cop.”

“But does that *really* count?”

“Hey. Asshole.” I glared at him. “Did you invite us up here to insult him, or did you have a point?”

Ren actually steepled his hands, as though he were some evil mastermind in a bad movie. “I wanted to make a...shall we say, business connection.”

Hudson put his beer down on the coffee table. “No.”

“You’re not even going to hear me out?”

Before I could react, Hudson was leaning over Ren, one hand cupping the other vampire’s throat. I rose too and hovered close by—not that I had any illusions I could stop Hudson if he chose to act more, uh, thoroughly. His fangs were down and his eyes were glowing, sure signs he’d reached the end of his rope. “Hear you out?” he rasped. “You’re lucky I don’t break your fucking neck.”

“I’d like to see you try.” Despite the bravado of his words, Ren’s voice sounded breathless.



“You made me into this—”

“I didn’t. Pike did.”

“You were his lieutenant!”

“And do you think I had any sway over him whatsoever?” Ren’s gaze bored into Hudson’s. “I was with him for ninety goddamned years. I hated that bastard with everything in me and when I heard you’d killed him and all of his lackeys? I fucking *wep*t with happiness. I was free.”

The words startled Hudson into loosening his grip, and Ren shoved him back.

“Don’t you dare lump me in with Pike. I didn’t have a choice—he made me into what he wanted me to be.”

Hudson shook his head. “I don’t believe you.”

“Then believe this—any other loyal lieutenant would have had your head for what you did. But did I ever come after you?”

“You obviously kept tabs on me.”

“Because you were searching for me. It would have been stupid not to.”

Hudson raked his fingers into his hair. “No. You were right there, all the time. If you’d wanted, you could have broken free—”

Ren sat up and rubbed his neck. “It never even occurred to me to try. There was nothing in my life beyond that band. Pike had seen to that. You? You had your career to return to.”

“Did everyone know I was a cop?”

“Does it matter?” Hudson stared at him silently and Ren sighed. “No. I found that out later, after Pike and the rest were dead.”

“And you didn’t want revenge?” I asked quietly.

“For what? He freed me. I should have been sending him thank-you baskets every year.”

“Probably tough to find *Thanks for killing our sire* themed ones.”

A laugh snorted past Ren’s lips, and he covered his mouth. He turned his attention to Hudson. “Truce? Truly, I’m not interested in being your enemy.”

I moved to Hudson’s side and slid my hand into his. Then I pushed myself up onto my toes and whispered in his ear, “Let it go.”

He closed his eyes and turned so his nose brushed the side of my face. “I’m not sure I know how.”

I kissed his cheek. “I do.” Turning back to Ren, I said, “I don’t think we’re ready for a ‘business connection’ yet.”

Ren looked at me, then at Hudson, and nodded. "I understand."

"Give me your number, though, and maybe—*maybe*—I'll be in touch." Because I believed Ren. It was entirely possible he was that good of an actor to so vehemently argue his innocence, but somehow I didn't think so. I thought he was exactly what he proclaimed to be—another victim of Pike's who'd done everything he could just to stay alive. It wouldn't hurt to have him as an ally.

Ren dug a business card out of his desk, scribbled something on the back, and handed it over. His fingers touched mine as I took the card, and he sucked in a sharp breath at the contact. "Damn."

"What?"

He shook his head and wiggled his fingers, as though I'd shocked him. "I can see why he's so drawn to you. Beyond the yummy-smelling blood. I thought I'd sensed it before, downstairs, but with all the people around..."

"What?" Hudson growled.

"Nothing," Ren said, smiling. "I'm happy for you, is all. It's not every day you get to meet a god, let alone bang one."

## Chapter Seventeen

“God?” I sputtered. “I’m not—”

Hudson moved toward Ren, his whole demeanor threatening, and Ren raised his hands in surrender. “What’d I say?”

“He’s not—”

“I’m not—”

Hudson and I looked at each other, and Ren let out a breathy chuckle. “Okay. My bad.” He shrugged, but the denial was insincere.

I didn’t want to believe him. I’d read about gods in Lexi’s book of all things paranormal—the text had been so earnest, full of wonder, but I’d read between the lines. Gods were nothing more than a myth, a lie perpetuated by people who didn’t know how to explain the turning of the seasons or eclipses, or...or other shit. That wasn’t *me*. I wasn’t all powerful, no matter how jacked up my magic was.

Right?

Except... I’d done shit no one should be able to do, like teleport Hudson and Evan out of an exploding house. Or mess with Omar’s memories.

The Crown of Osiris had been rumored to bestow immortality or godhood on its focus. That was why the demon had wanted to use it—it wanted its human body to become immortal. But when Evan had killed the demon, the spell or magic or whatever had rebounded on me, and I was already immortal, so...

No. Just...no. It was bullshit. It had to be.

“Let’s go,” I said quietly.

Ren didn’t say anything as we left his office, which I was thankful for. My brain was already spinning. All I wanted was to retreat and try to put my thoughts in order. Because he had to be wrong...even though his words were resonating uncomfortably like a truth I didn’t want to admit.

I was so caught up in my head, I didn’t realize Hudson had stopped until I bumped into his back. I grunted and looked around him to see five vampires blocking our path. They were each dressed like good ol’ boys in jeans and flannel and wearing matching scowls.

“I heard what Ren called you—Havoc, right?” I had to listen close to make out his words above the music, but none of the other vampires, including Hudson, seemed to have any problems hearing him. “I know that name.”

Hudson crossed his arms. “Do you?”

“Thought you knew better than to show your face in a vampire bar.”

“I had business with Ren.”

“The sort of business you had with Pike? Because that shit won’t fly here.”

I rounded Hudson’s broad form and pushed myself between him and his new friend. “I always wondered about that phrasing. Because, you know, shit doesn’t actually fly. Unless you’re flinging it. Are you going to fling shit?” I asked over my shoulder.

“Not my plan,” Hudson rumbled. There was reluctant amusement in his voice. Score one for me.

I turned back to the other vampire, smiling widely. “See? No flying shit.”

“Who the fuck are you?”

“Oh, sorry. Rude of me. I’m Wesley Cooper.” I squinted at him. “Do you want to get a piece of paper to write that down, or do you think you can remember it?”

“Wes, maybe I should—” No more reluctant amusement in Hudson’s voice, only concern.

I held up a hand. Patience. I knew what I was doing.

Sort of.

I mean, I didn’t have a plan, but I did best without one.

“And you are?” I prompted.

“Going to fucking tear you apart.”

“Wow. I bet it’s hard to get reservations with that name.”

I wasn’t shocked when the vamp leaped at me. But he was pretty stunned when I stopped him in midair.

So was I, honestly. There hadn’t been any effort involved, simply a thought, and it was done.

Fuck. Maybe Ren was right.

No. My magic was jacked up, that was all.

God, I was going to give myself a headache with the back-and-forth.

“Here’s how this is going to go,” I said, glad my voice betrayed none of the confusion swirling inside my head. “We’re going to get our coats and

leave. You can go confirm with Ren that we weren't here to do anything...untoward." Hudson snorted at my choice of words, and yeah, okay, I couldn't blame him. My age was showing, but I couldn't think of a more modern, less formal term. "And the next time we come in—because we probably will—you mind your business and don't get held up on invisible puppet strings. Deal?"

"What the fuck are you?"

"Something no one's seen in a long time," Ren announced from behind us. "Thank you for preventing a fight, Wesley. I rather like the interior of my bar the way it is."

I released the vampire and he collapsed to the floor. The rest of the bar resumed its activity—I hadn't realized everything had sort of stopped so the bar's clientele could watch our confrontation play out.

And then I groaned. "Please tell me you had this place protected."

Ren arched a brow. "Protected how?"

"Magic. You know." I waved a hand.

"As much as witches say they don't like vampires, their minds change quickly when you show them enough cash."

I didn't let my sigh of relief become audible. "Okay, good." No imps—or otherwise—were going to show up to make Ren's life complicated. I wasn't sure if Ren would be an ally or what, but it wouldn't hurt not to piss him off right at the beginning of this friendship. Relationship. Whatever.

The vampire pushed himself to his feet and brushed off his jeans. Behind me, Hudson grew tense. "We done here?"

The vampire looked at us, then cast a glance at Ren. "Yeah. Sorry."

"Thank you, Gunn." Ren's voice was softer than it had been. Sincere in his gratitude.

Gunn nodded and he and his friends walked away. A couple of his companions turned to watch us, but their expressions were more curious and cautious than hostile.

"I hope you'll return soon," Ren said with a grin. "We haven't seen this much excitement in ages." He peeled off to follow Gunn and his friends, probably to talk more. Or offer drinks. Or...you know, I had no idea.

It was kind of hard to think with Hudson's erection pressed into my ass.

"That was hot," he whispered in my ear.

"Really?" I turned my head and barely missed cracking his nose. "You think?"

He rubbed against me, not so subtly. “Uh-huh.”

And that suddenly, it was like a switch flipped in me and I *needed*. Maybe it was something to do with using magic...but I thought it was more likely that Hudson’s arousal simply turned me on. Knowing that he wanted me—that he wanted me so much the pupils of his eyes were already blown wide and surrounded by a thin glowing yellow line—made my stomach quiver and my knees go weak.

Which made the whole retrieving our coats and getting to the rental SUV a much more difficult task than it should have been. It was almost like Hudson’s lust was inflaming my own in a weird sort of feedback loop. Not that I was complaining, because damn, I was on fire. Even the chill January wind couldn’t dampen my excitement.

Hudson fumbled with the key fob as we approached the SUV, and the lights blinked to let us know the doors were unlocked. “Back seat,” I murmured.

“What? Wes—”

“You’re not a cop anymore,” I pointed out. “And like anyone coming out of the bar is going to care.” I reached under his jacket, seeking proof he was feeling what I was feeling, and I found it. His dick was like a piece of steel rebar in his jeans. “I want this in my mouth. Now.”

“Fuck. Okay.”

We scrambled into the back seat and I closed the door behind us as Hudson arranged himself on his back. His eyes glowed and his fangs were coming down as I watched, and that made me shiver. It felt like it had been ages since Hudson had bitten me, and I wanted that.

Not more than I wanted his dick in my mouth, though.

We worked at getting his coat off—or at least getting it open, along with his shirt, so I could run my hands over the wiry brown and silver hair that glinted on his chest. His abdominal muscles clenched and rippled as my fingers trailed down his ribs and over to his belly button, and down to the button of his jeans. He thrust upward and I had to swallow over a rush of anticipation that flooded my mouth with saliva.

“Don’t tease,” Hudson pleaded. “Suck it.”

I grinned. “I don’t know. I kind of like you begging for it.”

“Wes, you bastard. Put it in your mouth. Now.”

“Is that any way to ask?” I nudged his fly open and slid a finger down the rigid length still captured inside his underwear.

“Goddamn it!” Hudson’s hips chased my touch, but I took it away. He let out a frustrated grumble. “Just you wait. Next time you’re in the mood, I’m going to tie you up and edge you until you’re fucking purple and dripping.”

I pressed a hand to my own aching erection and grunted.

“You like that idea, huh?” Hudson’s yellow eyes glittered in the dark. “You want me to bring you to the edge over and over again? Not let you come?”

“Fuck, Hud.” His name came out on a whimper.

“Maybe we’ll get a cock ring. Help you out.”

I ripped my zipper open and pulled out my dick. Giving it a stroke, I moaned.

“That for me?” Hudson asked, his voice low.

I met his gaze and let the weight of my lust—the weight of my emotions—show. “Always. Only ever for you.”

“Fuck. Fuck the blow job,” he panted. “I need to be inside of you.”

“Yeah? Let me get your cock wet—” I was practically drooling to do so.

“Lube. In my pocket.”

“Even better.”

I kicked off my shoes, pants, and underwear, not caring about the bite of chill air, and accepted the packet of lube Hudson had dug out of his pocket.

“Optimistic much?”

“Hopeful.”

“You hoped you’d get laid in your rented SUV?” My voice was light, happy, and for the first time in months, I felt like me. Like I didn’t have to hide anything from Hudson anymore—because I didn’t.

“A boy can dream.” He shucked off his pants and underwear with one smooth move, and lay back again, holding his dick up at a ninety-degree angle. “Ride me, cowboy.”

I laughed—a sound that quickly turned to a moan as I worked myself open. I didn’t have the patience to do more than a cursory job. I wanted that thing in me now.

“For the record, never a cowboy,” I said as I straddled him. It was a little awkward—the SUV was not a bedroom, and the roof was lower than I thought. But as I sank down on him, everything else fell away.

He made a guttural sound, unintelligible, followed by a long, drawn-out “Fuuuuuck.”

My thoughts exactly.

The pain was negligible—there, but not enough to concern me or detract from the pleasure zinging through my veins. This connection was worth way more than a little pinch and sting. And when I rolled my hips, even that was forgotten.

The slap of our bodies punctuated our moans, groans, and *god-so-goods*. I reveled in the control I had in this position—not that I’d ever complain about Hudson drilling me into the mattress, because I loved feeling him on top of me, feeling the power and strength in his body. But this was more like a dance. Me undulating and rotating my hips, enticing him with the movements of my body even as I clenched him tight within me, making his eyes close when the pleasure got too great, making his fangs jut out as he opened his mouth in a silent gasp.

But as much as I wanted to draw it out, I couldn’t. My balls drew up, tightened, and I rocked harder, faster, hitting that perfect spot inside me that made everything more intense.

Hudson recognized that chase. “Yeah. Yeah, Wes, c’mon.”

“Need you.” I couldn’t stop the whimpered words if I wanted to.

“You have me. Always.”

I glared at him. “I know. But I need you to *fucking bite me*.”

He grinned. “Kinky.”

I rammed myself down on him and tightened every muscle I could.

“Hudson!”

With a muted roar, he lunged upward and sank his fangs into my neck.

Fuck, yes.

My cock spasmed between us, but that physical manifestation of my peak was drowned out by everything else. My body sang with its release—not just my balls or dick or ass, but everything. Dimly I recognized Hudson’s arms wrapped tight around me and his hard, animalistic thrusts before he bit down harder with his own orgasm. I melted against him, letting him drink his fill, knowing that I had never been and would never be safer than in Hudson’s arms.

\* \* \*

We were almost back to my place—round two was on both of our minds—when my phone lit up with a call from Iskander. A call. Not a text. He



rarely called anymore, because of the unreliability of his voice. My heart jumped into my throat as I hit Accept and put the call on speaker.

“What’s wrong?”

“Evan’s locked the door to his room,” Isk said, his voice sounding even worse over the phone than it did in person. “I was out at Mom’s with Rosanna, and when I got home he wouldn’t come out. Been trying to talk to him through it, but all he’ll say is ‘go away.’”

I cast a glance at Hudson. Evan had seemed fine when we returned from our campus adventure. What could have happened in the past few hours to change that?

“Maybe he needs some time alone,” I suggested.

“Thought that. Voice doesn’t sound right, though.”

“When was the last time he had any blood?” Hudson suddenly demanded.

“I don’t know.”

“Shit.” Hudson followed up his sharp curse with a quick U-turn. “Go downstairs, Isk.”

“Not leaving him alone.”

“Do it now.”

“I’ll stop knocking on the door—”

“He can still unlock the damned thing, Isk! Get downstairs *now*.”

“The fuck?”

Hudson focused on employing the defensive-driving techniques he’d learned as a cop, so I attempted an answer. “I think Hud’s worried Evan is hungry.”

Because everything pointed to that. Hadn’t I thought he looked not-so-good earlier tonight? I’d chalked that up to the depression. Evan had once told me that his depression made doing little everyday things—like getting out of bed, getting dressed, making breakfast, hell, brushing his teeth—all but impossible.

Maybe drinking blood twice a week was on that list too.

“Thought you were feeding him.” The sound of Isk’s feet pounding down the stairs punctuated his words.

“Not for a couple of weeks. At least.” And maybe being out in the sun a few days ago had exhausted his store of whatever-it-was in my blood.

“God, I’m a shitty friend.”

“Enough,” Hudson snapped, and I got it. Now wasn’t the time to dwell on what I’d done wrong. “Isk, you downstairs?”

“In the office.”

“Good. Stay there. We’re three minutes out. I’m gonna keep the line open—shout if anything changes.”

“Got it.”

I tapped my fingers on my knee and willed each stoplight to be green as Hudson threaded through the light traffic. Surprisingly—or maybe not—they complied. I sincerely hoped that didn’t mean I was peppering the otherplane with holes all the way along Dundas Street. Hudson pulled up to the office and parked on the street rather than pulling into the parking lot behind the building. I’d barely cracked my door open before he was out of the car and heading up the stairs to Iskander’s apartment.

Damned vampire speed.

By the time I reached the hallway outside Evan’s room, Hudson was already talking to him through the door. Gentle reassurances and promises that everything would be okay. I couldn’t hear Evan respond, and I was hoping that was because he was whispering or something in a range too low for my human ears—but a quick look at the worry on Hudson’s face told me that wasn’t the case.

“Anything?” I murmured.

He shook his head. “I can hear him breathing, but he’s not responding.”

“So you figure he’s been starving himself?”

“I don’t know. Not on purpose, I don’t think. Fuck, why didn’t I see it?” He rested his forehead against the door. “Pretty sure whatever’s behind this door isn’t going to be good.”

“No napping for hungry vampires, huh?”

“I—” His bronze skin lost some of its richness as he paled. “Fuck, I—I’ve seen this. I think. There was a girl one of Pike’s assholes turned. She hated blood and refused—oh god.”

I laid a hand on his arm. “Hud? You’re not there anymore.”

“I know. I’m—” He blew out a breath. “Go downstairs.”

“Uh, no.”

“Wes—”

“No. Look—” My voice shook, because I knew if Hud was that worried, things were bad. Beyond bad. “He needs to feed.”

Hudson looked horrified at the idea. “He’s gonna fucking rip your throat out—”

“He won’t, because you’ll be there to stop him, but Hud—he *has* to feed. And you know I’m it.”

Not only because Evan was spoiled by my blood, but because Hudson couldn’t feed him—other than the blood a sire donated to turn their progeny, vampires didn’t feed off each other—and any other human donor would be in much greater danger. I’d heal from anything Evan would do to me.

I was pretty sure I would, anyway.

Probably not the time to bring that bit of uncertainty up.

To his credit, Hudson didn’t argue any further. He pressed a hard, quick kiss to my lips, then kicked down Evan’s door.

The first thing I noticed was blood. Blood was everywhere. It soaked the bedcovers, splattered the walls, smeared the carpet. I couldn’t hold in the whimper at the sight, because I hadn’t expected this. I’d been prepared for Evan to launch himself at me, attack me like he had when he’d first woken up after being turned, but not...god, not this.

Had it been...was it imps? Something else? We’d assumed he’d been starving but what if we were wrong?

We found him crumpled on the floor on the other side of the bed, the carpet beneath him drenched in red. I darted forward—then skidded to a stop as I realized what I was seeing.

Bite marks. Both of his arms were covered in them. Some were ragged and awful tears, but many were a familiar pair of puncture wounds.

I had a matching set in my neck right now.

“Oh Jesus,” I whispered.

“When a vamp gets that hungry...” Hudson swallowed hard enough it was audible. “It’s hard to remember that your own blood isn’t food.”

Those words unfroze me. I sank to the floor beside Evan, trying to ignore how the blood squished under my knees, and pulled him into my lap. He wasn’t responsive and I hated how that reminded me of those moments months ago when I thought Hudson was dead.

I held out my wrist and I didn’t even have to ask for Hudson to bite it. Without the fun of sex, vampire bites hurt, but it was a small price to pay. I let my blood drip between Evan’s lips, then held my wrist flush up against them, hoping instinct would kick in.

Hoping he hadn't given up completely.

Just as my wounds started to close up, Evan struck. His fangs descended and clamped onto my wrist and—fuck, that hurt. Worse than Hudson's bite. My eyes watered from the pain, but god, he was drinking. Swallowing. His own wounds began to close, and still he drank.

I felt Hudson against my back and wondered when he'd started holding me up. One of his hands reached for Evan, and I shook my head, even as my eyelids started to get heavy. "Let him take what he needs."

"No," Hudson growled in my ear. "This is not how you're going to deal with your guilt, asshole."

I was going to protest that, but forming words was tough. "Li'l more."

The last thing I heard was Hudson roaring at Evan.

\* \* \*

I'd seen and done a lot of weird shit in my life. But nothing had quite crossed the mundane and paranormal streams like staging an intervention for a young vampire after a day spent recovering from feeding said vampire.

Evan sat at Iskander's two-seat kitchen table, slouched with his arms crossed. Hudson was across from him. Iskander and I were leaning against the counter, and Lexi was listening in via Skype from her hospital room. The thing that struck me most at the moment was that Iskander's kitchen was not Hudson's, and I missed it. More than I ever thought possible.

"You look like shit, Evan," Lexi announced, her voice tinny and still not as vibrant and fulsome as I was used to, but very much there, thank god.

"Coming from someone who was in a coma..." Iskander sucked in a breath. "That's saying something."

"I'm fine." Evan's frown deepened.

"That's the biggest line of bull I've ever heard," Hudson growled. "Hey. Sit up."

