

THE FORTY PROOF SERIES

Midlife² Ghost Hunter



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SHANNON
MAYEYER

MIDLIFE GHOST HUNTER

THE FORTY PROOF SERIES, BOOK 4

SHANNON MAYER



Midlife Ghost Hunter
The Forty Proof Series, Book 4
Shannon Mayer

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Mayer, Shannon
Midlife Ghost Hunter, The Forty Proof Series, Book 4

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I started running back in June and I hated it. Still hate it now, but let me tell you, that time running was where this story came to life. Running was where I once more felt the aches and pains of pushing a forty-year-old body to work hard when it hadn't for longer than I care to admit. I was reminded that Breena is the epitome of so many of us, that she carries with her OUR hopes and dreams for living well even though we are past our 'best before' dates. She reminds us that it's never too late to go again for the goal posts with everything we have.

That we are of worth.

That we are stronger than we realize.

I don't know about you, but I think this world needs more strong women. Women with heart and fire, with passion and voices. Women who carry not only ourselves but others through the storms this world throws at us.

Breena is one of those women.

And I think maybe you are too.

So own that strength, be the fire this world needs, and never shirk from your own flames because they are what will light up the darkness in the most epic of fashions.

What happens when you put a middle-aged woman wearing leather pants, a blood-stained tank top, ass-kicker boots, and three days of stink, into a communal jail cell with half a dozen other women? Well, let me tell you, nothing good can come of it. Especially for the one in the leather pants who smells like she doesn't know how to shower.

I turned my head, leaning my face against my upper arm, took an exploratory whiff of my own B.O. and made a face. What I wouldn't give for a shower. I mean, assuming I was getting out of jail soon. The bench I sat on was cold, hard, and not exactly what I would call comfy. Again, I was hoping it wouldn't matter soon.

I should have had my phone call already.

Should have heard something from my friends.

Should have been formally charged.

None of that had happened.

"Hey, you got anything on you? I'm jonesing hard." A hand pawed at my calf, and I shifted my foot so I could stare down at the woman with dark brown hair gazing up at me, somewhat vacantly, beads of sweat along her upper lip, which only highlighted that she needed a mirror and some tweezers. Desperately. Looking at her made me touch my own chin for the wayward hair that always managed to pop out without me noticing, going from nothing to four inches long overnight.

Easier to think about chin hairs than why and how I'd been stuck in this cell for more hours than I wanted to count.

"You probably don't want to lie on the floor," I pointed out as I adjusted my seat and slid down the bench out of reach. "Lawdy gawd only knows what's down there with you."

"Poop. Smearred around on the floor, like a skating rink," another woman muttered from across the twenty-by-twenty space, bars on one side and concrete on the others. The cell had three uncomfortable metal benches screwed to the floor, one on each wall and one in the middle, which was currently un-occupied.

The speaker had her head leaned back against the wall, eyes closed. Long fake eyelashes brushed her sallow cheeks. She looked younger than me, but honestly, it was hard to tell because she was rail thin. So thin, her name-brand clothes hung off her as if she'd played dress up in her mother's clothing.

My mind caught back up to what she'd said.

"You saying there is . . . *.poo* on the floor?" I looked at the space between my feet and indeed there did seem to be some off-color smudges ground into the cracks that didn't jive with what I would call a normal level of dirt.

"More than a bit," the woman in the designer clothes said. "They took the pooper out just before you came in. She'd had some fun in it. Someone came in to clean it, but they did a minimal job. Smells better now."

Gagging, I stumbled onto my feet as I hopped and danced to try to keep away from the smudges. Like some sort of nightmare version of Twister. The others started laughing at me, but I didn't stop until I was standing in the middle of the room. How the hell could I not have smelled shit that close to me? Was my sense of smell going? I'd heard that was a thing when women hit menopause.

I paused for a moment next to the middle bench—should I sit and swing my legs over?—when a hand slapped my ass hard enough to make me yelp and hop right over the hurdle.

"You go in the clink dressed like that, you'll be a favorite with those leathers on."

I spun to see the oldest of the prisoners hobble away from me, giggling to herself as she swayed her head from side to side,

reminiscent of my skeleton friend Robert. Her hair was brilliantly white and fluffy, like she'd back combed it repeatedly to give herself more height than her maybe four-foot-eleven frame. Then put twigs in it for good measure and a few more inches.

"I'm not going into the clink. I'll be out of here in no time," I said.

The old woman giggled. "Oh, that's what you think!"

I drew a ragged breath through my nose and stayed where I was, afraid to sit, afraid to move for fear of what I might step in.

Literally and figuratively.

But let me backtrack for those who are just now coming into my story. A mere twelve hours before this low moment of getting my ass slapped by an old lady while dancing around poo smears, I had been arrested for the murder of my ex-husband, Alan.

Now, to be fair, I had on more than one occasion thought about killing him, but no more so than any other woman with a douche canoe manipulating liar of an ex. However, I can firmly say I didn't so much as put a bruise on him. Not that the police here in Savannah had believed me. Nope, they'd tossed on the cuffs and dragged me here to my own personal hell.

To add insult to injury, the police have taken my magical leather hip bag, which meant they are now in possession of my gran's old spell book, the finger bone I use to summon Robert (shoot, that might not help me in the "I'd never hurt anyone" category if they ask me who it belongs to), and the book of black magic curses I'd picked up in my travels. They also have the two knives Crash made for me what felt like a lifetime ago. I wonder if the officers would be able to find them in the bag.

I hope not. I hope that my bigger-than-it-looked bag hides my goodies from the police.

The one thing they haven't been able to take from me was the one thing I wished to heaven they'd been able to. Of course, he was the reason I was currently stuck in this poop-covered cell.

Alan, aka Himself, aka the ex.

"Seriously, Bree?" Alan stood on the other side of the bars from me. My ex-husband, dead as a doornail, had come back as a ghost to haunt me. The jerk. "What did you expect, hanging around with that freak show crowd? Acting like you're some sort of super sleuth,

when we both know you were always terrible at guessing how a book or movie ended. The worst.”

He still wore his paddy hat, and he lifted it to rub his mostly bald head. “I mean, even I know you didn’t kill me, but let’s be honest, any of those freaks you’re with could be the culprit—it’s not like I remember how I died. Maybe that troll you were making out with did it because he didn’t like the idea of me as your ex-husband.”

I stared at Alan. The troll he was referring to was Crash. Crash was fae, and he had a glamor that kept humans from seeing his true appearance, which was why Alan had seen him as an ugly lump instead of the stunning piece of man—fae—meat that he was. Then again, maybe I was the one who’d gotten it wrong. Because it turned out Crash wasn’t such a stand-up guy. I’d helped him face down the goblin king, and he’d left me high and dry afterward.

I leaned my forehead against the bars and whispered to Alan. “You realize that if I get stuck here, you get stuck here, seeing as you’re attached to me whether either of us likes it or not? Why don’t you see what you can find out in the other rooms? Try to figure out why they think I did it. Maybe it’s just a mistake.”

And maybe I was the queen of England, but I was hoping this could be dealt with before I had to use the toilet in the corner of the room in full view of everyone.

Alan frowned, which wrinkled a great deal of his forehead with that receding hairline of his. He tapped a finger to the hollow of his throat and then turned as he spoke. “I have to admit, I’d like to know what they have on you. I’ll see what I can find.”

His footsteps didn’t make a sound as he walked off. When he disappeared from view, I turned and found myself face to face with the woman who had the expensive clothes hanging off her frame. Her dark brown eyes were dilated as she stared into my face. “You crazy? Talking to yourself or your demons? Or still coming off a high?”

“Not crazy, not high, more like I was talking to a demon.” I tried to slide sideways, but she snaked a hand around the bar to my left, and when I shifted to the right, she grabbed a bar on the other side. Well then, apparently, we were going to have a talk. I grimaced and looked at her. “Look, I didn’t kill anyone, certainly not my ex-

husband. I'm going to be out of here in no time, so no need to make friends."

I ducked under her arm, and she didn't try to stop me.

"They think you killed your ex?" the woman from the floor said. "I would like to kill my ex. He was a tool."

I blinked and looked away. "Maybe that's not something you should say when you're in jail and there are most likely cameras on us recording everything we say. Right?"

She shrugged. "I'm a druggie. They don't believe us when we tell them the truth. And if we get hurt? We just got what was coming to us for being like this." She waved a hand over her body. My eyes tracked the movement and found a path of bruises across her pale skin. Some were shaped like fingers and hands from where she'd been grabbed and squeezed.

A sharp pain spiked through my heart and my throat tightened. I was not the only one in trouble here. "I'm sorry they don't believe you. I'm sorry they think you deserve to be hurt. You don't."

She rolled onto her belly and put her chin on her hands, for all the world like we were having a sleepover and were about to play a game of Truth or Dare. "Did you kill him?"

I cleared my throat and shook my head. "No, I did not."

A sigh from the other side of the room. "I hit my ex in the head with a frying pan. It made a rather satisfying thud, both when I hit him and when he hit the floor. A double whammy, if you will."