Evan glared at him, and Hudson glared back. Eventually Evan straightened. Slowly. He even uncrossed his arms. "There. I'm sitting."

"Attitude."

"Fuck you, Hudson, you're not—"

"I'm going to cut you off right there, because technically, yeah. I am. Sire, not father, but it still means I'm responsible for you."

“Like you give a fuck.”

It was clear Hudson wasn't ready for that attack. His mouth dropped open for an instant before he schooled his expression. Where a minute before his emotions played across his face, now he'd locked them down in his blank Asshole Cop look.

This was not a good start.

Lexi spoke before Hudson gathered himself. “How can you say that?”

“Easy. He's been so busy with hanging out with Iskander and getting the firm set up—”

“Which you've been involved in,” Hudson protested.

Evan shrugged. “As an afterthought.”

I rubbed my hand over my eyes but didn't say anything.

“That was never my intention.”

Evan's finger traced a scar etched into the wood of the table, and he didn't look up at Hudson.

“That is such a bullshit excuse,” Lexi spat.

“What—that I didn't intend—” Hudson sputtered.

“No, not you, Hud. Evan's pissy little ‘you didn't pay enough attention to me’ whine.” I couldn't see her image from where I stood, but I could picture it easily enough—she had her *are you fucking kidding me* voice going on, which meant she was probably squinting at him. “Evan, key thing to remember here—your brain is an asshole. It's lying to you.”

“What, you mean like Wes did?”

“Yeah, I haven't had nearly enough of a talk with him about that bullshit, but we're not talking about Wes right now. We're talking about you and Hud.”

“He told me he was going to be there for me and—”

“I was,” Hudson interjected.

“No, you weren't. You were working or doing your bullshit ‘errands.’ But you're right, Lexi—it's dumb. So fucking *dumb*.” Evan slammed his palm on the table, and I'll admit, I jumped. “What kind of idiot needs so much reassurance? What kind of moron gets upset because his friends have other stuff going on in their lives? What kind of fucking shit-for-brains—”

“Hey—”

“—can't just be *normal*?”

Suddenly Evan jumped to his feet, grabbed the table, and threw it. It didn't go far—there wasn't enough room in Iskander's kitchen for it to do

more than flip, even if Hudson wasn't in the way. As it was, Hudson turned in time to take the brunt of the hit on his upper arm instead of his face. The phone clattered to the floor, and Lexi's startled noises reverberated tinnily under the crash of the table and the rush of Evan's heaving breaths.

"Holy shit," he gasped. "I—I'm sorry, I..."

Hudson rubbed his leg, where gravity had brought the edge of the table down hard, and winced as he got up.

"I didn't—I didn't mean to. I..." Evan threaded his hands into his hair and yanked. "What the fuck is wrong with me?"

Hudson moved to stand in front of Evan and placed his hands on his shoulders. "Depression."

Evan vigorously shook his head but didn't try to move away from Hudson's hands. "No, that's not—I know what my depression looks like. It's exhaustion and hiding in bed all day. Not...not..." He waved a hand at the upended table.

Iskander had retrieved the phone and was holding it out so Lexi could see both Evan and Hudson. "Depression can be a bunch of things," she said. "And it can change. Be easy on yourself, hon. You were already depressed, and then you became a vampire and it didn't fix anything, right?"

"I got a—a family," Evan said quietly.

"Yeah, you did," Hudson agreed.

"But you still had to fight your depression. And then there was the demon, and Wes being an asshole, and the house blowing up."

"Yeah." Evan sagged, and Hudson pulled him close.

"You're not dumb," I said. "Okay? I don't want to hear that again. Like Lexi said, your brain is a liar. When it tells you shit like that, try to ignore it."

"But—"

"*Nothing.*" Hudson's voice rumbled with the note of authority that seemed to have an extra-large impact on Evan. "I'm sorry I didn't see—that I was too busy—"

"No, no, that was stupid of me to get mad about."

Hudson crouched to look Evan in the eye. "But I'm gonna say this now: I'm never too busy for you. You can come talk to me anytime, about anything, no matter how low a priority you think it is. Or your brain tries to convince you it is." He looked down for a second. "Look... I know I'm not real good at this—this family thing. It's been a long, long time since I've

had that. But you all..." He swept the room, taking in all of us. "Like Evan said, so easily...you're my family. My—my band," he added quietly.

I stepped forward and slipped an arm around Hudson's waist, and the other around Evan's shoulders, and rested my forehead against Hudson's chest. "I'm good with being part of your band."

One of Iskander's hands covered mine as he embraced Hudson and Evan from the other side. "Me too."

I looked up to see the phone held up and Lexi looking at us with her eyes half-closed. "No fair having a group hug without me," she muttered, but she was smiling as she said it.

Hudson took the phone from Iskander's hand and cuddled it close. "Better?"

"It'll do, big guy. It'll do."

"So, um, Lex?" I ventured.

"Mmm-hmm?"

"I don't suppose you or your mom know how to prevent my magic from tearing holes in the otherplane, do you?"

## *Chapter Eighteen*

Lexi eyed the two steps that led up to her front door. The late afternoon sun cast long shadows across them that obscured their edges, but I didn't think that was the cause of her hesitation. Her mom and dad hung back because they were smart. Me, I couldn't help but take a step forward, arms out to offer her support.

"Back off, Wesley."

I froze but didn't move back.

"There's no shame in accepting help when you need it," Rosanna said softly.

From my vantage point slightly to the side and behind Lexi, I could see her screw up her lips, as though she were trying to keep a scream inside. I could only imagine how frustrating her injuries must be—she was a fiercely independent woman and had been from the moment I met her more than ten years ago. It had been her idea to come to Toronto for university instead of staying closer to home, mostly so she could meet and get to know her weird "uncle" Wes. In all that time, she hadn't been sick beyond a head cold now and again, and she'd certainly never been injured to this extent.

"Don't give me that look," she growled.

"What look?" I asked.

"That regretful, guilty one. This isn't your fault."

"I could have—"

"I will hit you, I swear to all the gods."

I held up my hands in surrender. "Okay, okay. But will you let me help you? Please?"

She let out a grumble that I took for acquiescence, so I gripped her good elbow to steady her as she climbed the stairs and stepped past the threshold into her house. It looked the same as it always did—overstuffed, unmatched furniture, parquet flooring that had seen better days but still had most of its varnish, and a bookshelf filled with all sorts of titles, from the arcane to the mundane. No—wait. She'd replaced her coffee table. The old thrift-store special piece of junk was gone, and a flat-top steamer trunk sat in its place. Guilt flared all over again as I realized I hadn't been here much in the past



few months. Most of the time we spent together these days had someone else included, except for the volunteering at Aurora House and the occasional shopping trip. When was the last time we'd hung out to watch a movie and spent some quality time just the two of us?

I couldn't remember.

I helped her over to one of the chairs in the living room and pretended not to notice the sigh of relief as she sat down. She leaned her head back and closed her eyes.

"Need anything?" I asked quietly.

She waved a hand, a gesture she'd taken up instead of shaking her head. "Give me a few." I was about to retreat to the kitchen when one of her eyes flicked open. "Hey, Wes? Thanks."

I leaned in and brushed a soft kiss to her forehead. "Rest up."

I found Rosanna in the kitchen with Darrell, heating up some coffee from that morning. They'd been staying in the guest room at Lexi's since they arrived. "Want some?" she asked, holding up the carafe.

"I'm good, thanks." I shoved my hands in my pockets and leaned on the doorjamb, since the kitchen wasn't big enough for three people. "You guys sticking around for a bit?"

"Yes," Darrell said, accepting the mug out of the microwave that Rosanna handed to him. "Until at least next week, depending on how she's doing."

"And how we're doing," Rosanna added. She paused for a second, then shook off whatever negative thoughts she was having. "But she looks good, right? Better."

"So much better," I agreed. Nowhere near a hundred percent, no, but she'd get there. In time. "You let me know if I can help out at all. Take her to appointments or whatever."

"I reached out to the magical community here," Rosanna said, retrieving her own mug from the microwave and settling into the chair across from Darrell at the two-person dinette table. "We've got a healer scheduled to come out tomorrow. She won't be able to take care of everything, but she can probably help immeasurably with the shoulder and give the skull fracture a boost too."

"That's awesome."

"And I asked around for support for Evan."

"He told me. He's a bit freaked out about his appointment."

“He said he might ask you to go with him.”

“He did.” Given how I’d fucked up my relationship with him, I wasn’t sure how good of a plan it was. But he’d asked me to be there, so I would be.

Rosanna gave me a sidelong look. “Maybe you should talk to the doctor too.”

“Me? Why? I’m fine.”

“Wes.”

“What? I’m not lying—”

“You’re a god.”

I snapped my open mouth shut and straightened, pulling away from the doorjamb. “No.”

She sighed. “You might not want to believe it, but that doesn’t mean it’s not true.”

“Way to blindside him, Mom,” Lexi called from the living room.

Rosanna gave me an exasperated look and abandoned her coffee. I followed her down the hall to the living room, where Lexi was now wide awake and scowling.

“You said you were going to lead him to that news slowly,” she scolded.

“You know as well as I do that slow and subtle doesn’t work on him.”

“Hello. I’m right here.” I flopped onto Lexi’s couch, my legs stretched out on the cushions. “So you already discussed this?”

If I’d known they were going to take the information I gave Lexi last night and come up with this...ugh, I still would have told them. What choice did I have? Between the two of them, they’d forgotten more about magic than I would ever know. I just hoped they remembered all the stuff that would help me.

“While we were waiting for the doctor to sign me out,” Lexi said. “We knew what the crown was supposed to do, right? Give the focus of the spell immortality or—”

“Godhood,” I finished bitterly.

“You sound pissed.”

“Because I am!”

“Why? Think of all the good things you can do. You can help so many people.”

“I never wanted this. I was happy as I was.”

Rosanna sat on the coffee table, facing me. “Things change,” she said gently.

“Okay—yes, usually. But this is me. I *don’t* change.”

“Well, you have,” Lexi snapped. “So suck it up, buttercup.”

“Suck it—” I blinked at her. “Really?”

“Lexi, that’s not helping,” Rosanna said.

“Sorry.”

“But the underlying sentiment is valid,” Rosanna continued, turning back to me. “The crown is gone and there’s no way to undo what it did. You need to accept it and move on.”

I shifted on the couch so I was sitting up properly. “Are you sure there’s no way to reverse this or...or whatever?”

“Honey, I wouldn’t even know where to start,” she admitted quietly. “I’m not my grandmother, you know? April was... She was exceptional. Fearless with magic, in a lot of ways.”

“And highly motivated to fix her brother’s mistake.”

“Yes. And it cost her.”

It had. The spell that had brought me back from the dead had drained April so much she’d never truly recovered her constitution. She’d lived a long, happy life, but she’d had only one difficult pregnancy and she’d been frail throughout the rest of her years.

“There’s a reason Darrell and I decided to reclaim ‘Aster’ when we got married,” Rosanna said. “It was a tribute. A connection. I’m a decent witch —”

“Mom, you’re better than decent.”

Rosanna shot Lexi a smile. “I’m not being self-deprecating, just factual. I’m decent—good but not great, and I can’t undo what the crown did to Wes, even if I wanted to.”

“You don’t want to?”

“No, I don’t. Because Lexi’s right—this is a gift. Maybe a burden too,” she said with a shrug. “But only if you keep looking at it like that.”

“Easy enough to say when it’s not *your* magic that’s causing holes in the otherplane,” I grumbled. “How do I stop it?”

“*That* I’m not sure,” Rosanna said with a sigh. “Most of the information about gods has become the stuff of legends—and I mean that literally. There are tales about gods’ heroic and fantastical deeds for their people, but

not a lot of details about how their magic worked. Works,” she amended. “That’s the problem with being something no one’s seen in centuries.”

“I’m not sure if that’s a step up or not from being something nobody’s ever seen.” Because as far as I knew, I was the only not-ghost ever. “So what do I do?”

“Stop using your magic,” Lexi said. The *duh* was unspoken but implied.

“At least until we can find more information,” Rosanna added.

Stop using my magic. Sure. That’d be simple.

Not.

\* \* \*

I stood on the sidewalk outside the Candra Café, the first place we’d encountered imps. There was a red CLOSED notice from Toronto Public Health posted on the door, which made my gut twist with guilt. The imps had invaded Bhavana’s because I’d used my magic there—for a good reason, maybe, but I had to wonder if it would have been better if the customer had slipped. Being sued because of a puddle would have been better than being closed down, right?

I sighed and, with a quick look around to make sure no one was paying attention, stepped into the otherplane.

The interior of the Candra Café was empty. There were signs of work in progress—drop sheets to protect the floor, a stepladder, a hammer on the counter—but there were no workers present. I hoped that was because of the time—5:30 p.m.—and not because they’d given up trying to bring the place up to code.

I walked through the construction materials and the counter to reach the back room, where the imps had originated. It wasn’t a surprise to find a tear there, near the back door. The tear was smaller than the one at Scott’s frat house—it wasn’t pulsing, either, and didn’t feel like a threat. Lexi had done a good job in patching it closed, but I saw where it could easily be torn again.

I stared at it, considering my options. I’d meant for this to be a sort of dry run in my fix-my-shit plan, since it was the first tear we’d discovered and less likely to have people around it. If I could perfect my approach here, I would be less likely to put anyone in harm’s way at the hospital or Aurora House.

But the approach I'd used at the frat house—which had been mostly willpower and brute strength—wouldn't work here. Pulling on my magic like that would split Lexi's haphazard seal apart, and then god knew what I'd be facing. If I was lucky, it would be only a few imps. If I wasn't...

Given how my luck was going recently, I wasn't willing to chance it.

If brute strength wasn't the answer, what else could I do?

I rematerialized and sank to the floor with my back braced against a wall, and stared at the space where the tear was. I couldn't see it in the living plane, but I could sense it now that I'd seen and felt it in the otherplane. I reached into my pocket to pull out my phone, and something fluttered to the ground.

Ren's business card.

I picked it up and considered it. He was the first one to name me a god—did he know anything Lexi and her mom didn't?

Before I could talk myself out of it, I punched in his number. It rang four times and I expected it to go to voice mail, but it connected.

"Ren Oshiro."

"Hi. Uh, this is Wes—Wesley Cooper. Hudson's—"

"Oh yes, Hudson's." Ren's voice dripped with suggestion, but I ignored it. "To what do I owe the pleasure of your call? Have you reconsidered our business connection?"

"No," I said quickly—probably too quickly. "Sorry. But I think you're going to need to give Hudson some time to rearrange his thoughts there."

Ren sighed, and some of the frivolity left his voice. "I do understand that. It's not easy to change one's perspective. So if you're not calling for that, then, Mr. Cooper...?"

"Wes is fine. And, uh, I have a question for you." I scrunched up my nose. "I don't suppose you know anything about nonwitch magic and how to seal tears in the otherplane?"

"What's the otherplane?"

Shit. I let out a disappointed breath. "Forget it."

"Is this about what I called you? The G-word?"

"I've had it, uh, independently confirmed."

"Glad to hear it. All right, so...magic is intuitive. Witches focus their magic using spells and rituals, for reasons, but other magic users don't necessarily have to do that. I suspect you fall into that category. You can think something and it happens, right?"

“Sort of.”

“It’s all about will. Shaping the magic to what you want it to do. But also intuition—learning from the shape the magic wants to take.”

I frowned. “Isn’t that a contradiction?”

“Not really. Sometimes you need one, sometimes you need the other. Not one size fits all.”

Okay...that actually made sense. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Remember this poor vampire’s contribution to your godliness, oh Lord Wes.”

I hung up on his laughter.

So...shaping and listening. Since I didn’t know what shape to urge my magic into, I decided listening was the better approach here. I leaned my head back against the wall, closed my eyes, and breathed.

This was the first time I’d sought out my magic without trying to use it for anything, and it felt...weird. Weirdly natural. Ever since I’d realized my magic was bigger than it used to be, I’d been thinking of it like a separate thing. An invader. But it wasn’t, was it? It was me. Part of me, an essential part. Interwoven with my soul, as it had been from the moment I’d woken up after April’s spell, only bigger and harder to contain.

But still familiar. Still mine. Understandable, now that I knew how to listen to it. I let its knowledge flow into me, over me...

And grew more terrified with every moment that passed.

## Chapter Nineteen

I was so busy panicking over what my magic had told me, I almost forgot about Evan's first appointment with his witch-healer-therapist. Cue some frantic driving across town to the Rosedale neighborhood—but I got him there on time. And then he told me he didn't want me to come in.

I wasn't sure if I was relieved or disappointed.

Either way, it gave me some time to think. I sat in the car—so I wouldn't have to make small talk with the receptionist—and mulled over everything I'd learned, trying to make sense out of it. Because what my magic had told me...it couldn't be right. Now that some time and distance separated me from the revelations I'd had in the Candra Café, logic insisted my imagination had dreamed up the actions I needed to take. Some twisted part of me—maybe the part that thought I should run whenever I encountered trouble.

And every one of those logical thoughts reverberated with wrongness.

By the time Evan emerged from the therapist's office, his feet dragging, I still hadn't reached any conclusions about what my magic had told me.

What I thought my magic had told me.

No...it had definitely told me something.

Evan slid into the passenger seat of my Toyota and leaned his head back. He looked like he'd been up for three days straight.

"Rough session?"

He grunted.

"Was it worth it, though?"

Another grunt, and then, "Maybe."

That was better than an out-and-out *no*.

"It was weird talking to a stranger. But...good. She didn't judge me or anything, just...listened." He sighed. "I needed that more than I thought I did."

That sounded a lot more positive than a *maybe*. I held in my enthusiasm, though—I was thrilled that these sessions might work for Evan, but it wasn't about me or what I thought was best.

“And she gave me these.” He held up a crystal on a leather string and a slip of paper. “A prescription for antidepressants, and a talisman that’s supposed to help my vampire brain absorb the meds properly.”

“Yeah? You happy about that?” I wasn’t naïve enough to think that meds worked for everyone, but it was something to try, anyway.

“It’s not going to fix everything. I know that. But the doctor said it was a part of a larger solution.” He let out a breath. “Honestly, if they can make it a little less overwhelming...”

I rubbed his shoulder. “Yeah. Let’s go get that filled.”

Pulling out of the parking lot, I headed in the direction of the office. The music was on low and I could barely hear the bass of the pop beats beneath the swish of tires through puddles on the street. The revelations from my magic prodded my tongue, but I didn’t say anything—Evan was staring out the window, clearly lost in thought, and he definitely had enough to occupy his brain for the moment.

“She thinks I should take up painting again,” he said suddenly.

“Who? Wait—you paint?”

Evan turned to offer me a crooked smile. “I *was* studying art history.”

Did I know that? I thought I had. Maybe. “I didn’t know you were an artist, though.”

“I don’t know if I’d call myself an artist. I dabbled. Sketched.” He looked at his hands and flexed his fingers. “Haven’t in a long time.”

“Does she think it’ll help?”

“She said a creative outlet is a good way to get in touch with my emo—*watch out!*”

I turned my attention back to the traffic in time to slam on the brakes and not hit the cube van that had skidded to a stop in front of us. My Toyota jerked forward as the car behind us tapped the rear bumper, but I didn’t think it was hard enough to cause any damage. In front of us, the van driver got out and rushed around the hood of his vehicle, hands rising to grab at his woolen toque.

What the hell had happened?

“You okay?” I asked Evan.

“Yeah,” he said in a shaky voice. “Fine.”

“Wait here.”

I got out of the car and jogged to the front of the van. A crowd was starting to gather and multiple people were on their phones, calling 9-1-1. I



pushed through the barrier of people, knowing that whatever I'd find on the other side wouldn't be good.

I hated it when I was right.

Two people crouched over someone, one performing chest compressions while the other was doing mouth-to-mouth. I couldn't make out any of the victim's features—which was fine by me. The horrible, unnatural angle of one of his legs and the pulpy mass of one of his arms told me enough. He was partially under the van, which hid other injuries from view.

"He jumped in front of me!" the van driver yelled at no one in particular. "I swear to god, I tried to stop!"

"He didn't jump! He was pushed!"

A man on the far side of middle age staggered forward, none too sure on his feet. Someone grabbed one of his elbows to help steady him. His nose was brilliantly red from the cold—and maybe a few drinks at one of the nearby bars—and his eyes wouldn't focus. But that could be shock too.

"He was pushed!" he screamed.

"Did you see who pushed him?" I asked.

He shook his head. "It was no one."

"But you just said—"

"I know what I said!" Spittle sprayed from the man's mouth. "He was pushed, but no one was there. No one!"

\* \* \*

I wasn't surprised when Katrina Li came knocking the next day.

Evan and I had stayed to give our statements to the police the night before, which basically amounted to "we didn't see anything," and that's where our involvement should have ended. But I couldn't stop thinking about the victim's friend screaming to anyone who would listen that his buddy had been pushed by no one. Eventually the cops had allowed us to leave, right around the time that the victim's friend had been carted into an ambulance.

He had to be mistaken. Confused, or in shock, or maybe so drunk he didn't know up from down. But if he was telling the truth...

I didn't really want to think about it.