I turned to see the fluffy-haired old granny smiling at us, showing a perfect set of teeth that caught me off guard. I'd have guessed she was missing at least one tooth if you'd asked me to make a bet on it. She crinkled up her face and went on. "A drunk he was. And liked to use his fists on me. I beat him within an inch of his life with a frying pan. Course, the judge said I was in the wrong. My lawyer told them I was crazy. I got no time, but I was sent out into the world with nothing after the lawyer took his fees. Don't matter, though, 'cause ain't nobody going to tell me now what to do."

Fancy Pants snorted lightly and rubbed at her nose. "Except here you are, locked up like the rest of us. And like they say in that movie about the guy and his friend in jail with the tree at the end, everybody in here is innocent. Course, you didn't kill your husband. Just like I

didn't crash my car while driving drunk—" she pointed at the woman on the floor, "—and she didn't break into a house to use the facilities while still higher than a kite from using drugs on the street corner after prostituting herself. All of us is clean, baby. All of us don't deserve this place."

I frowned. "*Shawshank Redemption* is the movie."

"That's all you got to say?" Fancy Pants shook her head. "They say you killed your ex-husband, and you think you're getting out?" She broke into a fit of giggles that was picked up by the woman on the floor, who laughed until she was shrieking. The sounds faded when the intercom crackled to life.

"Shut your filthy mouths!"

Fancy Pants slapped a hand over her mouth, and the sounds of laughter faded quickly.

She stumbled toward me, pointing a shaking finger at me until she pressed it against the middle of my chest, her whole hand trembling with the DTs. "That's not how it works, not for you, not for me, or any of us in here. You got a lawyer or something? No money, I'd bet, because money is what makes this place tick-tock-tick-tock." She wagged her finger back and forth for good measure.

I tried not to breathe deeply with her in my face. I might stink, but so did she. Like a sour drunk. "No, but I have friends. I'm sure they are trying to figure out what's going on." I took a step back to put distance between us. The smell of alcohol was still strong on her breath and it curdled my own stomach, which was already twisted in knots.

I was holding it together on the outside—staying calm, not freaking out—but I was slowly losing my mind. I'd been in here for twelve hours with only these women as company, and I wouldn't much call them company, and my own thoughts. Not even Officer Burke had come by. She was my one connection in the police force, and I'd thought she would have my back . . . or that she'd at least tell me what the hell was going on.

Before my arrest, I'd learned that my gran, my parents, and Alan had all been killed in the same gruesome way. Their necks torn open as if by an animal, their bodies left to bleed out and die. And they'd all been killed in New Orleans, a point not lost on me. Gran's spirit

had been taken by someone, and I figured my best shot of finding her was to figure out who'd killed those closest to me, and *why*. That had been the plan before I got stuck in here.

The police had other plans.

At first, I'd thought I'd be out in no time. I knew they had no proof, because of course, I hadn't killed Alan.

But nothing had been done in the right order.

I went back through the list of all the things that should have happened since I'd been stuffed in here and hadn't.

No phone call.

No visitors.

No formal charges.

It was almost as if I were being railroaded.

No, not almost, I *was* being railroaded. I could feel it as surely if I were tied to the tracks and could hear the blasting horn of the oncoming train.

I'd helped plenty of people out of jams. Where the hell was my hero? Yeah, don't answer that. I had to get myself out of this mess.

A semi-transparent figure strode through the closed door down the hall. I made myself walk slowly to the bars to meet Alan. He shook his head and rubbed the back of his neck. Definitely not the hero I wanted or needed, but in that moment, he was all I had.

"It's not good, Bree. I'm not your lawyer, obviously, but . . ." He frowned, pulled his cap off and rubbed his balding head before he put the hat back on. "The thing is I can see what kind of case they are building in there. They are . . ."

"They're trying to lock me up for a long time?" I asked quietly, not really caring if the other women heard me. I mean, they were all half loopy, anyway, and the woman on the floor had gotten one thing right: no one would believe their stories.

Alan scrunched his eyes shut, and my heart sank. How could it be worse than years in lock up? Gawd, Gran would kill me when I got out. I mean, assuming she didn't fade away. My heart clenched at the thought of losing her completely. "Alan. Tell me. I need to know what I'm up against so I can be ready to fight."

He wouldn't look at me, and for all that our marriage together had been a pile of shit sitting on a bunch of garbage, I knew him. And he

was worried. Upset. Trying not to freak out.

“Bree . . . they’re pushing for capital punishment.”

Because I was so stressed, I didn’t fully understand what he was saying, not really, I blurted out, “They want to give me lashes? Like a spanking?”

A burst of tittering giggles erupted behind me, and one of the ladies mumbled, “I’d take a spanking from that silver fox I saw earlier. Yummy. He can spank me anytime.”

Alan let out a growl and tried to grab the bars, but he tumbled straight through them and into me, which was strange because he was dead and yet I could still feel him. Almost solid, almost not. Like weirdly cold pudding

Alan was pudding. I focused on that thought because it was easier than what was blooming inside my brain.

His hands clenched into fists and he held them near his face. “Bree, *listen to me*. They are trying to have you executed for my murder, which even I can see from the evidence room you did not commit. Someone wants you dead, Bree. They are doing everything they can to make it happen, and the police are helping them. All posthaste.”

“Oh.” My legs gave out and I slid to my knees, my hands on the bars the only things holding me up. Alan was still talking but I couldn’t hear him through the roaring white noise between my ears. The police were trying to have me executed for a murder I had nothing to do with.

Why?

I’d done nothing to attract the attention of the human police. If it had been the shadow world’s police force, I would have said sure, they might have reason to get rid of me. But not the regular police.

“There would still be a trial,” I mumbled, my mouth more than a little numb as I struggled to process what Alan was saying.

He kept talking, his words beating back the buzzing in my head, but not much. Planted evidence. Pay offs. Rush trial. Ridiculous bail. No way out.

I pressed my head against the cool bars and fought the despair that wanted to drown me, the undertow of giving up wrapping around my legs and tugging hard. A deep breath, then another and another,

until the rest of the white noise slid away and I could look up without my vision sparkling and going black at the edges.

“Then I’m going to need a lawyer. One that isn’t dead,” I managed to say. “They have to give me that much.”

Like I’d wished on a star and the universe was providing instant fulfillment, a police officer stepped into the anteroom of the cells, clipboard in hand. Irritation flickered over his face, and a dusting of white powder on the corner of his mouth told me that I’d interrupted his coffee break and donuts. “O’Rylee, Breena. You have a visitor. Says he’s your lawyer?”

I pulled myself to my feet until I was standing once more, if not steady, at least upright. I had called no one, so Corb and the others must have pulled this gem out of the bag for me. A lawyer was good, and whoever it was would be able to slow down this train. Maybe they could get a stay of execution. Literally.

That’s what I thought, anyway, until *he* stepped into the room.

My eyes locked on him, and I was sure I was seeing things.

“Ohhh, the silver fox,” the old woman with the fluffy white hair said. “I was hoping he’d come my way.” She tittered and I stared at the man I’d thought had left me high and dry. The guy who could have been my rock to cling to in stormy seas. And instead . . .well, he’d become a rock I stubbed my toe on.

Crash stood in the doorway dressed in dark jeans, a button-down white shirt, and a black tie, and damn him, if he didn’t look just as good as when he was wrapped in nothing but a towel. No, that wasn’t true, I liked the towel look a lot. Even if I was pissed with him, the fluffy-haired old gal was right.

Crash was downright delicious, no matter how you sliced it.

Blue eyes flecked with gold stared back at me, and he lifted one eyebrow. “How am I not surprised to find you in hot water just hours after you were in the frying pan?”

The police officer came toward the cell with handcuffs hanging from the finger of one hand and the key held in the other, his knuckles white. He jammed the key in and cranked it hard enough that I thought for a second he might break it, and my next thought was that it would really suck to be stuck in here with the women I'd met and the smear of poo everywhere. I felt bad for them, but I didn't want to stay with them.

As soon as the door was open, he tossed the handcuffs to me, aiming them straight down so I didn't have a hope of catching them. They clattered across the floor to rest at my feet against the toe of my boots. Someone had definitely pissed in his cereal that morning.

"Put them on," he snapped.

"That's rather unprofessional," I said as I bent and picked up the cuffs, carefully putting them on one at a time, not tightening them too much. I knew better than to argue, seeing as the officer was obviously spoiling for a fight. This was not the time for me to put up a big stink. Maybe Crash would have a way out of here for me, a magic spell, or a legal loophole that I didn't know about. I was afraid to hope, but it had to be a good sign that he was here.

Or maybe he'd just showed up to apologize for the way he'd left things after I helped him kill Derek, the goblin king. Or for kicking me out of my gran's house with nothing but a note.

A note. Like he was a teenager who'd rather send a breakup text than look me in the eye when he said goodbye.

A lot of maybes in the pot and not much to take away from them. The police officer led me out with his hand tight on my right elbow, squeezing hard enough to make me wince. He took me out of the cell block, past Crash, and down a short hall to a small room with no window. A simple folding table and two chairs sat in the middle, leaving little space for anything else. I sat in the chair, the cop left, and a moment later, Crash stepped into the room and shut the door behind him with a soft click.