Kat stomped her boots on the mat and shot me a grin as she brushed off the snow her coat had accumulated on the short walk from the parking lot to

our door. The white stuff had been coming down all day, in a lazy sort of way. Pretty, but made for lousy road conditions. “Wow. Empty in here today. Where are your buddies?”

“My pointy-toothed friends are sleeping, and Isk’s out following a cheating spouse.”

“Exciting.”

“We know how to live. You want a coffee?”

“Love one.”

I got up to fiddle with the one-cup coffeemaker while Kat removed her jacket and gloves. By the time the coffeemaker was hissing out some brew, Kat had made her way into the office, a tablet in hand.

“Can I get your opinion on something?”

“Let me guess—the pedestrian who was killed on Yonge Street last night.”

She froze. “How did you—”

I tapped my temple. “Psychic.”

“Really?”

“No.” I handed over her coffee and quickly explained how Evan and I had been quasi-witnesses. Our names were probably buried on the last page of the report, since we really hadn’t had anything worthwhile to share.

Kat held up the tablet.

“There’s video?” I asked.

“There’s video,” she confirmed, then started the playback.

The footage was in color and provided a decent image despite the low-light nighttime setting. It was from a dashcam—the cube van’s, I assumed. It rambled down Yonge Street, flashes of streetlights and headlights from oncoming cars providing enough illumination to pick out pedestrians on the sidewalk here and there. The truck approached a green light with two men waiting on the corner for the light to change. Just before it reached the intersection, one of the figures at the corner lurched forward. The driver yelled, but I didn’t need that to know what the sudden jerking and shaking of the camera meant.

“Jesus.” I was glad I hadn’t witnessed this in real time. “His buddy insisted the victim didn’t jump out in front of the van. It wasn’t suicide.”

“That’s what it’s going down as, though.”

I leaned back in my chair. “But if he didn’t, that’s bullshit.”

“I don’t think he did.”

“Then why—”

“Because telling anyone who doesn’t know *you*—” She shook her head. “Just watch it again.”

She did something to the screen that focused in on the two pedestrians and slowed down the video speed. I watched as the truck inched closer to the intersection, and the two men waited patiently. One—the victim’s friend—had edged away from the other to look down the cross street, so he was at least a couple of arm’s lengths away. Then, in slow motion, he jerked sideways, as if in reaction to someone pushing him, and started to turn to his companion. At the same time, the victim jerked forward as though something had slammed into his back. He stumbled, trying to catch himself, and—

I winced at the shaking of the camera. “That’s awful.”

“Can you tell anything from the video?”

“Uh...”

“Like...is it a—a ghost?”

“You don’t have to whisper.”

She grunted. “I hate that I know about this shit now.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” I sucked in a breath. “I can’t say for sure. But why would a ghost shove a random person into traffic?”

“Why would a ghost steal a random brooch?”

I inclined my head. “Point. Think they’re related?”

“I don’t know, Wes. I think it all makes zero sense.”

“Fair enough. Details on the victim?”

Kat dug out her notebook and flipped through the pages. “Male, white, sixty-one. Name is Vincent Salzwedel.”

My back stiffened. “Salzwedel? You’re sure?”

“You know him?”

“No—I know the name, though.” I quickly explained how Evan and I had infiltrated the Ghost Squad meeting in search of someone who might know who’d hurt Lexi. “We found who did it, but I’ve got no evidence that would stand up in court. I’m confident in my ID, but I don’t think a judge would be.”

“And this professor, Salzwedel—you didn’t like him?”

“He came across as a self-important jackass.”

“That’s not a crime.”

“Unfortunately. But that’s weird, right? I mean, it’s not a common name.”

“No, definitely not. And a Salzwedel who seems to be involved with ghost shit—sorry—and one who seems to have been killed by a ghost—” She made a face.

“It’s got to tie together somehow,” I said. She looked at me hopefully, and I sighed. “Yes. I’ll look into it. You may walk away with your conscience intact. Just email me the details and a copy of the video, okay?”

“Consider it done.”

The pile of puzzle pieces was getting larger—the question was, how did they all fit together?

\* \* \*

“What the—”

I turned at Hudson’s startled gasp and smiled. “Hey. Morning. How’d you sleep?”

Hudson walked into the conference room where I was working and said distractedly, “Fine. Would’ve been better if I’d woken up with you. What is all this?”

“It’s my puzzle wall.” I turned to proudly examine my handiwork. “What do you think?”

“We might make an investigator out of you yet.” He chuckled. “Okay, walk me through it.”

“Wait—are Evan and Isk around?”

“Sure. Let me get them, so you only have to explain it once.” He pressed a kiss to my cheek and went off to carry out his task.

Within moments, all the members of our investigation firm gathered in the conference room, sitting on the opposite side of the table while I stood next to the wall filled with sticky notes, images, and pieces of paper with descriptions on them. I kind of wished we’d made this entire wall a whiteboard—something to talk with Iskander and Hudson about later.

“Okay. So.” I moved to the left side, where I’d posted a printed picture of Aurora House. “Reports of ghosts at the youth home. Some scary incidents and increased activity that hadn’t been there before. On my visit, I saw three ghosts from separate time frames.” I pointed to the sketches and descriptions I’d pinned up. “It’s super weird to find three intelligent ghosts in one location, let alone ghosts from various time frames who don’t know each other. So, I talked to one, and she said that ghosts were appearing and

disappearing from Aurora House. She has since disappeared, according to another ghost.”

“And that’s not normal,” Evan said.

“Very not normal. It’s also worth noting that I used magic here over the summer when Lexi and I were helping with renovations. Not a lot, but possibly enough to make some holes from the beyond.”

“But no imps,” Iskander said.

“None. Just extra ghosts.” I pointed to a line from Aurora House to Arwin Salzwedel, broken up by a sketch of the device we’d found in the youth home and Ben Clarkson’s name. The device itself was upstairs in Iskander’s residence, waiting for Lexi to be healed up so she could examine it in more detail. Though now that it was nonfunctional, I wasn’t sure what she’d get out of it...and in any case, it was only one piece in the puzzle now, instead of the only piece. “So here we’ve got a professor who knows shit about ghosts but is passing himself off like an expert, and one of his protégés who attacked Lexi in the youth home to try to protect the device—which one of the ghosts in Aurora House called a beacon. So the prof is connected somehow—”

Hudson shook his head. “It’s speculation. You have nothing to tie Salzwedel to Aurora House other than his connection to Ben, and there’s no proof Ben wasn’t working alone.”

“Okay. The connection is not strong but—”

“Still there.” Iskander cast a look at Hudson. “We don’t have a burden of law.”

Hudson tilted his head in acknowledgment.

“Aurora House to Ben, Ben to Salzwedel,” I said, tracing the connection. “Salzwedel to Salzwedel. Professor Arwin Salzwedel is the nephew of Vincent Salzwedel, who was killed last night when an invisible something shoved him in front of a cube van.”

Hudson’s brows rose. “Okay, wait. Was that the accident you and Evan saw last night?”

“One and the same.” I told them about Kat’s visit and the video she’d showed me, and my subsequent research that dug up the connection from Vincent to Arwin. Hudson’s expression remained skeptical throughout my recital of the facts, so I pulled up the video that Kat had sent me. He asked me to play it a few times and, after the fourth time, shook his head.

“There’s nothing there.”

“Isn’t that what I said?” I put the phone on the table and turned back to my wall. “So, like I said, Salzwedel to Salzwedel. Nephew to dead uncle. With maybe a ghost involved. And then, over here—” I waved to the side of the board, with one name that sat all alone, without any connections. “Silvia Samuels. Whose pawned brooch was stolen by a ghost.” I stood to the side and crossed my arms. “Well?”

“You seeing the common denominator?” Iskander asked Hudson.

“Yeah. Ghosts.” Hudson scowled. “But it doesn’t make *sense*.”

“Devil’s advocate?” Evan said, raising a hand. “Are the ghosts truly a common denominator or is it coincidence?”

I squinted at him. “This is not—”

“Hear me out. Do you know how many ghostly incidents happen in this city regularly?”

I opened my mouth, then closed it. “No. Not really. I mean, it can’t be many, right?”

“But you don’t know.”

“It’s not something that generally gets recorded anywhere, no.”

“So this looks suspicious, with all the ghost activity, but what if it’s just a weird coincidence? What if this is all, like, normal activity that only seems to be converging because we know about it and know the signs to look for?”

I grimaced. I didn’t like that theory, but I couldn’t discount it—except maybe I could. “No, see—it comes back to the ghosts at Aurora House.”

“How do you figure?” Iskander walked over to the whiteboard, kitty-corner to my puzzle wall, and picked up a marker to take notes.

“At least three intelligent ghosts in the house, all of whom barely know each other, and two of them don’t have ties to the property.”

Iskander finished writing and tapped the end of the marker against the board. “So an unlikely haunting situation coupled with ghosts appearing and disappearing—” He coughed. “How does that tie into a ghost thief and a ghost murderer?”

I grabbed the red marker and underlined Arwin Salzwedel’s name on the paper I’d put up with his picture, taken from the faculty website. “I know there’s no connection from him to Silvia’s brooch, but there is a connection from Aurora House to him to his uncle. It’s somewhere to start.”

“Nope. You confront Salzwedel on this and he’s going to clam up—or claim you’re harassing him.” Hudson plucked the marker from my fingers

and drew an arrow to Ben's name on his piece of paper. "This is where you want to start. The weak link. You said he was shaken up when you talked about what happened with Lexi, right? So talk to him. Lean on him. I guarantee he'll give something up."

"Okay, let's dig up what we can on Ben. I want to pay him a visit—and you're coming with me," I said to Hudson.

"Me?"

"Uh, yeah, Mr. Intimidating-As-Fuck Silver Fox."

He grinned. "I should add that to my business cards."

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## Chapter Twenty

It took Evan about five minutes to track down a way to contact Ben and arrange a meeting.

“And this is why you need to lock down your Facebook profile, kids,” he said, spinning his laptop around so we could see Ben’s details. His profile was completely accessible, with personal information right *there* and silly photos potential employers would definitely balk at. The first post was a link to an ad he’d placed on a classifieds site looking to sell a desktop gaming computer.

“Good job,” Hudson said. “Should I call him? He heard you two at the meeting.”

Evan shook his head. “I got this.” He picked up his phone, dialed the number on the ad—and when Ben answered, put on the most camp I’d ever seen from him. “Oh, *hi*. Is this the guy who’s selling the gaming rig with the GTX 1080?... Yay! How are you?... Good, I’m good. Look, hon, I’m super interested. My rig died and I’ve got a raid tonight... Yeah, in WoW. I know, totally old-school, but my boyfriend’s in Vancouver and this is how we stay connected. Can I meet you tonight? I know it’s late but... Eleven? Yes, perfect... I know exactly where that is. You are a lifesaver, thank you so much. Bye!” He tossed down his phone. “Eleven tonight in front of the Soldiers’ Tower.”

I blinked at Evan. “I’m impressed.”

He blushed. “Yeah?”

“Seriously impressed. But one question—what the hell is WoW?”

\* \* \*

After learning way more than I ever wanted to know about MMORPGs—and still not knowing what that acronym stood for—I went with Hudson to the meeting site.

I could tell the moment Ben recognized me, despite the dim lighting and the toque pulled down over my hair. He lurched to a stop, his smile fell



away, and his arms jerked like he was seriously considering throwing his desktop tower at me so he could get away.

“W-what do you want?”

Hudson moved in behind him, looming but not crowding him enough to make any passersby suspicious. The commons were surprisingly busy despite the hour and the subzero temperatures. The snow had stopped, but the cold had intensified with the setting of the sun.

“Information,” I said.

Ben’s teeth chattered. Yeah, it was bloody cold, but I thought that reaction was more due to fear than anything else. I wasn’t going to hurt the kid, but letting him think I would might be to my advantage.

“I d-don’t—”

“Sure you do. Easy questions first. Was Arwin Salzwedel involved in your operation at Aurora House?”

“O-operation?”

“Whatever the hell you were doing there. Was Salzwedel involved?”

“The professor—I m-mean—” Ben snapped his teeth shut and shook his head.

“You sure? You seemed cozy the other night.”

“You don’t have any—You don’t know I was involved or—I don’t have to say anything to you.”

“You’re right, you don’t.” Hudson kept his voice low and rumble, and Ben’s face grew even paler. “But I’m gonna bet you never intended to hurt our friend, did you?”

Ben pressed his lips together and blinked hard. He shook his head, and for the first time, I noticed the dark circles under his eyes. They weren’t there the last time I saw him, so maybe my words at the Ghost Squad meeting had had an impact.

“Is she okay? Really?”

“Getting there,” I said gruffly. Him feeling bad didn’t erase what he did, and I wasn’t ready to forgive it.

“But someone got killed last night.”

Ben jerked his gaze back to Hudson’s face. “What? W-what do you—”

“Professor Salzwedel’s uncle was pushed in front of a delivery truck.”

“Oh my god,” Ben breathed.

“Here’s the thing, though,” I said, pulling his attention back to me.

“Whoever did it was invisible.” I caught and held his gaze. “A ghost.”

“A—what? No. No, that’s...not possible. Ghosts wouldn’t—they *wouldn’t*. You’re lying.”

“I’m not.”

I cued up the video on my phone and let it play for Ben. It took only one viewing to turn him as white as the snow beneath our feet.

Tucking my phone away, I leaned in close and let the intensity of my emotions color my voice—because if Salzwedel was at all involved, somehow, someday, what the hell kind of person was he? “That was the professor’s uncle. A professor who has an interest in ghosts. A professor who’s already linked to weird shit that’s happening at Aurora House—”

“No. He would never do that. He wanted to use the ghosts, sure but—” Ben’s eyes widened and he bit his lip.

“What do you mean, *use* the ghosts?”

Ben shifted the giant computer tower in his hands, but didn’t say anything.

“Salzwedel was pretty clear that he believed ghosts were unintelligent and incapable of breaking free from their ingrained actions. So how can he use them?” When Ben remained quiet, I lost my temper. “Someone is *dead*, Ben! Tell us what you know!”

Ben looked up and bounced on his feet, clearly fighting with himself. Then he whispered, “He reprograms them.”

“He what?”

“He breaks them out of their...their ruts and gives them a new action.”

I shared a glance with Hudson. Of all the things I’d expected—well, I didn’t honestly know what I expected, but it wasn’t this.

“How the hell does he reprogram a ghost?”

“He’s got a bunch of different devices he’s created. You should see his workshop. It’s amazing.”

“Like the device we found in the barn?”

Some of the starch seemed to go out of Ben’s shoulders. “Yeah. That was a beacon. I volunteered at the home at the beginning of the school year and I thought I saw a—a ghost. I had convinced myself it was my imagination when I met Joelle at Halloween—”

“Who’s Joelle?”

“My girlfriend. She was with me at the Ghost Squad meeting.”

“But you volunteered at Aurora House?”

“Uh, hello? Bisexuality is a thing.” He rolled his eyes. “Anyway, she introduced me to the Ghost Squad. Then I talked to the professor about what I saw and he asked me to put the beacon in the barn—since it was easier to get in and out of there without Kee knowing. He wanted to pull spirits into the living world and direct them to his—to his workshop. We had beacons set up at intervals all the way.”

“Jesus Christ.” That fit with the report I’d gotten from Charlie, the biker ghost at Aurora House, and Mac, the farmhouse’s original owner—that ghosts were appearing randomly and leaving for parts unknown. They were being called, beckoned...and trapped.

“And what was he doing with them in his workshop?” Hudson asked.

“Learning how to reprogram them.” Ben’s gaze flipped from Hudson to me. “He reconfigures the energy he captures to make it useful. He’s been talking about turning ghosts into an energy source, to power like cars and houses and stuff. Can you imagine? It’s the ultimate renewable resource.”

I stared at him for a second, horror bubbling inside me. “You have no idea what you’re doing, do you?”

“Professor Salzwedel is brilliant and he—”

“They’re people! You’re talking about taking pieces of people’s souls—”

“They’re *not*. They’re bits of energy, that’s all.”

“No. They’re not bits of energy.” I could feel my magic uncoiling. “I am telling you right now, there is an afterlife. Your professor is calling souls from that afterlife, enticing them back to earth, and then—then—”

Oh god, I was going to be sick.

“Cannibalizing them,” Hudson finished.

Ben shook his head. “No. You’re—you’re wrong.”

I let myself slide into the otherplane—but only halfway, so I looked like a traditional ghost, with see-through body and ethereal voice and all. “I’m not wrong.”

The computer was loud when it smashed to the ground.

\* \* \*

Twenty minutes later, we were in a Starbucks, broken computer and all. The computer occupied the seat beside Ben—as though it was his friend out for a coffee too—so I took the chair next to Hudson. Not a hardship. Except Ben kept shooting wary looks my way instead of paying attention to

Hudson's questions seeking out every last detail he could provide. He seemed to expect me to do... I don't know, something sketchy. I wasn't sure what he'd do if I did. Run? Piss himself? Pass out? All three?

After about five minutes of darting glances and nervous shifting, I decided to give both him and Hudson a break. I got up, squeezing Hudson's shoulder, and held up my cell. "Gonna call Evan."

I moved over to the wall near the washrooms and eyed the ads up on the bulletin board as I waited for my call to connect. My eyes about bugged out of my head at the rent someone was asking for a studio apartment for sublet. I knew real estate in the city was stupid these days, but man.

"Hey, Wes," Evan answered.

Caller ID—I loved it, but after decades of it not being a thing, I still found it weird for someone to greet me with my name instead of the traditional hello. "We found Ben." I summarized our conversation—about Arwin Salzwedel's plan to reconfigure ghosts to serve his own needs, whatever they were.

"Holy shit," Evan said. "Isk, you got all that?"

"Yeah." Isk's voice grated over the line. "We found something too."

Because Ben wasn't the only string we had to tug. We'd left Evan and Iskander back in the office to dig up any connections they could find between Professor Salzwedel and the old lady who'd pawned her brooch to keep her lights and heat on.

"More details on what kind of entertainer Silvia Samuels was," Iskander continued.

Evan jumped in. "The weird kind. She put on one-woman burlesque-like shows where she told attendees their future."

"Uh..." I blinked. "Okay, yeah, that's one of the weirder things I've heard. So, what, she danced and stripped and paused midway through to give someone lotto numbers?"

"Dude, I have no idea. But she was pretty popular for a while."

"Until the makeup couldn't hide the lines anymore, am I right?"

"Seems like. In the eighties, she switched to only the fortune-telling without the dancing."

"And by 2010, she was broke." I flicked the "call now" tabs of one of the ads on the bulletin board. "Tragic, but I don't see how—"

"Ah, ah, I wasn't done." Evan sounded way too smug. "Silvia Samuels had no family."

“Right. I already knew that.”

“But Silvia Salzwedel did.”

I froze. “Come again?”

“She changed her name to Samuels in the sixties, before she started performing. I’m guessing the family wasn’t thrilled about her profession.”

“Holy shit.”

“Right?”

“Where does she fit in the family tree?”

“She’s Arwin Salzwedel’s great-aunt.”

“Mother of Vincent?”

“No, that’d make him Arwin’s cousin something-something removed, not his uncle. She didn’t have any kids, as far as we can tell.”

My mind whirled. “That’s the connection we were looking for, but fuck if I can figure out what it means.”

“At least we’ve covered the how. If the professor’s figured out how to reprogram ghosts and get them to do what he wants...”

The idea still made me want to puke. Hijacking someone’s soul—to commit crimes, or be used as a power source, or whatever else Salzwedel had thought up—was so...so...

Casually evil.

“But why? Why kill his uncle? Why steal his great-aunt’s brooch now, years after she pawned it?”

“That, we don’t know.”

I glanced over my shoulder at Hudson and Ben. The kid seemed to be a bit more relaxed. His hands weren’t trembling anymore. “Okay, I’m going to ask Ben some more questions. Keeping you on speaker.”

“Got it.”

Ben tensed up again as soon as I sat down, but I didn’t have time for it. “Warm again? Yeah? So why did the professor reprogram a ghost to steal a brooch from a pawnshop and another to kill his uncle?”

“Jesus Christ, Wes.” Hudson rubbed a hand over his face.

“What?”

“There’s such a thing as subtlety and tact.”

“Huh. Is there?” I turned back to Ben. “C’mon, man. My gut is screaming at me right now that we’re scratching the surface of the bad that your prof is involved in.”

“But that’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. He’s not bad. He’s crazy smart.”

I’d buy the *crazy* part of that description, for sure. “They’re not mutually exclusive, you know.”

“He’s going to solve the energy crisis.” His gaze bounced from Hudson to me and back. “I’m serious!”

“By using souls.” I held up a hand when Ben opened his mouth to argue. “I’m not going to debate that with you. You mentioned he’s got a workshop. Where?”

Ben’s brow wrinkled. “In a garage on his property. Why? Oh—no. No, no, no. No way.”

“No what?” I said innocently.

Ben leaned over the table. “You want to break in,” he whispered. “No! I’m not going to help you.”

I leaned forward too. “You owe me.”