The smell of clean, freshly showered man flowed from him, a hint of coal fires, and some sort of aftershave that mingled through the air and made me want things I really shouldn't have. Damn my hormones for not getting with the program.

"They don't have any cameras or listening devices in this room." Crash pulled the chair out across from me and sat, resting his hands on the table, fingers linked loosely. His eyes swept over me, as if looking for something. Maybe bruises? Wounds? Evidence that I really had killed Alan?

"No? Are you sure about that? If you'd asked me yesterday, I would've said the police would have no reason to arrest me, and yet, here I am. Apparently about to be strung up for a murder I didn't commit." I leaned back in my chair and crossed my legs at the ankles. I was not in the least relaxed, but I was not going to give him the . . .well, satisfaction wasn't the right word. He looked tired, and why not? We'd been up into the wee hours the previous night—no, not having that kind of fun—fighting for our lives against a goblin and his accomplice, who worked for the council of Savannah.

We'd survived, but even just sitting here I could feel the bruises and muscle tension slipping over me.

He frowned. "How did you know?"

Alan, who'd, of course, followed me, muttered to himself as he paced the tiny room, and I realized that as much as we hated each other, he was trying to figure out a way for me to not be executed. Focused on his own thoughts, he didn't make a single noise about Crash.

I blew out a breath and waved my cuffed hands in his general direction. "Alan. He did a quick recon mission and told me. He

doesn't like me, but I'd bet he's worried we'll be stuck together for eternity if I die like this."

Crash gave a slow nod. "Alan, were you able to see what exactly they have on her?"

Now Crash couldn't actually see Alan, not the way I could. I suspected he could catch a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye, or a shadow of sorts where my ex-husband was pacing, whereas I could see him as if he were still alive.

Alan paused. "They have my blood in a bottle, and they are currently putting it on the knives they took from her. They are also planting the blood on her hip bag and that jacket she has. They aren't even making the splatter pattern correct, which tells me that they are truly just going to sink her hard. But why? Who's after her? Was I killed just to frame her?"

I shook my head and then realized that Crash hadn't heard any of that. I passed it on, and Crash stood and left the room without a word.

I could almost feel my life ticking away as the seconds slid by. Gawd in heaven, what a mess. I rubbed my hands over my face, the cuffs clinking. If I was killed, would my spirit be with Gran? No, I couldn't think about that right now.

I focused on the moment. "Alan, I know you had dealings in the shadow world. Was it just with Davin, or did you have dealings with, like, the mob or something? Someone who might want to get whatever money you have left?" I asked. Maybe there had been someone he'd pissed off. Not impossible considering his attitude.

He didn't slow his pacing. "Yes, just with him, but he had connections that went far higher up and I . . .well, I wanted those connections. I thought it could help me with my firm, get me better paying cases and maybe my own company." He grimaced and waved a hand at his ghostly body. "Look where it got me."

I closed my eyes, thinking through the possibilities. "No loopholes to get me out on good behavior?"

"You?" Alan snorted. "Please, we both know good behavior is not your forte . . . and it wouldn't matter if it were. Bree, no lawyer will be able to get you out of this." I opened my eyes as he crouched by the table, and for a moment, I saw a glimmer of the man I'd fallen in love

with all those years ago. Smart, confident, and a little bit worried about me. “They will rig the jury. They will bury all the evidence once it’s done and scrub you from the files. It happens more often than people realize.”

Horror made my throat tighten, but I spoke through it. “How can you know all that?”

“Because they were talking about it in the evidence room,” he said. “Whoever has it in for you is deadly serious about getting rid of you, and they’ve paid the police department here very well to make it happen.” Emotion crossed his face. “This is not how the justice system should work! You should get your fair trial, at the very least.”

I realized he was more worried about the system being broken than my life, but I didn’t have enough energy to care.

The door opened once more and Crash came in and went to his chair and stood behind it, an air of defeat on him. “I can bail you out, but you’ll have to stay with me, and it will be house arrest. You won’t be able to leave at all.” He said it as if it was terrible news, and for him, I guess it was. He’d just kicked me out, and now he’d be seeing even more of me than he had before. Damn, that stung.

That sting turned to anger in a flash.

Forget this shit. I wasn’t going to wait for him to tell me why he’d suddenly turned his back on me and booted me out of my own grandmother’s house. I wasn’t a doormat. And I wasn’t a damn teenager either. Angst did nothing for me.

“What the hell, Crash? I don’t do games and this feels like a damn game. I helped you get away from Karissa when you were stoned out of your ducking mind, then I saved us from that psycho goblin, yet you’re acting like I’ve damn well treated *you* like crap! You’re acting like I did you wrong!”

Was I yelling? Yes, yes, I was.

I drew a breath and threw down the gauntlet. “And that’s *after* a shower where you couldn’t finish the job!”

Maybe I was hoping that someone could hear after all. Because that last line wasn’t quite true.

His eyebrows dipped low. “Maybe if your ex-husband’s ghost hadn’t shown up, I would have finished the job!”

Alan grimaced and slid out of the door. “I don’t need to listen to this.” I had to agree with him. He was so not the person I wanted here while I yelled at Crash about our almost-sex-scene.

I stood, scooting the chair backward so I could lean over the table and give him a serious glare. “Why? So you could feel better about kicking me out of my gran’s house? You figured you’d at least send me out with a mind-blowing orgasm? A pity duck?”

He leaned forward. “You don’t know the half of what you are doing! You’re fumbling through the shadow world like a damn wrecking ball. I can’t understand how you aren’t dead ten times over! But someone is trying hard to make sure you end up in an early grave, and I’m trying to keep you from it. That’s why I walked. My connection to you brings you even more danger!”

So now we were both yelling. Excellent. I slapped my hands on the table so hard, my palms stung and tingled and the cuffs jangled. “Maybe if *someone* would give me straight information instead of acting all mysterious and secretive, I wouldn’t get in so much ducking trouble! Maybe if that someone was a damn team player instead of pretending he didn’t need help, we could figure this out!”

Breathing hard, I stared him down, not caring that our noses were touching as we yelled back and forth. Not caring that the air all but crackled with tension as we yelled out our frustrations.

A growl slid from his lips, and a split second later, he dragged me across the table, into his arms, and I was kissing him back as hard as he was kissing me. The pull between us refused to listen to reason. The magic on his skin sung to my own and the fire of his touch lit up my body, burning away any thought of bruises or pain, burning away the hurt that he’d caused me by turning away from me after the fight. His mouth and all of him made me hot and twisted up, left me wishing there were a bed in the corner of the room with those soft sheets he favors that slithered over naked skin so very nicely.

No, I didn’t plan on letting him off the hook—at the very least, he owed me a better explanation—but that didn’t mean I wasn’t going to soak up the fiery kisses he planted on me, just in case . . . just in case there wasn’t another time.

Just in case the police had their way. That’s what I told myself.

Trust me, you wouldn’t have turned down the opportunity either.

Even so, I was the first to pull back, just enough so I could breathe. “You really hurt me, Crash. I’m not sure I’m ready to forgive you. You’re going to have to work for it.”

His hands smoothed down over my arms to take my fingers, and he stepped back, his chest rising and falling rapidly as if he couldn’t quite catch his breath. At least I wasn’t the only one so affected by this thing between us. “Shit. You’ve gotten under my skin and I was . . . you are . . . damn it, I can’t even talk properly.”

He didn’t let me go, but instead pulled me closer and set his chin on top of my head, his breath ruffling my hair. “I don’t want you to die, but trouble keeps finding you, or you keep finding it. I don’t know how I can keep you safe. . .” He trailed off and I looked up at him.

“Everyone dies, Crash. Maybe not you, because you’re fae, but everyone *else* dies. And me, I’m going to live full speed, foot on the pedal until that moment. Even if that moment is here and now.” I grabbed his face and kissed him hard even as Alan gagged in the background, muttering about kissing a troll.

Crash kissed me back, but this time he pulled away first. “I’ll get the bail set up. Your trial date is set for three days from now.”

Alan walked through the door again and began to pace, cursing a blue streak about the abuses being done to the system, which was kind of rich, really, considering he’d manipulated the court system plenty to stick it to me in the divorce. Crash, of course, didn’t hear him, but he frowned as if he could pick up on the energy Alan was throwing off.

“You going to tell me why you kicked me out of Gran’s house? Or ignored me as if I were beneath you?” That last one was the real stinger for me, because I struggled more than I liked to admit with my sense of self-worth. I mean, being forty-one and divorced because the ex you hated cheated on you is bad enough. Add in a little extra weight, a dead-ended career and an uncertain new one, and a girl’s left feeling a little uncertain now and then. I wasn’t perfect, you know. I still struggled with the ups and downs.

Some days, I was strong as iron.

Other days, I was as squishy as overcooked pasta.

Crash didn’t let me go. “Because you’re not the only one with enemies. The closer you are to me, the better your chances of dying

—” He paused. “There is more at play in the shadow world than the problems with the council and the O’Seans causing a ruckus. You’re right. We all die at some point. I just don’t want your death to be because I let myself get too close—”

The door banged open, cutting him off. The officer who’d brought me in strode across the small room and grabbed me by the cuffs, dragging me out of Crash’s arms. “Time’s up.”