“I don’t—”

“You put my best friend in a coma to save your own ass. She has a dislocated shoulder. She has a fucking fractured skull. She was in the hospital for more than a week. She’s still got regular headaches and she might for months. You owe her so much, but she’s not here right now, so I’m gonna collect on her behalf.” I straightened. “Unless...oh hey, did I mention Hudson here used to be a cop? We’ve got lots of friends downtown still.”

“Lots,” Hudson echoed.

“Fuck.” Ben collapsed forward, resting his head on the table and nearly upending his half-full coffee cup. He banged his head once, twice, and looked up. “Okay,” he said on a sigh. “But after this we’re even.”

I arched a brow. “No. You don’t get to call that.”

“Wes—”

I crossed my arms as I looked at Hudson. “He doesn’t. He could have killed her. Because of him, her family, me, you, all of her friends—we were all scared out of our minds. So no.” I turned my glare to Ben. “He doesn’t get to say when we’re even.”

For once, Ben met my gaze without flinching. “Fair,” he breathed. “I fucked up and I’ve got to own it. But you’re not—you’re not going to hurt the professor, right?”

“That’s not our intention,” Hudson said. “We want to know what he’s doing, and we want to convince him to stop. Through words, not violence.”

I saw the hope in Ben’s eyes—but there was skepticism there too. I wasn’t sure if he was doubting Hudson’s word, or if he knew something we didn’t about the good professor.

\* \* \*

Arwin Salzwedel lived in Downsview, in a modest brick bungalow with a detached garage tucked to the side. It sort of reminded me of Hudson’s place—his destroyed place—minus the ornate metal fence. Someone had shoveled only one side of the double driveway. The other side sported about a foot of snow that was not at all pristine—we went through too many melts and freezes for accumulated snow to look pretty after a month or so. Christmas lights flashed sullenly from one of the bushes next to the front door, crowded in bunches and uneven as though they’d been placed on the tree as an afterthought and their existence forgotten.

There were no lights on in the house, and I couldn’t see any windows in the garage to determine if it was equally dark in the interior as it was on the exterior. Hudson stopped at the corner and turned right, as though the little bungalow was of no interest to him. About a block away, he pulled to the side and parked the rented SUV.

“I don’t like this,” Hudson murmured.

I kissed his cheek. “If I could leave you out of this, I would.”

Entering—without breaking, thank you—was my thing. When we’d started dating in 1980, Hudson had been a rookie cop, idealistic and keen, but he’d been surprisingly okay with my job. Okay, not happy with it and wishing I would find a new career, but never telling me I had to change. Which, looking back, was probably the biggest sign he was into me. I’d respected that, and made sure my profession didn’t touch him in any way, shape or form. But I needed Hudson to keep watch over Ben while I ghosted through the garage door.

“I don’t want to be left out. What happens if you get caught up in this...pied piper song when you go ghost?”

“It won’t be there anymore. We’ve got the device they left at the youth home. Even if there are more—” as Ben had suggested “—by removing the first one, it’ll have disrupted the system. Right?” I said to Ben.

He shrugged.

Hudson glared at him and turned back to me. “Are you sure, though? What if—”

I cupped his cheeks and gave him a soft kiss. “Hud. It’ll be okay.”

Especially if Ren and Rosanna were right and I was a god.

Maybe.

I shoved all thoughts of potential godhood out of my brain as we got out of the SUV and hiked through the cold to the professor’s house. Ben wasn’t enthusiastic, but he’d stopped protesting, at least. Rather than make ourselves conspicuous by tromping through the snow-covered yard, we walked up the cleared side of the driveway as though we were going to ring the doorbell to sell him magazines or something.

At midnight. Sure.

It didn’t matter anyway because the street was dead. No cars drove by, no lights on neighbors’ houses came on, nothing. I could hear the constant thrum of traffic in the distance from larger streets, but Nash Drive remained quiet.

Ben nodded at the garage’s side door. The windows were boarded up, so there was no way for us to prepare ourselves for what might be inside.

Before Hudson could get more worried—and ramp up my own worry—I stepped into the otherplane.

And something...tugged at me.

It wasn’t like the voices I’d heard at one of the murder scenes in the spring—whispers that I couldn’t quite make out but felt compelled to get closer to. And it wasn’t a force like the trap I’d fallen into at the same scene that tried to drag me through the otherplane to the beyond. This was...it was...

I needed to go inside.

Dazed, I stepped through the door, and my heart sang with the rightness of it. Yeah, that was it. This was where I needed to be. Inside, safe, with the others already gathered here, waiting...waiting...

*Wait.*

Wood rattled against wood, and my memory came rushing back.

I stumbled into the living plane, breathing hard, and fell against the door.

Behind me, a feminine voice shouted, “What the—”

I flipped the lock open and stepped back, then turned to face the interior of the garage as Hudson and Ben burst through the door.



The girl who I'd seen with Ben at the Ghost Squad meeting—his girlfriend, Joelle—and Arwin Salzwedel stared at us in confusion and anger, respectively. We all kind of froze in this weird standoff of a tableau, until I noticed what was in one of the bays where a vehicle was supposed to be.

A dozen angry ghosts staring at me.

The faces closest to me were set in nearly identical expressions of rage. If they were intelligent once, I was pretty sure those motionless scowls meant they weren't any longer. Had something Salzwedel done caused that, or had they lost their sense of individuality after being cooped up together? Either outcome was horrifying. The energy rising off them was uniformly negative, making the hair on my arms and neck stand up. But the worst part?

One of the ghosts was Charlie, the biker I'd met in Aurora House.

A series of machines that looked like pylons about a foot tall encircled the crowd, and I could see something that looked like a pentagram etched into the concrete floor beneath their feet.

"Ben?" Salzwedel's query cut through my building horror.

"Professor, I'm sorry, they forced me—"

"What the hell is going on?" Salzwedel demanded, stepping forward to confront Hudson and me.

I waved a hand at the circle of ghosts. "What is *that*?" My voice shook—with horror or rage, I wasn't even sure.

"None of your goddamned business," Salzwedel snarled. "Get the hell off my property."

Hudson laid a hand on my shoulder as he stood close behind me.

"What?" he murmured in my ear.

"Trapped ghosts. Oh my god, Hud. They're...it's horrible. And Charlie—she's right there, but she doesn't—there's nothing intelligent there anymore." I took a step in the direction of the circle because I couldn't let it stand for a moment more.

"No!"

Salzwedel leaped out in front of me—which was a mistake. Hudson was suddenly there between us, his arms out to either side to prevent Salzwedel from getting past. Claws extended from each of his fingers and he crouched in a fighting stance.

"Jesus Christ!"

Salzwedel jolted back into Joelle, who tripped sideways and knocked over one of the circle pylons. She screamed. Ben rushed forward, pushing me out of the way, and then Salzwedel shoved me from the other direction as he made for the door. I crashed to the floor and Hudson started after him, but skidded to a stop when Ben cried out.

The ghosts hadn't moved but something had grabbed Ben and hoisted him into the air—tentacles of energy and malice that I couldn't see, but I could definitely feel. Joelle crabwalked backward, away from Ben's airborne form, staring up at him with her mouth wide and tears streaming from her eyes.

“What—”

“Help!” Ben's voice was strangled and his face was turning red.

Here's the thing about angry ghosts: they normally don't give a shit about other ghosts or not-ghosts, in my case. Or things that are maybe, kinda, but not really dead, like Hudson.

But they really, really liked the energy given off by young people.

And these ones looked *hungry*.

## *Chapter Twenty-One*

There have been a number of moments in my life that illustrate I'm not the best person. Like when I hesitated instead of immediately intervening when a woman was murdered in front of me. Or when I demanded that Evan keep my secret. I want to be good, and generally, I think I am. But sometimes...maybe not so much.

Like in this moment—I seriously considered letting the ghosts take Ben. It would be justice for them. Justice for Lexi. A lesson learned. Except I wasn't sure he'd survive it, and that was too high a price to pay when I could prevent it.

I unboxed my magic and stepped into the otherplane. The pied piper's song screamed in my ears, but I forced myself not to acknowledge it, not to recognize it, and certainly not to get swept up by it. I focused all of my attention on the crowd of fuzzy, indistinct ghosts. They needed to be contained.

First I had to pull them into the otherplane, where they belonged. I lifted my hands and imagined a giant bubble surrounding them. It instantly popped into being—which was weird, because up until now, the otherplane had been a static reflection of the real world. Creating something within it felt strange and unnatural. Then I focused harder and brought the ghosts through from the living plane into the bubble.

Step one complete.

Step two was sending the ghosts into the beyond. Unlike the situation at the frat house, there was no tear here that I could shove them through—except, wait. Yeah, there was, because I'd used my magic. It was a lot smaller than the one at the frat house, but it was big enough for my purposes. I hoped. I would have to encourage them to leave, one by one, and that was going to take time.

I wasn't sure I had the time, but I also knew I couldn't leave the ghosts in the bubble. But maybe I could get Charlie to help me. If I could get through to her.

She was pressed against the bubble, her clothes and hair the same as I remembered from our talk at Aurora House. Her eyes were different—

empty and dark—and her expression had no trace of the easygoing woman I'd spoken to.

“Charlie? Remember me?”

Nothing.

“We talked at Aurora House. Uh, at the old farm? You told me about ghosts appearing and disappearing. And their screams. I understand about the screams now.”

Still nothing. She stared at me, her expression as angry and devoid of humanity as it had been when I first saw her in the garage.

“I'm sorry this happened to you,” I whispered. “I'm going to send you home now, and I hope that fixes things.”

It *had* to fix things. I couldn't stand thinking of all of these ghosts—these souls—existing as inhuman bits of energy for eternity. I wasn't a praying sort of guy, but I sent up a whisper of hope that the beyond would repair whatever damage Salzwedel had inflicted.

I engaged my magic again, wincing as the tear grew larger, but I didn't have a choice. Reaching out, I grabbed Charlie with my magic as gently as I could. She didn't react—which told me more than anything that whatever was left of these people, it wasn't what made them *them*. I tugged her through the bubble and over into the tear, and she didn't even make a sound as it sucked her through to the beyond and she disappeared.

“Bye, Charlie.” I swallowed hard and set to work sending the rest of the ghosts home.

I couldn't have said how long it took me, but when the last ghost was pressed through the border to the beyond, I stepped back into the living plane—only for my knees to give out. Hudson darted forward to grab me before I could hit the cement floor.

“You okay?” There was a frantic note to his voice and I realized I'd probably been in the otherplane for as long as I felt I was.

“Tired.” I patted his arms even as I leaned more heavily into him. He guided me to a nearby stool and I sank down gratefully. “Sorry. Was more involved than I thought.”

“The ghosts—the ghosts are gone?” Ben sat on the floor with Joelle at his side. His throat sported angry red lines and his voice was rough.

“Gone,” I confirmed.

Joelle kissed his cheek. “I can't believe—” Her voice hitched. “He left us. That *asshole*.” She leaned her forehead against Ben's temple. He cupped

her cheek.

“Where would he go?” Hudson asked.

Joelle gave a tiny shake of her head.

I let out a long, tired sigh. “Look, kid. That asshole ran to save his own skin. He didn’t even look back. Do you honestly think you owe him *any* loyalty?”

“He’s going to change the world,” she whispered.

“Ben gave us the whole spiel—ghosts as energy, isn’t it great, renewable resource, blah, blah, blah. One problem. Ghosts are *people*.”

“But he said—”

“Who? The bastard who just ran out that door? The one who doesn’t know shit about the paranormal? He’s like a fucking kid with his dad’s hunting rifle—dangerous and uninformed.”

“Wes is a ghost. Sort of. You saw him disappear, right?” Ben said. “And they say that Professor Salzwedel has used his reprogrammed ghosts to steal something and—and kill his uncle.”

“What?” Joelle whispered. “Kill his—”

“A ghost pushed him into the path of a delivery truck,” I supplied.

“Oh my god.” Her hand shook as she brought it up to cover her mouth. “He was so excited the night before last, when our reprogramming was a success. Even more so than when we’d first done it. He was...giddy.”

“Did he say anything odd?” Hudson asked.

Joelle shared a look with Ben. “The professor is always a little odd,” she admitted.

“But that night?”

“He was talking to something in his hand. I thought at first it was his phone, that he was recording something or talking on speakerphone. But then I got a look at what he was holding, and it was this old-looking piece of jewelry.”

I perked up. “A brooch?”

“Maybe. Or a pendant. He kept saying to it, ‘I did it.’ And, ‘Almost time now.’” She shuddered. “It was weird, but if he had—if we reprogrammed a ghost to kill—I didn’t know. I swear it.”

“Do you know what he’s trying to do?” Hudson swept his gaze around the garage. There were bits and pieces of things all over the place—maybe they made sense to Ben and Joelle, but I couldn’t see how any of it fit together to do anything. “Beyond the energy source thing.”

“I...” Ben paused, frowning. “I assumed that was it.”

“But then why the reprogramming?” I didn’t even want to think about how Salzwedel had managed that—as far as I was concerned, that was a secret he could keep. “If he wants them as fuel, and he considers them *things*, he wouldn’t need to reprogram them for anything. He’d simply need to lure them in, trap them, and then...consume them.”

“I don’t know,” Joelle breathed. “I mean...you’re not wrong. I just never thought of it that way.”

So caught up in wondering if they could, she didn’t stop and think. Good god.

Hudson turned to me. “So why, then?”

“I have no clue.”

“You said he needed more ghosts?” Hudson asked, and Joelle nodded. “Where would he go?”

“Aurora House. That was our source. We have beacons set up to lead the ghosts from the barn to here. They’re still kind of working, even without the one in the barn itself.”

Jesus, that was a lot of beacons. Aurora House was not anywhere close to Salzwedel’s place. “But he left all his gear.”

“We loaded some stuff into his car already,” Joelle said, then wrinkled her nose. “Not the best work I’ve ever done, but the professor said they would do.”

“Do what?”

“I’m not entirely sure,” she admitted slowly. “But I think the idea is that they’ll form a portal to bring in as many ghosts as possible.”

Hudson looked at me, horror etched across his features. “He’s going to attract a lot more than ghosts, isn’t he?”

“Shit, yeah,” I said tiredly. “A lot more.”

\* \* \*

We parked on the shoulder of the highway near Aurora House and walked down the drive so Salzwedel wouldn’t hear the car. If he was even there. The barn was a dark, looming shape I could barely make out at the edge of the compound lights. As we got closer to the house, a figure rose from a bench on the porch next to a small outdoor heater. It took me only a second to see it was Kee. I’d called and given them a heads-up that they might have

an intruder on the property, but had begged them to do nothing until we got there.

“I think there’s someone in the barn,” they said in a rush when we were close enough for them to speak at a low volume. “I heard something banging around and I swear I saw a flashlight.” They did a double take at our companions. “Ben?”

“Hi, Kee,” he said, giving them a wan grin.

“What are you doing here?”

He shrugged. “It’s a long story.”

“You stay here and tell Kee all about it,” I said. “You too, Joelle.”

“But—”

“Sit,” Hudson ordered, pointing to the bench. “Stay.” Then he marched off toward the barn.

I trotted after him. We were going to have to talk about his tendency to command people like dogs sometimes.

“What’s the plan?” I whispered.

He cast a look over his shoulder. “Stop him?”

“Great. Nice and vague. I like it.”

“The cop part of me has been screaming *what the fuck* since Ben told us about the ghosts-as-energy plan. It’s wrong, so very, very wrong—but not illegal. Shit, it’s not even believable.” The frustration was evident in his voice. “I can’t arrest him. Not even a citizen’s arrest, because there’s no crime. So what the hell do we do?”

“Ask him nicely to stop fucking with the planes?”

“Sure.”

“Really?”

“I mean, my plan was to hit him over the head. Yours is much more polite.” He held out a hand to stop my forward progress. “Shh.”

I froze, waiting, as he tilted his head to listen and tried not to pay too much attention to how the cold winter wind was cutting through my jacket and toque.

“One heartbeat,” he murmured. “On the ground floor, near the back of the barn.”

“Where Lexi fell?”

“Right around there, yeah.”

We reached the side door and I gently pulled it open, repeating *don’t squeak, don’t squeak* silently. The universe must have listened for once,

because the door didn't squeak. I waved Hudson to proceed through, since he had the night vision, and I followed close on his tail, my mind whirling as I anticipated the impending confrontation.

I didn't think politely asking Salzwedel to stop his experiments would work. But Hudson smacking him over the head wouldn't, either—at least not long term. The last time we'd been in this position, the bad guy had been a murdering demon who tried to kill Hudson and threatened to kill Lexi and used me to further its own agenda. So yeah, Evan had been totally justified in killing its host body. But that wasn't the case here. Yeah, Salzwedel was bad. Really bad. But it was hard to justify killing a guy who was murdering people who were already dead.

There was a moral dilemma I bet the good professor didn't cover in his philosophy classes.

Hudson stopped behind a pile of construction debris and lifted up three fingers. Then he brought down one, then a second, and I prepared to launch myself out to thwart Salzwedel's plans. As his last finger disappeared, we leaped out from our hiding place—

And winced at a very feminine scream. A flashlight swung in our direction and I squinted, trying to see past the blinding light.

"Tiffany?" I shouted incredulously.

Her scream tapered off. "Y-yeah?"

Jesus Christ. She was the one who had been testing the electromagnetic whatchit at the Ghost Squad meeting. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Before she could answer, the door slammed open and Kee, Ben, and Joelle joined us. Once he saw it was Tiffany, Ben bent over and breathed heavily. "I thought—I don't know what I thought." Joelle rubbed his back.

"Tiffany was about to tell us what the hell she's doing here," Hudson growled.

The woman in question swallowed audibly. "I, uh... I'm doing more in-depth testing?"

"Of what?"

"This?" She held up her phone with the familiar antenna. "Professor Salzwedel said this was a great location."

"And did he mention you'd be trespassing on private property?" Kee demanded.

"N-no."



“Well, come on. Let’s you and I discuss the concept of asking permission.” Kee held out their arm to invite Tiffany out of the barn.

“Fuck.” I groaned. “I don’t know if he played us, or if this is a coincidence, but—”

“He played us,” Ben said softly. “He had to know we might tell you that he’d come here. It’d be simple to call Tiffany and get her to come out here. She’s desperate to get good data for her equipment testing, and he’s got cred with the squad.”

“So where else would he go for more ghosts?”

“I don’t know,” Joelle said, and at my dubious look, she lifted her hands in surrender. “I really don’t. This was the only place we ever used. The beacon worked great, until—well.” She had the grace to look ashamed at that.

“Would he try a building that has a reputation for being haunted?”

“We tried the Don Jail once. There were some blips but nothing usable.”

I’d heard that the old building was supposed to be one of the most haunted structures in Toronto, but I’d never visited it myself. “Other than that?”

“I mean, there are a few places around town, but I don’t think he had plans to, uh, access any of them.”

“Break in, she means,” Hudson interpreted.

Joelle gave him a sheepish look.

“So...what? What criteria would attract him to a potential ghost site?”

Hudson looked at me. “Do you think he could have clued in about your...plane problem?”

“I don’t see how. We haven’t discussed it beyond the group and he’s not even involved in the magical community—right?” I asked Joelle.

“He learned how to draw a circle from an old book.” Joelle bit her lip. “I, uh, have an idea.” At Hudson’s nod, she continued. “Okay, so, a few months ago—before Ben saw the ghost here, and then I met Ben, and... Anyway. The professor was getting impatient and one night, he kind of...ranted about explosions and how they could thin the veil.”

My breath caught. “Your house.”

“His house?” Ben echoed.

“Natural gas explosion there,” Hudson said, starting for the door. “It was all over the papers. Address and everything. Shit.”

Hudson drove through the predawn streets like the hounds of hell were chasing us. I hung on to the oh-shit bar above the passenger window and tried to remember that he'd been a cop for nearly forty years. Driving like a responsible maniac was part of the training, right?

The streets weren't empty—they never were in Toronto—but the thin traffic didn't present much of a challenge. And luck was with us—none of Hudson's former compatriots spotted our SUV as it wove toward Little Italy with total disregard for speed limits.

Hudson pulled to a stop at the curb in front of his house, and the SUV slid, knocking sideways and bumping into the curb. He slammed it into Park and wrenched off his seat belt as I did the same. With impeccable timing, Iskander and Evan pulled in behind us.

"Stay here," Hudson ordered the kids in the back seat.

One look at their wide-eyed, pale faces said they'd obey. Which was excellent. I didn't know what we were going to find in the rubble of Hudson's house, but I damn sure didn't want the kids there to witness it. Or to be manipulated by Salzwedel into switching sides again.

I dashed out of the SUV behind Hudson. Iskander and Evan jumped out of their car, ready to accompany us, but Hudson waved them off. With a pointed look at Evan, he ordered, "Protect the humans." Power rang in his words.

The order made Evan's back stiffen and his eyes flash yellow. "You didn't have to pull the sire bullshit. Jesus."

"Sorry. Instinct," Hudson called over his shoulder as we approached the fence.

Before I could slip into the otherplane to walk through it, as I had before, he picked me up like I was some blushing bride on her wedding day, bent down, and jumped.

Yeah, okay, I made a not very dignified sound.