Officer Cuffs (as I thought of him now) hustled me to the holding cell with the other women. Crash must have followed, something I guessed solely based on the way their eyes looked past me and went all dreamy and soft. Which was interesting.

Alan saw Crash as a troll, hideous and ugly.

Women saw Crash as sex on a stick made for licking all night long.

I looked over my shoulder at him. “You make the guys think you aren’t competition, then show off for the ladies, huh? Clever.”

He winked and gave me a slow-burn smile that set off all sorts of fireworks in my lower regions and reminded me it had been a long, long time since I’d had any sort of tumble in the sack worth remembering. I mean, the shower moments with him were good, and I replayed them more often than I cared to admit, but the whole scene had been left rather unfinished if you know what I mean.

A series of *ooohs* rose from the women behind me as if they were the Mormon Tabernacle Choir singing praises to heaven. Seriously, they could have been a full orchestra for how long the sounds of their appreciation went on, changing in tones and pitches.

“Oh, honey, if you don’t climb on him, I’m going to!” The old lady cackled. “Lovely, he is so very lovely.”

“He is lovely,” I said. “I’ll give him that.”

Officer Cuffs beside me puffed up his chest and gave them a smug smile. I burst out laughing. "I don't mean you, Short Stack. I mean my lawyer."

I was shoved through the open cell door as the officer whipped around. "Him? He's a fat, hideous troll!"

Same language Alan had used. Crash was definitely pulling tricks with his glamor, the cheeky man. Crash winked at me again, that smile of his doing all sorts of terrible things to me. I didn't care what other people saw; he was hotter than sin and I was ready to find a reason to repent.

"I'll be back as soon as I get the bail money set up. Don't do anything, okay?" Crash said, and then he was hustled toward the door by the officer, who obviously didn't want anything to do with him with the way he touched his arm and then jerked back. The officer even went so far as to wipe his hands on his pants, as if he'd touched something gross.

"How am I going to do something in here?" I lifted my hands, grabbing the bars.

Officer Cuffs snorted. "She's going to trial in three days. She ain't going anywhere."

Crash stood in the doorway and spoke as if Cuffs hadn't interjected into our conversation. "Don't ask me. You're the one who finds trouble like a—"

The door slammed behind the two men, and I was alone again with the other women.

"You really pissed someone off, didn't you?" the old lady with the fluffy hair said. "I mean, I've seen them process people fast, but a trial in three days? That's something else, and you are about as white as they come. I'd believe it more if you weren't so pale."

I looked down at her, realizing she barely came up to my shoulder. "You've seen them do this before?"

Fancy pants looked at me. "Who you talking to?"

I waved at her to shush her, looking at the old lady again.

"Usually when they want to get rid of someone stirring up shit. That's the way of things here in Savannah, as I'm sure you know." She blinked rheumy eyes up at me. "Savannah is good at keeping

her secrets close, and she don't like anyone knowing what a beast she is under the silken covers."

Her description was not all that far off. "I haven't been lifting anyone's sheets."

Well, that wasn't exactly true. I'd been dealing with the O'Seans and their garbage. Plus, I'd done the council a solid by helping them identify Davin as a mole. And when I met with them a few days ago, Stark, the old guy, had actually spoken to me. Something he never did anymore, according to Roderick. Surely that meant I was on their good side. Maybe they'd help me?

"Hey, I want my phone call!" I banged my cuffs against the bars. Damn it, the ass hadn't even taken them off and I'd been too busy goggling at Crash along with all the other estrogen-overloaded ladies to realize it.

I clanged against the bars until the other woman started bitching. Officer Cuffs finally came back with a rather bored look on his face. "What?"

"I want my phone call," I said. "Right now. And I need to speak with Officer Burke."

"You ain't got a right—"

"Now!" I barked the word at him and . . .well, for lack of a better word, I flexed my magic muscles. I had a bit of fae in me, a bit of witch, a little of lord only knew what. It was enough to put some oomph into the word, and he jumped as if I'd slapped him on the ass with a willow switch.

"Burke ain't here. She's on suspension." The words came out of him in a burst like they'd been pulled out. "House arrest."

My jaw dropped. I wanted to ask what had happened to get her into trouble, but from the way his eyes had narrowed, I figured there would be no forthcoming information from him.

I asked anyway.

"None of your damn business," he said, already on his way out the door.

"Then get me my phone call!" I pushed more magic into my words, and again he jumped, slamming the door behind him.

"Oh, Leather Girl, you lit a fire under his ass. How'd you do that?" The old lady once more sidled up to me, and I looked down at her.