He landed on the other side—because goddamn, he'd cleared the fence in a single leap, like he was fucking Superman or something, even with me in his arms—and held me tight to his chest so I wouldn't feel the impact quite as hard.

"The squeak was cute," he said with a grin as he put me down.

"Cute!" I smacked his arm. "A little warning next time." I glanced up at the fence, noting its height once again. "That was..."

“Impressive?” His chest puffed up a little.

My lips twisted in a crooked smile a lot like the one he wore frequently.  
“Yeah.”

There were footprints leading up the snow-covered driveway toward the collapsed garage and past the portable chain-link construction fence that had been erected around the two buildings sometime after I’d last visited. The owner of the footprints had ignored the KEEP OUT warnings every few feet. Hudson and I did the same, making our way over snowy lumps—bricks, wood, and other debris, I assumed—toward the rear of the property.

Looking at the ruin of Hudson’s place didn’t get any easier. This was once Hudson’s sanctuary and now I knew that I’d been the one who’d wrecked it. Not on purpose, but the imp came through because of my magic, so yeah. I’d ruined it. My heart *ached*.

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered.

He gripped my mitten-covered hand with his bare one. “Not your fault.”

“Uh, kind of is completely my fault, yeah.”

“It’s replaceable. You’re not. Evan’s not. I’m not.” He drew in a breath and let it out slowly. It plumed out from his lips, but without as much misty volume as my breaths. “It’s okay.”

It wasn’t, but now probably wasn’t the time to argue it.

Hudson’s eyes grew unfocused for a second. “I can hear a heartbeat inside.”

So either it was some sort of animal taking shelter—such as it was—or Salzwedel. My bet was on Salzwedel, because even a stray dog would think twice about venturing inside the ruin in front of us.

I slipped partway into the otherplane again since I didn’t have Hudson’s catlike feet and ability to be noiseless. A low buzz reverberated in my ears, but I didn’t know what it was, so I ignored it. Smart? Probably not, but I had bigger things to worry about. We picked our way over the bricks and beams of wood that used to be his home and squeezed between a pair of floor joists to enter the basement. It wasn’t as dark as Aurora House’s barn, thanks to the unintentional skylights, but still dark enough that it took my eyes some time to adjust.

Arwin Salzwedel stood outside a hastily drawn circle—a circle that would have made Lexi wince, it was so poorly executed. A pair of devices leaned haphazardly on either side of the circle, glowing ominously in the dim light. They barely resembled the finely crafted objects we’d found at

Aurora House and in his workshop, which told me that these had been pieced together and put into use without the precise planning evident in other aspects of Salzwedel's activity.

Because we'd pushed him to act more quickly than he'd intended? Or was he...what was the term from crime shows I'd seen about serial killers? Devolving? Would that apply here?

I'd ask Hudson but he'd probably scowl and remind me that real life wasn't a cop show.

Salzwedel himself was unkempt, with a few days' growth of beard and his hatless hair sticking up every which way. Between that and the shoddy tools, I got the picture that he was desperate.

Desperate people were the most unpredictable.

As I watched, a ghost appeared above one of the devices—a flicker of a form, with a puzzled frown that morphed into horror as it got sucked across the circle into the other device. The glow on the second device increased exponentially, and with a sick twist in my stomach, I realized it had to be a battery of some sort. He was charging up something, to do *something*, but I had no idea what.

From everything Ben and Joelle had said, Salzwedel wanted to use ghosts as a power source. He'd had a sweet setup at Aurora House, a lure to his trap and a completely remote setup. Why take the risk of staying on-site?

Unless, as we suspected, the whole ghosts-as-a-power-source thing was bullshit.

And it was a cover-up for something else.

You know what? I didn't need the answers right now. We just needed to stop him.

Hudson nudged me and I nodded, knowing what he was asking. He stood up and in his best cop voice shouted, "Arwin Salzwedel, *stop*. Let me see your hands."

Salzwedel turned and sneered. "You can't stop me."

"This is my property, and you're trespassing," Hudson growled. "We can do this nice and easy, where you back off and leave, or I can call in the cops and have you arrested."

Another ghost flitted across the circle, and the light in the battery jacked up another notch. Salzwedel grinned at it. "Go ahead and call. By the time they get here, it'll be done."

*“What will be done?”* I demanded.

He held up something that caught the light given off by the battery. It sparkled and the shape was vaguely familiar. *“The summoning.”*

He placed the object on the battery, then did something to the other device, the one that had been sucking in ghosts from the beyond. Suddenly the dull device jolted to life, sharing the glow of the one I’d thought of as a battery. I couldn’t make sense of it—how the energy was being transmitted or anything—but there was no denying the evidence in front of me.

Something was happening. And I couldn’t imagine it was anything good.

*“Wes!”* Hudson shouted.

Yep. Time to move. I sank fully into the otherplane—

And collapsed. That low buzz I’d heard and ignored? It was infinitely more powerful now, sending shards of sound through my skull. I grasped my head and tried to breathe through the pain, but everything in me had seized up. The resonance vibrated through the core of me—if I were in the living plane, I’d say it hummed through my bones and flesh, but here, there was nothing so substantial. This was nothing like the compulsion in Salzwedel’s garage—there was nothing I had to do.

It was all I could do to keep myself from shattering.

Dimly, I heard Hudson shout my name again. Then a gunshot. A second. A third.

I had to get up. I had to.

I pushed myself to my hands and knees. I couldn’t feel the ground beneath me. The resonance pressed down on my back, as though it was a living, breathing thing determined to keep me down. As hard as I tried, I couldn’t lever myself up to my feet.

So, I rolled sideways, out of the otherplane.

My ears rang in the sudden silence. Except—it wasn’t really silence, because Salzwedel’s lips were moving and the devices on either side of the circle were vibrating enough that they should be making some noise. My eyes raked the scene, looking for Hudson—and there he was. On the ground.

I stumbled and fell to my knees beside him. *“Oh god, Hudson.”*

He looked up at me, his mouth moving, but there was no sound. Memories rose of the last time I’d been in a similar position—holding Iskander, blood bubbling out of his ruined throat, as he tried to tell me something.

“No, shh, it’s okay. It’s okay.” I blinked hard, trying to keep the tears at bay. This couldn’t be happening again. It couldn’t.

A strong hand gripped mine and squeezed. Hard. Hudson was staring up at me, his mouth moving, but more slowly.

“Don’t you fucking leave me, Hud—”

Hudson let go of my hand and tapped my ear with his fingers. Then he cupped my chin in a very firm grip and held my face still. With his other hand—and a wince—he pointed at his lips.

“What?”

He pointed to his lips again and mouthed something.

I frowned. “What?”

He moved the hand cupping my chin to the nape of my neck and tugged me downward, tilting my head so my ear was against his lips.

“Your ears are fucked.” It sounded like he was whispering, but the strong puff of breath against the curve of my ear suggested otherwise. “I’m okay. He missed my heart. Just need to wait until the bullets are expelled.”

Relief made me weak. I lurched forward, my forehead resting against Hudson’s shoulder. Vampires didn’t have many weaknesses, but a well-aimed bullet was one of them. Heart or head would kill Hudson. Anything else would only slow him down for a bit.

Something in the air changed—pressure, or a pitch of the energy being generated by Salzwedel’s devices. I lifted my head in time to see a— a tear rend the air inside the circle. And maybe my hearing was coming back, because I swore I heard Salzwedel yell in triumph.

Whatever this was, it couldn’t be good.

Hudson managed to push himself up onto one arm so he could see what was happening. I threaded my fingers through his and held on tight. I should have reached out with my magic and interrupted Salzwedel’s celebrations and tried to seal the rift closed, but the magic in my head trembled. Whatever that pressure had been in the otherplane, it had messed with my abilities—and what if using them made the tear bigger? I couldn’t risk that.

A pale, bony hand reached through the tear, followed quickly by a skeletal form of an old, frail woman. Her long, wavy, and ragged white hair hung listlessly over shriveled and drooped shoulders, and her arms were little but skin and bones. Age spots stood out on her parchment-like skin, and her eyes were pits of blackness. She wore nothing but shadows, as far

as I could tell—or maybe the blackness flowing over her torso and legs was a diaphanous fabric.

“I did it, Aunt Silvia!” Salzwedel’s voice seemed to come from very far away, but at least I could hear again. “I followed your instructions and I did it.”

This was Silvia Samuels—née Salzwedel. Dead for five years. Jesus Christ.

“Good boy.”

I felt rather than heard Silvia’s voice. It slithered through me like dark, unbridled dread. I didn’t know what she was, but she wasn’t a ghost.

“I killed Uncle Vincent, like you asked,” Salzwedel said.

“No less than he deserved for abandoning me when I needed him most.”

“And I retrieved your brooch.”

“So I see.” She extended a bony finger to brush the cheap metal of the brooch where it still sat atop one of the devices. Her fingernails were like long, thin daggers—I think I’d seen something like them in a horror movie once, but right now, I couldn’t think of which one. Carefully, she picked the brooch up and pinned it to her chest.

Oh god. To the *skin* of her chest. The cloth—if that was what it was—covered it.

“Thank you, Arwin. You were always such a good, *obedient* boy.”

“You taught me so much, Aunt Silvia. I’m only sorry that—”

“Shh, it’s done. You need to do only one more thing for me.”

“Anything.”

She drew the back of her hand down Salzwedel’s cheek—reaching beyond the boundaries of the circle to do so.

She shouldn’t be able to do that.

Before I could shout a warning, she drew her hand back and punched her dagger-nails through Arwin’s chest. He let out a stunned gasp and looked down, then back up, blood starting to trickle from his lips. Silvia pulled her fist back, yanking it out of his chest cavity—and there was something in it. She opened her mouth wide, wider than anyone should be able to, displaying row after row of sharp, pointed teeth, and shoved her bounty inside.

Chewed. And swallowed.

Salzwedel, now ignored, toppled to the ground at her feet.

“Did she—” Hudson swallowed “—eat his heart?”

If I opened my mouth, I was going to puke, so I said nothing. Instead I stood shakily and positioned myself in front of Hudson. Silvia's black, black eyes fastened on me and, not gonna lie, my knees shook and my bladder threatened to let go.

"Well, well, what have we here?" She lifted her nose to the air and walked out of the circle as though it was nothing. "Vampire? No—that's you," she said, turning her attention to Hudson, still laid out on the rubble behind me.

I shifted to block her view, and she looked at me again. Good...but, uh, not good.

"I don't know what you are." She sounded bemused. "Not human, that's clear."

"You don't belong here," I managed, and my voice trembled only a little bit. Go, me.

"I disagree." She took another few steps toward me. Behind her, the tear rippled, like something else was trying to come through.

Shit. Could I physically shove her back through that rift? I had my doubts. Part of the success I'd had with grabbing the hellhound and ghosts and forcing them back into the beyond was that they didn't belong in the living plane, or even the otherplane. The living plane was for the living and the otherplane was transitory. The beyond beckoned them, tugged at them.

But Silvia had been summoned. Invited. She moved on the living plane as easily as any human. I wondered if that had to do with the brooch, if it acted as an anchor of some sort.

My magic burbled in my chest. Its rhythm felt off, thrown into disarray by whatever that force had been in the otherplane, but I had to work with what I had. I drew it out, wincing as the ripples in the tear grew more pronounced. This was going to go very bad. I knew it. But I didn't have a choice.

I wouldn't go down without a fight.

Silvia stopped her advance and her fathomless eyes grew unfocused. "Oh, I know that," she murmured. "That lovely aroma has been leaking all over the beyond. Maddening. I need it."

She started forward again and I lashed out with my magic, imagining it as a whip. It snapped against her cheek, flaying the flesh—but there was no blood. She stopped and lifted the flap of skin back into place, where it stitched back together.



Fuck.

I couldn't retreat—it would leave Hudson vulnerable. So I attacked her again, and again, causing wounds that seemed more annoying than anything else, but which kept her at bay.

Then the first hellhound dropped out of the tear.

For the briefest of seconds, I thought it might attack Silvia, since she was the closest. But no...it trotted over to her and stopped at her side, like it was an overgrown and very ugly pet. Smiling at me, she gestured to the hellhound, and it leaped at me.

By this time, Hudson had pushed himself to a sitting position, and he was trying desperately to gain his feet and fight. But he'd lost a lot of blood and needed more, and there wasn't time to let him bite me. So I fought as best I could, but I couldn't get a grip on the hellhound with my magic like I'd done before. It was slippery. Or maybe I was finally finding my limits.

Another hellhound slipped through the widening tear. Then imps and ghosts. The hellhound I was fighting took advantage of my distraction and fatigue and shoved me to the ground. Its teeth fastened onto my shoulder and shook me. I couldn't hold in the cry of pain and fear.

We'd failed. No—I'd failed.

The hellhound held me down, pinning me in place with a paw on my chest and its teeth still embedded in my flesh. It hadn't gone for the throat, at least—probably because Silvia herself wanted to kill me.

Or, let's be honest now—she wanted to eat me.

She approached, looking slightly less skeletal now than she had when she'd first stepped out of the beyond. I guess ingesting a human heart worked wonders. I tried to turn my head to see Hudson, but the hellhound pressed harder on my chest and growled. Its teeth scraped against the bone in my shoulder and I cried out again.

"Just stay still," Silvia advised. "It will all be over soon."

One of the ghosts swept by her and she froze. For the first time, I saw something like uncertainty or even fear in her eyes. Unexpectedly, she retreated a step, then another, and with a snap of her fingers, the hellhound let me go.

"I will find you again. Don't worry." With an extra-wide smile that showed off her shark-like teeth, she turned and began walking up the hill created by rubble that led to Hudson's backyard. "Take it down," she said to one of the ghosts.

Energy surged, but it wasn't mine or Silvia's. Dust fell into my face. Coughing, I turned onto my side, only two thoughts in my head: *Hudson* and *get out*.

Hudson lay unmoving a few feet away, but it might as well have been kilometers. I reached out and dragged myself toward him with my one usable arm, and whimpered with the surge of pain that threatened to take my vision.

"Hud!" I croaked. More dust came raining down, and the walls around us made a disturbing squeal.

*Take it down*, Silvia had ordered. She meant the ruins of the goddamned house.

"Hudson!" My shout wasn't much stronger this time. I needed to get to him, but the distance between us seemed insurmountable. I gritted my teeth and dragged myself forward—

Just as the house roared, shook, and tumbled down on top of us.

## *Chapter Twenty-Two*

I knew I was dreaming. I wasn't sure how I knew—though it might have been the presence of a pair of boobs on my usually boobless chest. They were covered by a flimsy white nightgown I definitely didn't own. As was the nature of dreams, it didn't bother me. It just was.

My gaze swept across my surroundings. The apartment was familiar but not—not mine, but it belonged to this other me. Lacy, diaphanous material draped from the skeleton of the canopy bed, and even in the candlelight, I could see that the fabric was yellowed and darkened with age. The bed itself sagged in the middle and the coverings looked worn and nearly threadbare. The rest of the furniture was equally shabby—the dresser had rough corners worn by age and neglect, and even the woven throw rug covering the scarred wooden floors was matted with years of overuse.

My body felt brittle. Achy, fragile. Getting up from my kneeling position would be difficult, but anything worth doing was also worth a sacrifice. The air around me nipped at my nose and fingers—my asshole landlord had started turning off the heat for a few hours each day, each period of time without heat getting longer and longer, but he wouldn't scare me off. He was another asshole of a man trying to control me, and I would not bow. I would not break.

And if he managed to win the battle, he would not win the war.

I smiled as I sliced my inner arm with the knife and let the blood drain into the chalice in the center of my circle of candles. Words fell from my lips, words I knew but didn't know. Words I'd memorized a decade ago. Or more. My memory was as unreliable as the heat in my apartment—sometimes burning brightly, sometimes cold and dark. But these words...they'd never left me. They were my comfort. My salvation. My revenge.

My landlord was only the latest in a long line of men who'd wronged me. My father was the first—he'd cast me out when he realized I had the sight. Touched by evil, he'd called me. My would-be fiancé, who'd come home married to a Vietnamese woman he'd gotten pregnant. My brother, who'd

refused to help when I'd shoved my dignity aside and asked for a loan to pay my rent.

Entitled, egotistical pricks, every single one of them.

I could feel my death approaching, the dark rider on a pale horse lingering beyond my sight. It wouldn't be tonight, but soon...soon he'd come to carry me off. As long as he gave me enough time to prepare my soul for revenge, I would go with him willingly. Laughing, even. Because death wasn't the end.

As cliché as it sounded, it really was only the beginning.

\* \* \*

"Wes!"

I blinked my eyes open, visions of Silvia's apartment and her bloodstained skin wisping away like the tattered lace she'd draped over her bed. I had no idea why I'd dreamed that, or if it was...more of a vision of the past. Something shifted above me and the present intruded on my foggy thoughts. For a moment, I couldn't tell where I was—then I remembered the crash of the house, and I thrust my hands out to find I was surrounded by wood and god knew what else.

"Here!" I croaked, then coughed and tried again. "Here!"

I explored the darkness with my hands. My legs appeared to be free too, so however the house had fallen, it had left me with a little bubble to myself. God, I hoped the same thing had happened for Hudson. I didn't know if a crushing injury was something a vampire could heal from, and I didn't want to find out.

Light flared by my head and I squinted and turned my face away. That was full-on sunlight, not the weak rays of dawn. Jesus—how long had I been trapped? How long had I been dreaming? Wary of the light, I turned back to the hole, and my breath almost stopped as I recognized the face looking down at me.

"You're not going to make us dig you out, are you?" Hudson asked with a wavering grin.

"You're okay," I managed.

"Yeah. I woke up shortly after the collapse and dug my way out, thinking Mr. Ghost-Not-Ghost would be out here waiting for me." His smile dimmed. "Not so much."

“So you hung around waiting for me to show?”

“For a bit, yeah. Then we had to wait for my nosy neighbors to head to work.” He tilted his head. “Go ghost, dummy.”

I grunted and let my body go insubstantial. I wasn’t a hundred percent—not even seventy—but everything seemed a little easier in the otherplane. I passed through the rubble without any effort, and once I was free, rejoined the living plane. Suddenly all of the aches and pains returned with a vengeance, and I staggered. Hudson was there to catch me, though—and Iskander and Evan hovered nearby.

Clearly the sun continued to not bother either Hudson or Evan. Yay, magic blood.

“Where are Ben and Joelle?”

“In Hudson’s SUV,” Iskander rasped.

“Passed out in the back seat, hanging on to each other,” Evan supplied. “They had a pretty good freak-out when the house went down.”

I leaned hard against Hudson, and I didn’t miss the fact that he was not standing particularly straight, either. We needed to rest and regroup—and plan. As much as I liked the office for planning, it wouldn’t be good to be slumped over furniture if a client came calling.

“Lexi’s,” I said, then realized no one else was privy to my thoughts. “We need magical advice.” Then I groaned. “I need to see if there’s a tear.”

Hudson grabbed my arm as I made to turn around. “You’re barely upright. We can ask Rosanna to patch it, if there is one.”

I glanced back at the ruin of Hudson’s house and thought of Arwin Salzwedel’s body buried in the rubble. “We should call Kat too.”

Hudson paused. “She’s gonna start to hate me.”

My chuckle was more air than sound. “Oh, honey, I think you’re already firmly on her shit list.”

\* \* \*

After a shower, a snack—protein bars for me and Essence du Wes for Hudson—and a nap that was way too short, I felt marginally more human. Or human-like, anyway. The puncture wounds in my shoulder had healed, leaving angry red marks in my skin and a lingering ache, but it was getting better by the moment. As for Hudson, there was no evidence he’d been shot three times. I mean, yay for vampire healing. But my brain was doing this

weird hitching kind of thing where the memory of him bleeding on the floor would steamroll through my thoughts and push everything else aside for a few seconds. Just, you know, so I didn't forget I almost fucking lost him. Again.

We all arranged ourselves around Lexi's living room, and everyone else looked as ragged as Hudson and I felt. Ben and Joelle had elected to stay instead of returning to their dorms or classes or whatever their usual plans were. I wasn't sure if it was because they truly wanted to help, or if they were afraid that Silvia would come looking for them. Why she might, I had no idea. I hadn't even thought of it until Joelle asked the question in a shaky voice. So yeah... I was coming down on the side of them preserving their asses, but fair enough.

I'd probably do the same thing.

Lexi sat on an armchair with her computer balanced on a knee and one of the arms. Her casted left arm was positioned almost parallel to the floor while her right hand flew over the keyboard and touchpad as she researched stuff. Her mom sat on the floor, her back braced against the chair, as she flipped through an ancient-looking leather-bound tome.

Lexi looked so much better than she had even a few days ago—fiery and energetic, more like her regular self. Her hair was a hint of dark fuzz on her scalp. I caught her shooting glares at Ben more than once, but he accepted the metaphorical daggers without complaint. I thought I'd heard him apologize to her when we'd first shown up and he realized who she was, but that memory was fuzzy with fatigue and pain. At any rate, there was some measure of peace in the room—as far as Lexi and Ben went.

The rest of us were understandably on edge as Lexi and her mom searched for answers.

"And you're sure she wasn't a ghost?" Lexi said for the third time.

"Fucking positive," I growled, then let out a breath when Rosanna shot me a mom look. I leaned more heavily against Hudson on the love seat.

"Sorry. I don't know what else I can tell you."

"She smelled like death," Hudson offered up. "Did you mention the hellhounds acted like puppies with her?"

Looking at Lexi, I gestured at Hudson. "That too."

She refocused on her computer. "And she definitely wasn't a vampire."

I made a strangling gesture with my hands, which Hudson pressed down into my lap before Lexi could see it. "Definitely not," he said. "She was

dead.”

“What happened to you insisting *you* were dead?” I arched a brow.

He wrapped a hand over my shoulder and pulled me tight against him. “I’m big enough to admit when I’m wrong. Especially after seeing...that. I am absolutely, one hundred percent not dead.”

“Draugr?” Lexi looked down at her mom. “The brooch could be her treasure.”

Rosanna shook her head. “She didn’t come out of her grave.”

“Crap.”

Joelle raised a tentative hand. “Could it maybe be a lich?”

Lexi pressed her lips into a thin line. “This ain’t World of Warcraft.”

I snapped my fingers. “I know what that is!”

“Got it.” Rosanna pointed to a line in her book. “Revenant.”

Lexi’s hands flew over the keyboard and trackpad until she brought up whatever was listed on the TechnoWitchWeb about revenants. Her eyes scanned down the page, and the more she read, the grayer her skin got.

*Uh-oh.* “Lex?”

“This is not good, Mom.”

Rosanna reached out to her husband, Darrell, who’d pulled up a kitchen chair to sit next to his two ladies. “No, honey, it’s not.”

My gut quivered—because knowing what I did already about Silvia, Lexi’s and Rosanna’s reactions were so not working for me. Blindly I sought Hudson’s hand with my own, and felt much more grounded when he grabbed it and held on tight. “Guys? You got a pic?”

Rosanna turned her book around to display the illustration of a revenant and—yeah, that could have been Silvia’s twin. The bone-white skin, the vaporous clothing, the stilettos for fingernails, and the mouth of shark’s teeth.

Lexi began to read. “A revenant is anger personified. It is a powerful undead creature that can be summoned from the beyond only if the deceased was prepared with the proper rituals prior to their death. Death must not be due to natural causes, and the summoner must have an item of personal importance to the deceased to act as an anchor of the spell. A revenant’s power comes from the individual’s unwavering and unyielding anger, which is why they are often called the spirit of rage.”

“Sounds fun,” Evan croaked from his space on the floor near Hudson and Iskander, who sat on the couch.

“Revenants must consume the flesh of the living frequently—ideally heart’s blood.”

“Can confirm,” I said, swallowing hard.

“They are vulnerable to sunlight. Unlike vampires, revenants are truly undead and even indirect sunlight will cause them to ignite and burn.”

“Good to know,” Hudson said.

That was good to know—and a definite advantage, since our two vampires were no longer limited to the dark.

“Historically...” Lexi paused, wet her lips, and continued. “Historically, revenants were soldiers sacrificed and later summoned to participate in key battles. Ivar the Boneless reportedly had two revenants and their servants at the head of his army when he invaded the Kingdom of East Anglia in 865 CE. About a century earlier, Charles Martel of the Franks summoned a revenant to help in the Battle of Tours.” She paused, obviously skipping through some additional content she didn’t read aloud. “Here we go. ‘Revenants can move freely as long as they are anchored by their personal item. For safety, the summoner usually keeps that item locked away, protected by a mundane lock and key or an arcane version.’”

“Well, there’s your problem,” Hudson said, deadpan.

“Anchor is key,” Iskander said.

“You mean the brooch she *pinned to the skin of her chest*?” I shuddered.

“You’re a thief, Wes—you could steal it,” Evan said.

“Retired thief,” I corrected automatically. “And maybe. But not without a fucking good distraction.”

“First we need to find out where she’s hiding,” Lexi said, fiddling with her laptop again. “Evan, what time did the house come down?”

“It was 6:38,” Ben piped up. “I remember seeing the clock on the dash.”

“The sky would have been growing lighter—faintly, but potentially enough to hurt her.” Lexi scanned her screen. “Official sunrise was about 7:30 a.m. But if the early light of the sun was getting to her, I’m going to guess she wouldn’t want to wait until actual sunrise to take cover. So what’s close by that would offer complete darkness and solitude?”

Hudson got up from his seat to stand behind Lexi as she looked at what I presumed was a map. His mouth pressed into a thin line. “No, these pictures are a few years out of date. See, that?” He pointed to something. “That building’s a GoodLife Fitness now.”

“So not a place she’d hole up.”



“No, but...scroll to the east. No, the other east.”

“Sorry.”

He pointed to another location. “This might be something.”

“It’s an empty lot.”

“Correction—in 2012, the date of this picture, it was an empty lot. Now it’s a high-rise condo unit under construction. With a parking garage.” He leveled a pointed look at Lexi.

“Can you think of anywhere else close by that she’d retreat to?” I asked. Because this time, I didn’t want to show up at the construction site, scare the shit out of people, and be completely wrong.

“She probably doesn’t know the area, so she’s going to be limited to whatever her hellhounds can sniff out for her. And quickly.” He tapped the screen and straightened. “I think this is the only option.”

“Okay, then.” I let out a long, kind of jagged breath, because I wasn’t looking forward to going up against Silvia the Revenant again—but it wasn’t like I had any choice. “Hud—”

Movement at the corner of my eye caught my attention and interrupted my train of thought. Michael flickered into sight at the edge of the room, then glitched out.

Shit.

I turned my attention back to my friends, my steady voice camouflaging the anxiety I suddenly felt. “Hud, you call Kat and let her know about Professor Dumbass and his undead great-aunt.”

“That’ll be a fun convo,” Hudson grumbled, but he pulled his phone out of his pocket and retreated into the kitchen.

“Everyone else...” I waved my hands as I stood. “Plan.”

“Where are you going?” Lexi asked.

“Little ghost’s room.” I shot her a smile I didn’t feel before making my way to the stairs and jogging up to the guest room Hudson was staying in.

I stepped inside, closed the door, and leaned against it. Barely a breath had passed my lips before Michael’s form stuttered into being.

“—not going to work.”

I thumped my head against the door. “We don’t even have a plan yet.”

“No—Not g—ting it.” His expression was dark with frustration in the seconds I could see him. “Y—cause of—holes.”

I bristled. “I know. I’m not stupid—”

“—magic—shredded—veil.”

I remembered what my magic had shown me in my quiet moment in Bhavana's café. "I know," I said more quietly.

"Y—know—fix it."

The blood drained out of my face and my fingertips grew cold. "There has to be another way."

Michael shook his head, the movement jerky with his glitching.

"Michael, I can't."

"—don't want to—"

"You're right. I don't."

"Doesn't matter." Michael took a deep, ragged breath. "Solution is—you—leaving this plane."

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## Chapter Twenty-Three

I returned to the living room to help with planning, but I couldn't contribute much. I kept flashing back to that moment in the empty café, when I'd sought my magic's input on the imp and ghost problem, and it had told me—in great detail—exactly how I could fix everything. I hadn't wanted to believe it. In fact, I'd actively worked on pretending I didn't know. But now Michael had confirmed it all.

To fix all of this without risking any of my friends, all I had to do was turn the otherplane inside out—with me and the imps, ghosts, hellhounds, and one scary-ass revenant on the beyond side of things instead of in the living plane.

I didn't want to do it.

I had long ago acknowledged I was a selfish asshole. The sky was blue, maple syrup was gross—I'd fight anyone who said otherwise—and I looked out for number one first and foremost, always. It came from growing up how I did, getting kicked out of the house at sixteen for kissing a boy I didn't desire simply because I wanted to know what kissing was like, and having to fight for survival among the rough, transient farm workers at the start of the Great Depression. I'd learned many, many lessons from that time of my life. Some of them had worn off, sanded away by the luxury of always having enough food and never having to worry about growing old. Others remained steadfast—like my impeccable survival instinct.

It didn't care that Michael assured me I would continue on. It wouldn't be *here*. It wouldn't be with *these people*. So therefore, I didn't want to do it.

But if I didn't do it, would this *here* and *these people* survive?

I broke away and headed back upstairs long before we'd found a viable alternative to the “sacrifice Wes” plan—not that they knew about that. Part of me didn't want to tell them because they'd argue. Another part didn't want me to voice it because it would make it real.

And there was yet another part that didn't want them to know in case I had to do it.

Hudson found me slumped on the bed, staring at the carpet between my feet but not seeing it. When he rubbed my shoulder, I leaned into him, but I didn't look up.

"What's going on?" he asked softly, settling on the bed beside me.

I thought about not telling him. Lies of omission were easy—especially since he didn't need to know, because I wasn't going to do it. Except, lies of omission had stolen a lot of the joy from these past months, and I didn't want to backslide. Honesty and openness—that was what we both deserved.

"I...I know how to fix this."

He looked at me for a moment, taking in everything about me with his well-trained cop's gaze. "I'm not going to like this, am I?"

I leaned my head against his shoulder and told him. It was easier to do it without looking at him, but I could feel the tension jacking up in his frame the longer I spoke. Finally, when I was done, he gently nudged me away from him, turned to face me, and cupped my cheeks.

"You are *not* going through with that," he growled. "A nuclear bomb would fix a lot of things too, but what would be left behind wouldn't be worth living in. You hear me?"

"I hear you." I sucked in a breath. "But—"

"No. No buts. I can't believe you're trusting him. He *killed* you."

And Hudson didn't even know the whole story—I'd never been able to confess that I'd been ready to commit suicide for Michael. But now was not the time to share that truth, so I shoved it aside.

"I'm not. My magic—I know how to do it. It showed me first. He's not lying."

"Not about the method, maybe, but the motivation?"

"Why would he—"

"God, I love you, but you are so fucking naïve sometimes."

We both froze and our gazes locked together. By the pallor of his usually bronze and vibrant skin, I knew he hadn't meant to say that. The L word part. So...should I ignore it? Say it back? Wait so Hudson could clarify and/or backpedal?

He licked his lips nervously. "So, uh, we haven't said that to each other yet this time around."

Time for more honesty and openness. "We did, actually. But you don't remember."

His brow furrowed. "When?"

“When I was fighting Not-Julia in the otherplane.” The demon had been incorporeal after Evan beheaded its human host, and I’d had to grab it and try to force it into a stream of magic to take it back into the realms beyond. “I almost followed the demon into the beyond, but you grabbed me. Saved me.”

“I was in the otherplane?”

“I thought you were dead.” He’d taken a bullet to the heart, I’d thought, but it hadn’t been a direct hit. “I thought you were—were saying goodbye. You told me you loved me, that you’d never stopped loving me, and I said it back.”

He tilted his head. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t think it was ready for prime time. And then I realized I was—was different and I couldn’t tell you and...” I couldn’t meet his gaze.

Hudson gently pulled at my chin until I was looking at him again. “It was the truth. I love you. I never stopped.”

My chest was suddenly tight and my eyes burned. I squeezed them shut and Hudson brushed away the few tears that escaped. “I don’t want to go,” I whispered.

He pulled me tight against his chest and burrowed his face into my neck. “Then don’t. We’ll find a way to stop her without doing...*that*.”

“I don’t want to. I don’t want to go into the beyond. I—” My voice hitched. “I only want *you*. I love you.”

Hudson kissed me, firmly, forcefully, leaving no room for doubt that he felt the same way. His tongue and lips consumed me, and I gave under the weight of it, falling back onto the bed. He followed me down and I surrendered.

This was all I wanted, for the rest of the long, long years stretching out before me. Hudson’s love, this connection, this necessary sharing of touch. It wasn’t even about sex—it rarely was with me, even if the orgasms felt good—it was about being needed by another living being, needing them in return. From the way Hudson worshipped me with his lips, tongue, hands, and body, I knew he understood.

Our clothes disappeared—slowly or all at once, I wasn’t sure. But the familiar feeling of his chest hair rasping against my skin electrified me. I arched beneath him, moaning softly, and he took the opportunity to bury his nose in my armpit, kiss his way to my nipple—licking and teasing it until I gasped—and then farther down, down, down. Words kept spilling from my

lips, though I wasn't sure what I was saying—pleas and begging, probably, stuff I'd be embarrassed by at any other time. But not now. This was the time for all the nonsense words and sounds, noises that were a language all their own.

When he entered me, after slow prep that drove rationality even further away, my gaze locked on his. His fangs were down, his eyes showing only a thin ring of glowing yellow around pupils blown wide with need, and I lifted my legs up to cradle him as he thrust inside me, so strong and yet so gentle.

“Mine.” His voice was guttural, showing the animal he insisted lived inside him.

“Yours,” I agreed without hesitation.

I tilted my head to the side, exposing my neck, and he took the invitation. His fangs pierced my skin and he moaned, and the knowledge that I could give him this, I could do this for him, made my balls draw up. My orgasm sang through me, triggering Hudson's, and in that moment, we found perfection.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

From our vantage point, I could barely see the bones of the building under construction across the street, thanks to the shit-ton of snow acting as a curtain. A squall had moved in while we were plotting, and though it made transportation difficult, it also ensured no one was working on the site or able to witness anything they shouldn't witness. It was about three in the afternoon—not dark yet, but dull and gray, thanks to the storm. If we moved quickly, the revenant would be trapped in her underground lair, held in place by the diffuse sunlight sneaking through the heavy clouds.

*This is going to work.*

I kept repeating that to myself as we made our way across the street. We paused at the fence for Lexi and her mom to reach out and magically mess with any cameras, then Hudson wrenched the chain and padlock on the gate into pieces. The site itself was eerie, with the snow concealing shapes until we were only a few paces from them. I hunched my shoulders, partly from the cold trying to inch down my neck, and partly because we were breaking and entering and I was *visible*.

It wasn't natural.

At the edge of the parking garage, we huddled into a circle. We being me, Hudson, Iskander, Evan, Lexi, Rosanna, Darrell, and—kind of surprisingly—Ben and Joelle. The four humans would form a circle with Lexi and Rosanna. A decent-sized circle, according to them. I might have agreed, if they were all witches. But they weren't. I hoped they were a good enough facsimile to fool the magic into doing what we needed it to do.

Hudson, Evan, and I, being the magical creatures of this crew, would be the ones trying to separate Silvia's brooch from her grasp. And hopefully distracting her from the circle at the same time.

This was not going to be fun.

Complicating things was the fact that the circle had to happen within sight of Silvia. They were going to start out low-level with the magic, building up intent. Once we retrieved the brooch, they would open up the throttle and pour on all the power they could muster. But it had to happen at the instant the brooch was separate from Silvia, when the protection it

offered first dropped. I didn't understand the specific mechanics of it, but Lexi and Rosanna did, so I'd leave it to them.

The fact remained that having the circle on-site made the situation so much riskier than if they could do the ritual back at Lexi's. I wasn't a fan. Added to all that was the fact that Lexi was here—with her arm in a sling and squinting as she looked around. I knew she was still in pain and I didn't want her anywhere close to this place, but we didn't have a choice. We needed every bit of help we could get.

"Ready?" Lexi asked.

"No," I huffed out with a humorless chuckle. "Have I mentioned how much I hate this plan?"

"Yes," Hudson said. "But it's the *only* plan." His eyes shot me meaningful darts, and I nodded.

The only plan. Right. Got it.

The half-finished building's parking garage was as dark as night. There were lights everywhere, but only a handful were on—probably so the place wasn't completely pitch-black for safety or whatever. Our footsteps sounded loud against the concrete now that we were out of the wind and snow. It was almost as though the storm had shut off the moment we stepped into the structure. I knew that wasn't the case, and the occasional, extra-forceful gust of wind howled through the beams above us to reiterate its existence.

*It's quiet. Too quiet.* I almost said it aloud—stupid humor was my go-to solution for nerves—but I pressed my mouth shut over the words. It was too quiet, and I didn't want to give away our position. The structure looked weird without any parking lines or driving arrows painted on the floor. It was like a blank slate—or an arena waiting for a battle.

We continued down. I didn't know how many levels the parking garage had, but I knew the revenant would be on the last one—well away from any hint of the sun. There was no real way for us to sneak down there. We'd have to keep our approach as silent as possible.

On the third level, Hudson froze. His eyes burned yellow, as did Evan's, and his claws and fangs were fully extended. "Set up here," he ordered Lexi. "Hellhound coming."

Shit.

Before we could say or do anything else, the hellhound charged us from the shadows. Hudson intercepted it with a roar. Evan darted in to help,



fangs and eyes flashing, and I hoped that this wouldn't set him back again. I spared a glance in Lexi's direction and she gave me a tight nod, her mouth forming the word *Go*.

I stepped into the otherplane, ready to manipulate whatever energy I could in my best poltergeist impression. Exploding lights were always a good distraction, but in this case, the handicap to our team would outweigh any benefit. I was limited in what I could do in a fight, though, since I didn't want to open any rifts here. We weren't sure what a revenant's capabilities were, but she'd called forth minions from beyond easily enough through the tear at Hudson's house. I didn't want to be the reason she increased her army.

There was a sharp crack and a brutal whine, and the hellhound dissolved. One down, who knew how many to go.

I rematerialized and reached out to Hudson. He had a scratch down the side of his face, but as I watched, it closed up. "You okay?"

"Fine." His voice was clipped, but I knew it had nothing to do with me or my question. Hudson hated killing things—even hellhounds, apparently. "She had two of those, right? So—"

A growl reverberated from the darkness. Then another.

And another.

"More than two," Evan said shakily.

So, uh, maybe she could make her own tears through the otherplane. Shit.

I melded back into the otherplane as more creatures emerged from the shadows. I couldn't see them clearly—the otherplane always obscured the forms of living creatures, even if they didn't belong to the living plane, apparently. I recognized the shape of three hellhounds, a dozen imps, and others that looked almost human, though smaller and bent, with spindly limbs. Hudson and Evan dove into the fray, their spiky and monstrous shadow forms representing their vampire selves.

I could hardly keep track of the number of beyond creatures we fought. I used my poltergeist powers to throw imps around as hard as I could. Evan and Hudson slashed and bit their way through the bigger monsters, but for every one they defeated, it seemed two more appeared.

One of the humanoid shadow forms jumped on Hudson and he went down. Panicked, I rejoined the living plane and grabbed the thing on top of him. I managed to pull it off—and almost recoiled in horror. It looked like a wizened old human, genderless, hairless, with filmy white eyes. Its

fingernails were similar to Silvia's—daggers rather than nails. Its mouth and nose formed a blunt snout filled with tiny, needle-like teeth. It was, frankly, terrifying.

I wrestled with it, trying to keep those teeth from my neck. Not a brawler at the best of times, my punches were not impressive or very effective—though it hadn't ripped my throat out yet, so I'd call that a win. Suddenly it was yanked off me, and big hands cupped its head. With a sharp snap, it went limp, and dissolved.

Hudson stood over me. He had more scratches on his face and his coat was all but shredded. Smears of blood were visible through the tears, even in the darkness. But he was upright and his glowing eyes were focused, so I trusted that he wasn't too badly hurt. He opened his mouth as an imp dashed between us. I grabbed it, shoved it to the ground, and, awkwardly standing, stepped on its neck. It too dissolved.

And there were still more creatures.

I swiped a hand over my forehead and looked over at the circle. Lexi and Rosanna were chanting competing things—the plan was for Rosanna to chant a protection spell while Lexi led the revenant-banishing spell with everyone else. So far so good. There were imps and a hellhound prowling around our witches and would-be witches, but they couldn't get close enough to touch them.

I sensed something big at my back and stepped into the otherplane as another hellhound lunged. And so I reentered the fight. I lost track of time and I stopped counting the creatures we banished—not like it mattered because there were always *more*. It was almost like a dance—dart into the otherplane, work some poltergeist energy, dart back into the living plane, lay the smackdown on something bite-size, repeat. In the living plane, sweat dripped into my eyes. In the otherplane, my concentration and hold wavered.

This wasn't sustainable.

“Mom! No!”

I jolted back into the otherplane in time to see Rosanna fall. The protection spell fizzled and failed—and Silvia stepped out between two columns to grab Darrell by the neck.

Oh god.

I knew without Lexi saying it that all the energy they'd built up to use in the spell against Silvia was gone. I felt it dissipate into nothingness. Lexi

was a badass, but she wasn't hardhearted, and there was no way she could maintain her concentration with her mother lying on the ground and her dad in the clutches of a creature who could snap his neck without much effort.

Silvia smiled, her cavernous mouth showing off her shark's teeth. Triumph glittered in her eyes, even as the rest of the beyond creatures paused, as though waiting for a celebration or a show of her strength and victory.

Without the spell, we were lost.

I looked at Hudson, about fifty feet away, and caught his gaze. He shook his head and mouthed *No*.

Or maybe he shouted it and I didn't hear it over the pounding of my heart.

"I love you," I said.

"Wesley, don't—"

I ignored him and reached into my magic. The knowledge of how to end this—end all of it—was right there, as I remembered it. It meant giving myself over to my abilities. My—my godhood. I could change reality and I would—for my friends, for my family. And yes, for the city I'd called home for eighty years. Because if Silvia walked out of this garage tonight, she would lay waste to Toronto and no one would be able to stop her.

My magic expanded beyond my body. My body became secondary, of no importance, inconsequential. I might have shed it, or it might have dissolved, or I might have changed forms somehow—I don't know. But it no longer constrained me.

The veil rippled around me, weakening, and I knew I had to be quick. Without my body, my metaphysical reach cascaded out across the city. I could sense the holes I'd left—big and little—and the creatures that had sneaked through. I could sense the tear Silvia had opened up deeper within the parking structure to pull in soldiers for her army.

When Michael had first mentioned this, I'd known it would come to pass. No matter how much I didn't want to leave, protecting my friends and family and city was worth any cost. I hoped Hudson forgave me someday.

With giant, invisible hands, I scooped up all the creatures of the beyond—including Silvia—and scrubbed all of us, and our footprints, from the living plane.

## *Chapter Twenty-Five*

I sat on the porch swing and pushed it idly to and fro as I watched the sun dip below the horizon. A lone tree, way out near the edges of our land, stood in stark silhouette against the wash of colors. Coyotes yipped off to the north and I tensed as I listened. No, they were too far away to be a threat. I let out a breath and relaxed.

It felt like it had been a long time since I'd sat here to watch the sun go down, but it couldn't have been that long, surely. The farmstead looked the same as always. The two-story house at my back was worn and weathered, thick strips of caulking between rough-hewn logs to keep out the harsh Alberta winter. The barn, a few hundred feet to the left, matched the house in looks and was at least double the house's width. The paddock stretching out from the barn was empty. The wind whistled around the house eaves, but other than that—and the occasional distant coyote howl—everything was quiet. Far quieter than it should be. There should be cattle lowing, chickens squawking, horses neighing, people talking. This was a working farm. Which meant I should be working too. But that didn't feel right.

I looked down at my hands and saw those belonging to a man, not a boy. They were as weathered as the farmstead buildings, not a boy's fresh, smooth skin. I brought one hand to touch my cheek and scratched my nails through the stubble I found there. Not a lot, but more than I'd had at sixteen.

Sixteen... I hadn't been here since I was sixteen.

This wasn't real.

I leaped to my feet. "Hudson!"

Even as the second syllable of his name left my lips, I knew it was useless. He was gone—or, more accurately, I was. I'd turned the otherplane inside out—in a sense—repairing all the holes as I pulled myself through the plane into the beyond.

Should I be surprised my beyond looked like the farmstead I'd lived on as a child? I had a lot of thoughts about this place, not all of them positive. In fact, most of them weren't. But, on second thought, the negative memories revolved mostly around my parents and their actions. They'd

kicked me off this property in 1926 and I'd never looked back. The little boy who'd played in these fields might have hoped he'd see his parents again, but the man who'd lived far longer than he ever should have understood that their abandonment was about them, not me.

As far as I was concerned, James and Ruth Cooper ceased to be my parents when they abandoned me to a giant, unforgiving world.

I sat back down and rocked more vehemently. The colorful sunset was serene and almost too perfect. I'd forgotten how big the sky could look on the prairies. Big enough to make me feel small and insignificant, which at various points in my life had been both reassuring and terrifying.

That insignificance made my stomach clench now. I'd done what I'd needed to do, and this was it. This was my "reward." No matter how much I didn't want it, no one would listen to my pleas and arguments and wishes. Why would they? I was a speck in the greater scheme of things. Unimportant.

They didn't care that my heart ached like it had been snapped in two.

I rubbed my sternum and tried to catch my breath as it hit me—hard—that I was really here. Hudson was out of my reach—at least according to Michael. Maybe Hudson was right and I shouldn't trust him. Hell, my own past told me I shouldn't trust him. But I kind of did.

Part of me wanted to use my magic again and burrow my way back out of the beyond—but that would mean reintroducing the problems I'd fixed. Stuff wasn't supposed to travel from the beyond into the living plane. Otherwise demons and shit would be roaming among humans constantly. Maybe I could attempt it, and maybe I could succeed—but what if I broke things again? I'd have to leave, and I didn't know if I could give up Hudson twice.

With a sigh, I pushed myself to my feet, unsurprised to see I was wearing a similar getup to what I'd worn on the farm as a kid—overalls, a rough cotton shirt, and work boots. There was a straw cowboy hat on the swing beside me, but I left it where it was. With the sun being almost down, I wouldn't need the protection. I made my way toward the empty paddock and the barn, and I realized the one thing I did miss from my childhood was my horse, Sparky. No sooner had the thought crossed my mind than I heard a whinny from inside the barn, and I quickened my steps.

Sure enough, there was Sparky in the second stall, his usual spot. The rest of the barn was empty, but I wondered if I seriously reminisced about

the cows I used to look after—

No, wait. “I don’t want cows,” I said to the roof. “But I could use a portal to the living plane that doesn’t mess with anything.”

Color me shocked when one didn’t appear.

Sparky was a warm brown quarter horse with a tiny puff of white between his eyes—his spark. I didn’t know if this was truly Sparky or a figment of my imagination, but I strode forward to greet him, anyway. He huffed and snorted the same as the real Sparky and lipped the sleeve of my shirt when I wasn’t immediately forthcoming with a carrot.

“You’re not a horse, you’re a pig,” I said, and I heard the echo of those words over the long decades. Leaning my forehead against my horse’s, I whispered, “God. Sparky.”

I patted him and reached into my pocket automatically, knowing there wouldn’t be anything there...except there was. I pulled out a carrot and held it up. That had not been there when I was sitting down—I’d have felt it.

Convenient.

“Here you go.” I fed the carrot to Sparky and he munched it enthusiastically.

I leaned on him for another few minutes, drawing in his warmth and life, and worked out what to do next. I supposed I could take Sparky for a ride, but it was almost dark, and seeing as he was as dead as I was (maybe?) he probably couldn’t break a leg in a gopher hole, but I didn’t want to chance it. I could explore the house and verify that my parents were not in residence. Or I could sit on the porch until the sun came up.

The afterlife was so exciting.

Exploring the house won out.

I was shocked to find the interior of the house was completely modern. Light switches like what I’d grown used to over the years, but nothing like my childhood. Tile flooring in the foyer and the kitchen. No icebox—no, these were stainless steel appliances from the twenty-first century. A coffeemaker that was the twin of the one in my apartment sat on the counter. I hadn’t realized how much I’d been dreading living in a house where I had to draw water from a well until I saw the modern kitchen sink, complete with hot and cold taps.

I pulled open the fridge and let out a sigh of thankfulness when I spotted beer in longneck bottles. Yes. That. I needed one of those. I decided

exploring the rest of the house could wait, grabbed a beer, and returned to the porch swing.

I had some thinking to do.

\* \* \*

By the time I made my way upstairs toward the bedroom, I wasn't any more clear on what I was going to do. Sitting around doing nothing sounded great for a vacation, not so much for the afterlife. Seriously, if that was what was expected of me, the beyond was going to have a very bored, very frustrated maybe-god on its hands. So either I had to find something to do—something that would give me comfort or some sort of fulfillment—or I had to find a way out of here. An escape route that didn't depend on my magic, because I refused to risk fucking everything up again.

I had a vague plan to saddle up Sparky when the sun rose to start exploring. Maybe I could find my way into another realm of the beyond. I didn't know if it would be better or worse than this one, but it was better than doing nothing.

I flipped on the light in the bedroom and jumped back with a scream while I flung the straw hat I'd retrieved from the porch swing at Michael's head. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

He caught the hat and set it aside. "Waiting for you."

"That's not creepy." I pushed the door wide instead of slamming it like I wanted to. No way was I closing myself in my bedroom with him. At least he wasn't glitchy anymore. "You couldn't come see me when I was sitting on the porch?"

Michael brushed his hands over the modern, luxe duvet covering the king-size bed. "So this is where you grew up?"

"Without all the twenty-first-century stuff, obviously, but yeah." I crossed my arms and leaned on the doorjamb. "Why are you here?"

"I need to tell you not to try to go back on your own."

I bristled. "I figured that out already, thanks."

"If you use your magic to tear through the veil, everything you fixed will be undone."

"I'm not an idiot." But that effectively killed the small hope I had that I'd guessed wrong. "Why the fuck would anyone *want* to be a god? If I can't even use this power—"

“It was different. A long time ago, I mean,” Michael said softly. “So many minor gods and they all had believers. There was no need for the gods to reach into the beyond for power—their worshippers supplied it.”

“What, like they were suctioning power off the people who followed them?”

“Not suctioning, no. It was freely given.”

Good to know, but completely useless. I mean, if the big-G God could barely inspire people to worship Him these days, what chance did I have? I wasn’t even a god of anything.

Michael looked at the bed coverings, tracing the vague pattern left by the stitching. “You and me...we’re completely done, aren’t we?”

The sudden change of topic—and the topic itself—made my breath hitch. “You shot me. You *killed me*, Michael.”

“You agreed.”

I *had* agreed. That didn’t make it okay.

“Do you know what it was like to find out that you’d killed yourself weeks later? Well after you were caught?”

“No. I—No.”

I wanted to punch a wall, but I held my clenched fists at my side. “Did you plan to kill me and walk away?”

He jerked his head up. “No. No. I meant—I intended—But you were lying on the floor, bleeding, dead, and I couldn’t move. Then people rushed in the door and—”

“You expect me to believe that?”

“It’s the truth! I swear to god, Wes.”

I stepped away from the door and gestured at it. “Out.”

“But—”

“No. Out. I don’t—” I swallowed hard. “I can’t talk to you right now.”

Michael got up from the bed and walked toward me. I kept my eyes on the floor, unwilling to witness whatever expression he had on his face. I wouldn’t feel guilty, damn it. Not for making him leave, not for accusing him of murder, not for *anything*.

He paused in front of me. “I’m sorry you thought—”

I couldn’t deal with this. Not now. Maybe not ever. “Get out of my fucking house!” The house shook—hell, it might have been my entire portion of the beyond that resonated with my shout.



He lifted his hands in surrender and disappeared. Why he got to do a vanishing act and I didn't, I had no idea. Right now, I couldn't bring myself to care. He was gone.

I let my knees crumple and take me to the floor.

\* \* \*

I dreamed of Hudson.

Not a sexy dream—which I was almost glad for. As much as I missed his touch and his kisses as we made love, I didn't think I could bear revisiting that while knowing I'd never have it again. No, in my dream, Hudson was pacing. His surroundings were vague shadows, and I couldn't make out any other people around him, but Hudson himself was clear as day. He looked tired, with dark circles under his eyes, and I wanted to smooth the skin with my thumbs to erase the signs of fatigue. His hair was mussed and looked greasy, as though he hadn't showered in a few days, and his stubble was thicker than I'd ever seen it.

He paused in wearing a rut in the floor and said something to someone. I couldn't hear his voice, but I could sense the force behind his words. He wasn't happy, if I hadn't guessed that already from his appearance. I wanted to cup his cheeks, tug until he looked down at me, and press a soft, reassuring, grounding kiss to his lips.

But I couldn't. Because I wasn't there.

I awoke with a gasp. My hands covered my face as I tried to rein in the emotions roiling through me—grief, sorrow, loss. I shook with the force of it all and a scream pushed at my lips. I restrained it, then realized it was pointless.

So I let it out.

The scream bounced off the walls and fed back to me all the pain and anguish in my heart. When I stopped, my throat raw, I didn't feel much better. Just empty.

I got up and dressed, not bothering with a shower, and since my stomach wasn't insisting I eat anything, I didn't hunt down breakfast. I popped the straw cowboy hat on my head as I exited the house and headed for the barn.

Saddling Sparky was easier than I thought it would be. My hands and body remembered everything I had to do, so I shut my brain off and carried out the tasks on autopilot. By the time I led him out of the barn and hoisted

myself up into the saddle, the sun had risen enough to cast long shadows across the yard. I reflected that it should be chilly, given that it seemed to be early summer—the nights still had the bite of winter at this time of year, as I recalled. But it wasn't. It wasn't hot and it wasn't cold. I was active and awake, but I wasn't hungry. Hell, I'd used the toilet this morning more out of habit than any real need.

Another reminder that this wasn't life.

Was it a reward, like I'd sarcastically said to myself yesterday? Or was it a punishment?

With a sigh, I nudged Sparky with my knees and we started our exploration. Like the farm and the barn, the land was the same as I remembered. It looked flat, but I knew that was an illusion—the prairie was actually rolling, with dips and gentle rises. There were no trees, and the air was scented with wild roses, an aroma I'd forgotten I missed. The sun rose slowly and steadily to bake the fields that had started to sprout growth. I expected to feel it burning my skin and making sweat bloom everywhere, but no matter how far it rose into the sky, I stayed pleasantly warm.

I didn't like it.

I reached the lone tree I'd noted last night at sundown. Its gnarled and twisted trunk was a silent homage to the tenacity required to grow in a place that looked gentle at the moment but could be harsh and unforgiving. On the other side of the slight rise was a tiny creek. Suddenly, I remembered being out here so damned clearly—I'd named the tree Sentinel, since it stood over the creek like a guardian. The flow of water was barely enough to cover my feet back then, and it looked to be about the same now.

I tethered Sparky to the tree, though I suspected there was nothing that could make him run off. I hadn't seen a single gopher, or hawk, or snake, or anything to prove there was life in this place beyond me and my horse. Or, well, "life."

If I was going to think deep thoughts, I probably should have stopped to make coffee.

I pulled off my boots and socks and wandered down the slope to the creek. The water should have bit into my skin with sharp, stinging cold, but all I felt was a cool, satiny touch. Refreshing, but not what I wanted. I wanted to feel, damn it. I wanted it to be *real*. With a sigh, I kicked at the water, then kicked again...and again. A shimmer over the water caught my eye, and I stopped. A heat illusion? Except it wasn't that hot. Tentatively, I

stuck out my hand toward where I'd seen the distortion—and met a nearly invisible barrier. The air seemed to grow thicker against my fingers, and I suddenly realized that despite seeing the plains stretch until the horizon, this was as far as my bubble of the beyond went. And the harder I shoved against the barrier, the more solid it felt.

So I punched it.

As I sat in the creek, holding my throbbing hand, I conceded it wasn't the best-thought-out plan, but my anger wouldn't let me sit still. I jumped to my feet and kicked water at the barrier, yelling. I grabbed handfuls of the stuff to fling at it. Then I moved on to scooping up rocks from the creek bed and threw those at the damned thing, as hard as I could. They connected and fell to the ground, all the energy contained.

“Fuck you!” I screamed at the sky. “Fuck *you*!”

I didn't believe in God. Christian, pagan, or otherwise—I had no desire or inclination to follow any sort of organized religion, because it was all bullshit. It was men making up stories to control other people, and I wanted no part of it. So I didn't believe that there was a greater power, a divine being, who controlled our lives. It made no sense that there would be, because how could a loving God allow the monstrosities he did? Like the murder of Amrita, a ten-year-old girl whose ghost I'd found months ago, still lingering at her burial site? How could he allow her killer to go undiscovered and unpunished? And that was only one example of the unfairness a truly caring divine would prevent. So therefore, one didn't exist.

But I had a hard time accepting that the universe would bring me and Hudson back together and allow us only a few short months with each other when I thought we'd have centuries. Millennia.

My rage exhausted, I staggered over to the bank and sat down heavily, my knees bent, and my arms draped over them. “Is this a lesson?” I asked the grass between my toes. “Is this what I get for assuming I had forever with him?” I ran a hand through my hair, knocking off the cowboy hat that had stayed put all the way through my tantrum. “It's not fair.”

That last bit came out petulant and whiny, but fuck it. That's how I felt. It had finally seemed I was *living* these past few months—and yeah, I'd made some poor decisions, decisions I regretted, but I'd generally been happier than ever before despite the annoyance of my magic. Hudson and I had been making it work, mostly. We'd been learning how to be a couple again.

We'd been building a foundation for our life—with a few cracks, maybe, but we were going to patch those together.

I lay down, reached over my head to grab my hat, and placed it over my face to block out the sun.

I slipped into the dream without knowing I'd fallen asleep. It was of Hudson again—because of course it was. This time, I could make out a little more of his surroundings. He sat at a two-person bar-height table, leaning forward to get close to the person on the other side of it. He looked better than he had in my last dream—his skin was still pallid but he'd shaved and styled his hair. My palm itched to rub his smooth cheek.

I caught a flash of red from the person across from him and realized it was Ren. His hair was as bright as ever. Like in the last dream, I couldn't hear anything, and the surroundings beyond the table were vague and undefined. But it was easy enough to see the woman who stepped up to their table—she was statuesque, blonde, with her hair caught up in a messy updo, and she wore a skirt and tank top tight enough to advertise her curves. She walked up to Hudson with a smile and tilted her head to the side. I could see the faint evidence of bite marks along her neck, and my gut clenched.

Feeding Hudson was *my* job.

Except it wasn't anymore, was it? Clearly I'd been gone longer than I thought, if Hudson was looking for a donor. And what about Evan? Was he surviving on animal blood or had he managed to get over his aversion to the human stuff? I watched disconsolately as the woman clasped Hudson's hand and led him toward the back of Ren's bar.

When I woke up, there were tears on my cheeks and Michael was sitting beside me.

"I'm sorry," he said as I sat up, ready to give him both barrels. I deflated slightly, and he took it as a sign to continue. "I'm sorry. I should never have made that decision for you. I should never have pulled the trigger. If you couldn't do it, you couldn't do it. I shouldn't have."

Amazing how you could go eighty years and not know how badly you needed something. Michael's apology filled cracks in my chest I hadn't even realized were there.

"I'm sorry I was too cowardly to face punishment for what I did," Michael went on. "I'm sorry I ruined all the wonderful memories we'd

made together. I wasn't strong enough to live without you, and I wasn't strong enough to live with you."

"I loved you." I didn't know what else to say—didn't know if that would help or hurt. "I honestly did. Or I thought I did," I corrected gently. "After meeting Hudson—"

"I understand." He brushed at his face, trying to clear away the evidence of his tears. "I think if what we had was—was real, or more real or—I don't know. I think maybe I would have been brave enough to carry through on our dreams."

"Or maybe not." I offered him a sad smile. "It was a different time. I don't know if *I* was brave enough. Maybe that's why your plan appealed."

"Forgive me, Wes. Please."

A shitty, vindictive part of me wanted to say no. He'd ended my life. Without his sister bringing me back, I'd be well into whatever afterlife had once awaited me. My existence had been irrevocably changed.

But because of him, I'd met Hudson. I'd seen so many amazing things—and not just magical ones. I'd seen the first man walk on the moon. Computers—first room-sized ones, then ones that could fit in your pocket. Self-driving cars. Things were changing, some for the better, some for the worse, and god—I was going to miss the chance to witness it all.

Michael should be experiencing that, not living in this purgatory with me.

"I forgive you."

He crumpled in on himself, crying again, and I scooted over to him to awkwardly hug his shaking shoulders. I didn't say anything for a long time, but simply let him cry it out. It struck me that he had been caught in the past as much as I had, needing absolution that he couldn't get until now.

When his sobs subsided, I asked, "Is reincarnation a thing?"

He looked up, blinking. His eyelashes were stuck together in clumps and his eyes were red-rimmed. "I—I don't know."

"I hope it is. You should be living in this age. There's so much more freedom and acceptance—and no, it's not perfect by any means, but men can marry men now, Michael. In Canada, at least. A few other places too. They can adopt children and be fathers. They don't have to live in the closet and they don't have to marry women they don't want to marry for the sake of image. I want you to experience that. I want you to *live* that."

"But what about you?"

"What about me?"

“You’d be here all alone.”

Oh yeah. That. I summoned up another smile from somewhere, an expression I didn’t feel. “Don’t worry about me. I can experiment with making this what I want it to be.”

“I don’t want you to be lonely.”

“I’ve got Sparky.”

“Wes—”

“I’ll be okay. I had my second chance. You deserve yours.”

Michael grabbed a spear of grass and twirled it in his fingers. “What if reincarnation isn’t a thing?”

“I get the sense that the beyond has room for all sorts of theologies.” Or else I’d be shoved in someone else’s idea of heaven. Or maybe this was my hell. Who knew? “So if you want reincarnation to be a thing, maybe it can be.”

“That easy, huh?”

“Probably not, but isn’t it worth a try?”

He huffed out a laugh and shook his head.

I grabbed his hand. “Live a good long life this time, okay? Find happiness.”

The smile he gave me was tremulous. “Thank you, Wes.”

And he was gone.

I let my hand fall back to my lap and stared at the space where Michael had been. I hoped he’d find a new life, a better life, for himself. One with fewer mistakes.

I pushed myself to my feet and brushed grass off my pants. Up by the tree, Sparky nickered. The sky overhead remained cloudless and birdless, but the soft, dancing breeze kept the tableau from feeling too stagnant.

A whisper drifted by on the edge of my hearing.

I spun around, but I saw only what had already been there—the brook, the tree and horse, the rolling prairie and new grasses. “Hello?” I called.

I waited, keeping my breath shallow so I wouldn’t miss a response, but none came.

Shaking my head, I started in Sparky’s direction, only to have the whisper halt my feet again. It teased my senses, but it wasn’t loud enough to differentiate words—if even it was words. Maybe I had dreamed up a bird with a weird call, what with my thinking about the lack of birds in the sky. That had to be it.

I was reaching for Sparky's reins when I heard another sound. Or...felt it. It was a rumble in my chest, a growl in the air. I looked around and it took me a minute to find what seemed to be the source—a disturbance in the middle of the creek where I'd fought with the barrier between my bubble of the beyond and the rest of it.

My heart leaped, full of hope. Had whoever—whatever—governed the beyond heard my cursing? Okay, that thought was a little scary, but maybe I'd be able to plead my case. I could be charming and convincing when I wanted to be.

Or—an even better thought—maybe Hudson had found a way to reach through and pull me out?

That idea had me running back down to the creek, my breath coming fast and hard as hoping and wishing made me light-headed. As I grew closer, the ripple in the air became more pronounced. Something was definitely trying to get through.

Over and above the rumble of the barrier shredding, the wind whispered, “Wes.”

“I'm here!” I shouted.

A little farther. Just a little more...

“Wesssss...”

The ripple was now definitely a tear. I could almost glimpse something trying to push through. Tears sprang to my eyes. Oh my god. Yes. Please. Come through.

A hand emerged.

A hand with stiletto claws.

Hope turned to dust and I staggered a step back.

“I found you,” Silvia purred as she forced her head through the barrier. She gnashed her teeth, then smiled, a huge, terrifying smile.

I tripped over something and fell, but I couldn't take my eyes off the horror emerging out of thin air. Her nonclothes flowed around her collarbone and lower, giving the impression of softness that was an utter lie. I'd defeated her. How was she here? I didn't want to be in the beyond, but I'd take my empty, lonely bubble over anything with a hungry revenant.

“Wessssleeyyyy...”

The whisper again—and it wasn't coming from Silvia. Another threat? Something else coming for a fight? Oh, god, what if it was Not-Julia the demon looking for revenge too?

“You are going to be delicious,” Silvia murmured. Her smile widened as I scrambled backward. “Yes, run. Chasing makes the meat all the sweeter.”

I glanced up at Sentinel and Sparky, who was dancing near the tree but not running yet. Could I reach him? Fuck, this was my beyond—could I wish her away?

Maybe—if I could get past the gibbering fear that had my brain tied in knots.

“Wesley Taggart Cooper.”

My full name tugged at me...somehow. I didn’t understand it, but I could feel it in my chest, in my heart. I gasped and pressed my hands against my sternum, but the tug didn’t hurt, exactly. It simply felt weird.

Not evil, though. Not threatening. Unless the beyond offered some sort of clairvoyance to its denizens, only three people knew my middle name. And they were all on the living plane.

“Wesley Taggart Cooper.”

Silvia’s left side was completely through the barrier now. She reached out a clawed hand and almost caught the hem of my pants. “I thought you were going to run, little one? Run. Please run.”

“Wesley.”

Yank.

“Taggart.”

Yank.

“Cooper.”

And suddenly I was whipping through nothingness, flying through space, Silvia’s infuriated scream of frustration chasing me—until gravity grabbed me again and I staggered.

The first thing I saw was the pentagram etched into the floor, surrounding me. I stood in the center—which made no sense. I blinked at it, not comprehending why it was there. Then, slowly, I looked up—and my breath caught.

Hudson.



## *Chapter Twenty-Six*

He stood on the other side of the pentagram, his hair disheveled and his stubble heavy, though not quite at the beard level. He wore one of his colored T-shirts, the ones that still threw me for a loop at their mere existence—but the turquoise shade of this one worked. There were dark circles under his eyes and his pants seemed to hang off his hips, as though he'd lost weight...and, taking him in from head to toe, I thought he had.

“Holy shit. It worked.”

Evan's voice shattered the stillness and I realized that Hudson and I weren't the only people in the room. Lexi was there too—without her sling—Evan, Iskander, Ben and Joelle, Rosanna and Darrell, and even Kee and Kat. And—holy shit—Ren?

“'Bout fucking time,” Lexi grumbled. “I have a headache.” Deliberately, she dragged the toe of her shoe over the edge of the pentagram—which had, apparently, been drawn in chalk—and jerked her head at Hudson. “Go on.”

I wasn't sure who moved first, but his arms were around me, holding me close, holding me so tight I could barely breathe, and I loved it. I needed it.

I thought I'd lost it forever.

“How—” I hiccupped, my words and breath fighting for space. “How—”

“Shh,” he soothed. “I've got you. You're here. Oh my god, you're here.” He pressed a kiss to my cheek, to my nose, to my forehead and temple, and then finally found my mouth, where he kissed me so thoroughly, I had no doubt he'd missed me just as much as I'd missed him.

“I love you,” I managed when we parted to take a breath. “I'm sorry, I—”

“You had to. I know. I know. But god, Wes—never again. Never, never again. Please, sweetheart.” His voice broke on the plea, and I pressed my face into his chest as sobs shook both of us.

“You saved me. You all saved me.”

I don't know how long passed before I felt a nudge and Hudson lifted his arm and I lifted mine to welcome Evan into our embrace. Then Lexi was there on our other side, then Iskander, and Rosanna. It was so wonderful, and so absurd, I started laughing through my tears.

“How?” I asked again.

“Hudson said Ren was the first person to mention you were a god, so Mom and I went to have a chat with him,” Lexi said softly. “He helped, Wes.”

“Summoning a god is a lot like summoning a demon,” Ren said from beyond our group hug. “You need their true name, a worthwhile sacrifice, and a whole lot of will. The biggest difference, beyond gods being much rarer than demons, is that you generally don’t have to worry about them wanting to possess you. Can I get in on this hug?”

“No,” Hudson growled.

Ren sighed, loudly, but his eyes twinkled. I didn’t think he was put out by Hudson’s denial.

“What did you sacrifice?” I asked Hudson.

“Not me.” He looked over at Rosanna.

She brushed a hand over my head. “It was worth it.”

My stomach sank. “Rosanna, what did you—”

Lexi gave her mom a sad, soft look. “She sacrificed her magic.”

“No,” I croaked.

“Yes,” Rosanna said firmly.

I shook my head. No—her family had given me so much, I couldn’t—

“Stop.” She cupped my cheek. “It was worth it. You bring so much joy to Lexi and Hudson—and Evan and Iskander and everyone who knows you. It was worth it, Wesley.”

“You don’t understand. April—I owed her, so much, and I never repaid her. Or Vera, or you or Lexi and now—now this? Rosie, I can’t—”

“Rosie.” She smiled. “I haven’t heard that out of you in ages.” She made a shushing noise as I choked on the words I wanted to say. “It was mine to give, and I gave it freely. I don’t regret it, not one bit.”

I shifted until I was standing beside Hudson, one of his large arms draped across my shoulder, as Rosanna moved over to Darrell’s side.

“You’re still magical to me, baby,” Darrell murmured.

She blushed as she looked up at him.

“Great!” Ren clapped his hands. “Now, Wesley—Hudson filled me in on what went wrong before. With your—” he waved a hand “—godhood.”

And suddenly what Michael had told me in the beyond came flooding back. “I was getting my magic from the beyond, which caused the tears, when I should have been using energy from my, uh, worshippers. Except I don’t have wor—”

Hudson cleared his throat.

I eyed him. "What?"

"You've got me," he said, squeezing me close.

"And me," Evan said.

Iskander raised a hand.

"I already believe in a multi-deity pantheon," Lexi said, grinning.

"What's one more?"

"Um, us too," Ben said. Joelle nodded.

I started to tremble. I couldn't help it. "What, are you all going to meet on Sundays at the Church of Holy Wes-What-the-Fuck?"

"See, that's the beauty of actually *knowing* a god," Ren said. "They don't have to believe you're the savior or will absolve all their sins or whatever the hell else the big religions want us to think. All they need is to believe in *you*."

"Which means what?"

"I believe in the heart you try so hard to hide from the world," Lexi said. "The heart that's so big and so caring, it scares you."

"I believe in your willingness to do anything for your family—none of whom are related to you by blood, but it doesn't matter, because you've adopted them as yours," Evan said.

"I believe in your ingenuity and cleverness," Iskander whispered. "Figuring out how to live and thrive."

"I believe in your goodness," Rosanna said. "My grandmother gave you an unexpected, odd gift that you never asked for—and even though her motivation was colored by selfishness, you never resented it and you never wasted it." Her eyes twinkled. "Much."

"I believe in your willingness to help," Kee said. "Thank you so much for everything you did, Wes. We've still got ghosts at Aurora House, but there's something different now—they don't feel as afraid and desperate as before."

"I'm glad," I managed.

Kat crossed her arms. "I didn't know this was going to devolve into a circle jerk but whatever. I believe in your desire to protect people."

Joelle said, "Ben and I—we believe in your ferocity when someone you love is threatened."

"Is it my turn?" Hudson whispered. I couldn't answer him, because all my concentration was going toward listening and not bawling my eyes out.

“I believe in your joyfulness and your optimism and your acceptance. Your willingness to give second chances—and third and fourth ones.” He kissed my temple. “I love you.”

“Well, I believe you’re a pain in the ass,” Ren said. “But obviously one who’s well loved, so I don’t think you’ll have any issues with your magic now that you know the right way to go about it. Just don’t expect the unlimited power you had before.”

“That’s fine,” I managed. “That’s perfect. I never wanted unlimited power.”

“How about unlimited love?” Hudson murmured.

I nodded shakily. “That, I’ll take.”

\* \* \*

I’d been gone for fifteen days. The streets and sidewalks were clear of snow—we were in the midst of a mid-February thaw, but that didn’t mean there wouldn’t be more snow on the way at some point. This was Canada, and winter storms in March weren’t unheard of. Hudson was still driving his rental since he hadn’t been able to focus enough to replace his beast of a muscle car, and all the streets we passed as he drove me from Lexi’s town house to my apartment looked the same and yet different. I found myself kind of missing the wide-open skies and prairie grasses stretching as far as the eye could see...but not enough to go back there.

Hudson pulled into a parking spot behind my building and turned off the car. “I, uh... I’ve been staying here.”

“Yeah? Iskander’s place wasn’t doing it for you anymore?”

He wrinkled his nose. “It never did, to be honest. I don’t mind being close to work, but I like to leave my work behind when I go home, you know?”

“Sure. It’s okay.”

“I didn’t think you would have a problem with it. It helped, staying somewhere that smelled like you.”

I gave him a sideways look. “In a good way, right?”

He chuckled. “Yes. A very good way.”

We walked up the stairs to my place and Hudson caught me up on inconsequential stuff—well, inconsequential compared to my stay in the beyond, but important to the business of Caballero Investigations.

“When you—when you...disappeared, everything went with you. Silvia, her hellhounds, everything. Except her brooch. It fell to the concrete.”

“Her anchor,” I said as we reached my floor.

“Exactly. I took it to Dennis and gave him all the history on Silvia we were able to dig up. Left out the part about her being a heart-eating undead monster, though.”

“Probably a good idea.”

“I encouraged him to melt down the brooch.”

“Also a good idea.”

I stepped into my apartment, expecting the same “familiar yet different” feeling I’d had driving through the streets. But my apartment looked the same as it always did—not super stylish, but mostly up to date and tidy. Probably even tidier than usual. I was tempted to head straight for the bedroom and reconnect with Hudson in the best way, but I had things I wanted to say first.

I waved at the couch. “Sit.”

Hudson raised a brow but did as I said. He leaned back, a bit insolently, but I wouldn’t have him any other way.

“Okay, first—I love you.”

“I know.”

“Thank you, Han Solo.” I smirked. “No, I mean, I really love you. You’re it, you always will be.”

Hudson held out his hand, and I couldn’t resist. I sat down on the coffee table, facing him, and entwined our fingers. “I know. Actually I—”

I pressed a finger to his lips. “I’m not done.”

He kissed my finger and grinned when I lifted it. “Go on.”

“I promise no more lies of omission. I’m going to be open and honest with you from now on.” I squinted at him. “And you’ve got to promise the same.”

“Open and honest. I’m one hundred percent on board with that.”

“Great.” I smiled, a huge, wide smile that probably gave me eye wrinkles to challenge Hudson’s. “I think we should move in together.”

He stared at me. I kept breathing, but it was a near thing as the silence grew. Extended.

Oh shit. Had he changed his mind?

“That’s my line,” he said finally.

“You said you weren’t gonna ask me again.”

"I did. But then I said I lied."

I rolled my eyes. "Whatever. I'm asking you now."

"That's not fair."

"Oh my god, Hudson!"

"You can't just swoop in and steal my thunder like that."

"Fine. I take it back."

He tugged on my hand and I jolted forward, off the coffee table, and climbed up on the couch to straddle his lap. "Oh no. You can't take it back."

I let out a low, mock growl. "Now you're just being difficult."

"It's what I excel at." He kissed my cheek and nuzzled my ear. "I'll move in with you under one condition."

"Uh-oh." I leaned back so I could see his face. "What?"

"We get a house."

"Are you kidding? Have you seen house prices lately?"

"Yeah. But if you sell your building..."

"What? I—No. I love this building."

"I know, but this apartment is tiny, sweetheart," Hudson said softly. "If you sell your building and I sell my now-empty lot, plus the money we've set aside, plus my insurance payout... I think we could get a really nice place. With enough room for our friends to visit and stay if they wanted."

Because they weren't friends, not really—they were family. Hudson's band. And clearly he wanted them close by, as often as they could be.

"Let me think about it." But I was pretty sure it wouldn't take much thinking, or much arguing, for that matter, to get me to sway toward Hudson's idea.

"Okay, good. Also..." He took a breath. "I think we're mates."

"We're—" I blinked. "What?"

"Mates."

"I don't—"

"Bonded pair. My soul recognizes yours? You had to have felt it."

Had I? I thought always knowing where he was was due to my god magic—but that sense had been significantly stronger with Hudson than anyone else. And a few times it had seemed I'd felt what he was feeling.

"When you were gone..." His voice cracked. "It hurt. I *ached*. I'd suspected before—remember when I took you to see the light festival? I was going to talk to you about it then. But after you went into the beyond, I knew for sure. It's..." He nudged my head until my forehead met his. "I

loved you before. But this is something beyond love. It's deeper." He chuckled breathlessly. "Profound."

"I still don't understand. How does this even happen?"

"Magic?"

After all the fighting I'd done this past year with my magic, I wasn't sure if I liked that answer or not. But...it would be nice if magic brought something wholly positive to my life for once.

"Ren said it's the same sort of bond that happens between any two people in love—but with vampires, it's more tangible. It solidifies into something unbreakable."

"Unbreakable, huh?" I swallowed. "So...you're never walking away again."

"Never. You're my mate. My love." He pressed a hard, fast kiss to my lips, a fierce promise. "Come to bed and I'll show you what I mean."

He didn't have to ask me twice.

\* \* \* \* \*

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## Chapter One

You'd think I'd recognize murder when I saw it, but I didn't always put two and two together quickly enough.

Like that job to retrieve an ill-conceived contract from a downtown Toronto office building. After hours, no one around, and I heard a woman's passionate cry of "Do me harder, cowboy!" It wasn't until *after* I stuck my ghostly head through the office door that I clued in what it meant: my target and his secretary getting their freak on. Twenty years later and I still couldn't scrub their pony play from my brain.

Or when, on a bright afternoon in 1933, I'd blithely accepted my lover's invitation for a daylight meeting—something he'd never asked for before. My only thought was that I'd get extra, unexpected time with Michael.

In hindsight, I should have expected the gun.

Murder was the last thing I thought I'd witness in the home of Meredith Montague, an actor and one of Toronto's elite. The entire Forest Hill mansion dripped elegance, with pale neutral colors accented with white furniture and tons of natural light from giant windows.

The study in particular was a beautiful, serene space...except for the figures on the floor.

I remained frozen behind Meredith's rolltop desk, despite the fact that neither figure would see me. I was invisible, incorporeal, one step removed from the living world, as insubstantial as a ghost. Hell, I *was* a ghost—just one who had a living body most of the time.

The bigger figure was on top of the smaller one—and, well, the first place my brain went was sex. Duh. Except...the language of loving wasn't there. Their bodies didn't undulate. They didn't flow. There was no familiar rhythm, no distinctive butt-thrusts, no grunts of exertion, nothing. Only a man on top of a woman, though I couldn't be sure. When I was in my ghost form on the otherplane, living beings seemed shrouded in cotton and fuzz, indistinct and detailless. But I could tell he was straddling her, his hands on either side of her head, his arms braced...

Wait—his hands weren't on either side of her head. They were around her *neck*.

I never proclaimed myself to be a hero or even a good guy. For fuck's sake, I sneaked into people's private spaces as a ghost to "recover" items for interested parties—heirlooms my clients wanted back, contracts they shouldn't have signed, or, occasionally, information they could use for leverage. I wasn't ashamed of it. My abilities were a tool, and anyone else would use them the same way. On top of that, I found that most of my targets had done something not-so-nice to put them on the radar of the folks who knew how to acquire my services.

All that aside, deep down I'd thought that if I was ever faced with a life-or-death situation, I'd find some tiny thread of heroism rooted somewhere inside my psyche and *act*.

But fear—shock—rooted me to the spot. Logic said nothing could hurt me. They couldn't see me, couldn't feel me—other than a cold breeze if I got too close—and they damn sure couldn't touch me. But I *remembered* dying. I remembered the disbelief, the fear and the pain before the shock of *nothing*.

*That's what she's feeling.* That thought broke the bonds holding me, and I lurched upward with a vague notion I'd grab something, anything, to use as a weapon—

Except it was too late. The woman's legs kicked once more and she went limp. I held my breath, waiting for her to move again, but the life faded from her, peeling away the obscuring layers of the otherplane to reveal her features as she became as dead and inanimate as the furniture surrounding us.

Long golden hair. Iconic red cat-eye glasses sitting askew over dull, lifeless blue eyes. A fifties-style white blouse with tiny red polka dots and red stitching, one button popped at her neck.

My target—Meredith Montague.

I'd never been around someone at the moment of their death, so I had no idea if her spirit would join me on the otherplane. I didn't know if I wanted that or not, to be honest. There should be something more than her body on the ground, as inert as the chair beside her, but what would I say? I didn't want to be the one to explain to her that her life was over. But there was no mystical light and no indication that Meredith's soul would come shake my hand on its way to her final destination.

The man sat back on his heels, his hands resting on his thighs, as he looked at the body on the floor. Then he got up. I watched him warily,

shrinking back as he got close. His shape was...weird. On the otherplane, most people's figures were muted and obscured, as though they were wrapped in layers and layers of translucent gauze.

But this man...his figure was the dark, slate gray of an impending storm. It had jagged edges, as though a thousand razors extended from his clothes and skin. An aura of danger surrounded him—not an actual, visual aura, since even in the otherplane I had no ability to see that kind of thing. It was more of a sense. A warning that this was someone I did *not* want to mess with, a warning that went beyond what I'd witnessed.

He gave no indication he saw me as he made his way to the side bar, looked out over the grounds lit in the late afternoon sunshine for a moment, and then poured himself a drink.

With a dead body on the floor behind him, he *poured himself a drink*.

In some ways, the casualness was more horrifying than the murder. I mean, I could be callous and self-centered, but not on the level of ignoring a dead body in the room. But the murderer—the monster—sipped his drink slowly. As though he had the right to be there.

I shook with the need to leave, to go, to pretend the past hour hadn't happened. Rising from where I was hunched behind the desk, I started for the wall with the big window overlooking the gardens—only to freeze as I realized the murderer's eyes were locked on me.

They were blacker than black, fathomless pits that would have probably looked like normal, everyday human eyes were I not in the otherplane. But they sent a chill racing through me—fear, horror, *wrongness*. I begged my feet to move, and this time, they did. I raced through the wall, out of the house, and away, welcoming the numbness that spread through my brain and body.

I managed to make it a block away before I threw up.

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# *Acknowledgments*

Writing is a solitary endeavor, except when it's not. The support of a community of writers and readers is essential to keeping this writer sane!

Thank you to my beta readers, j. leigh bailey and Hannah Varacalli, for providing fantastic and much-needed feedback. And j., your regular sprint nights were invaluable.

Thank you to Annie B. for being a huge cheerleader even when she hadn't yet read the first book in the series! Your enthusiasm never fails to make me smile.

Thank you (always!) to Kelly Jensen, who provides whatever encouragement and support I need.

Deb Nemeth, your edits regularly challenge me, and I know I'm a better writer because of it. Thank you!

To the Carina Press team, thank you for your quick responses to my burning question of the day (whatever it happens to be!) and your unwavering support.

And, per usual, my family gets mentioned last...because they are the best thing in my life. Thank you for understanding when deadlines force me to disappear into my office. I'm able to live my dream because of you. Love you all.

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Jenn Burke has loved out-of-this-world romance since she first read about heroes and heroines kicking butt and falling in love as a preteen. Now that she's an author, she couldn't be happier to bring adventure, romance, and sexy times to her readers.

She's been called a pocket-sized and puntastic Canadian on social media, and she'll happily own that label. Jenn lives just outside of Ottawa, Ontario, with her husband and two kids, plus two dogs named after video game characters...because her geekiness knows no bounds.

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ISBN-13: 9781488036262

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