“Do you have a name?”

“Edna,” she said. “Edna White.”

“Seriously,” Fancy Pants stood beside me on the other side. “*Who* are you talking to? ’Cause acting crazy is not going to get you out of here. Just ask us. We’ve all tried it. Nobody cares if you’re nuts.”

I looked down at Edna, who grinned up at me as Alan appeared in the anteroom, looking paler than usual. “Bree, they’re moving up the trial again. This is impossible! How are they making this happen?”

“The shadow world,” I answered without hesitation, the certainty coming from the middle of my bones. Crash could have handled the regular police without an issue. I was sure of it. Hell, I’d bet that Corb and Eammon could have gotten me out of trouble with the human authorities. But we weren’t dealing with them, were we? “Same way you got everything in the divorce and landed me with our combined debt. The corrupt system never bothered you much when you were a beneficiary of it.”

Alan glared at me. “That was necessary. There are times when the law is wrong and needs to be massaged into place.”

I pointed a finger at him, my handcuffs clinking. “And I’d bet you anything that they—those people in the other room—feel the same way you did. So all your high and mighty ‘this isn’t right’ bullshit is just for show.”

Which was beside the point. Officer Burke was on house arrest, no doubt to keep her from helping me. So this thing went even deeper than I’d first thought. How had they known there was a connection between us?

Talk about getting ducked sideways and upside down.

I looked back at Edna, who had an impressive swat for a dead person, and let out a sigh. “You got any ideas on how to get out of here?”

Fancy Pants ignored me this time, just muttering “Nuts, she’s a fruit loop.”

“You need someone to break you out. Maybe that hotsy-totsy, yummy lawyer of yours? He’s got muscles for days, and I’d put money on him being fae, if I were a betting kind of woman.” Edna

sighed. “I did so love me a fae lover once in a while. Very flexy in the sack, all bendy and full of tingly magic in all the right places.”

I started to giggle. I shouldn’t have laughed. I was for all intents and purposes on death row, about to be executed for a crime I hadn’t committed.

The giddiness of the unexpected laughter mixed with adrenaline made me feel like I was full of helium and about to float away. Maybe it would have turned into full-blown meltdown laughter, only the door opened and Officer Cuffs walked in with a cell phone, holding it out to me as though he couldn’t believe what he was doing and didn’t want to acknowledge it.

“Here. You have two minutes.” Officer Cuffs growled, his eyes sweeping over the other women in the cell with me. Fancy Pants cringed back, but Edna and the gal on the floor did not.

I took the phone and dialed the first number I could think of, which was Corb’s. Hopefully he could put his council connections to good use. He picked up on the second ring.

“Who is this?” he growled, obviously not recognizing the number.

“Corb, it’s me. I need you to get Roderick and send him down here. They’re framing me for Alan’s murder. Something hinky is going on, and the council might be able to help. There’s no way the human police are doing this alone. I—”

“They won’t help. I already tried,” he said. “Hold tight. We’re working another angle. They’re not going to win, Bree. Trust me. Okay? Look for Kink, just wait for her.”

And then he hung up on me, which was just as well, seeing as Officer Cuffs was trying to tug the phone away.

“That was not two minutes,” Fancy Pants said, no longer cowering. “I timed it.” She tapped her very expensive gold watch.

She’d just got done calling me crazy, so I hadn’t expected her to stand up for me. Then, as he jerked the phone away from me anyway, it hit me—we were all locked in here together, being treated like shit, and it had formed a weird kind of sisterhood. Even if one of us was dead, and one of us was about to be dead, we were tied together in this place of in-between. In between life and death, in between the outside world and being locked up . . . almost like a fae in between.

I blew out a breath as the officer stormed off, slamming the door behind him. The sound echoed through the room, and I stepped away from the bars, my cuffs clinking.

Corb thought he had a loophole? If there was one, why hadn't Crash thought of it? Of the two of them, I had more faith in Crash despite our rocky whatever-the-hell-was-going-on-between-us situation. Corb was young, and he cared too much about earning the praise of his superiors and the council. It had driven him to lie about things he really shouldn't have.

Then again, Crash had been less than forthcoming too.

Jaysus on high, maybe I *liked* liars? I wrinkled up my nose and pursed my lips. I was going to have to dissect that at a later date, when my head wasn't on the chopping block.

The creak of the outer door turned all our heads. A new guy swept into the room, his hair smoothed back in a swooshing pompadour style that made me think he was going to whip out a bright red cape and flap it at an oncoming bull. Hell, he was lean and lanky enough that he could have pulled it off.

He drew close enough that I could have reached through the bars to shake hands with him. A bright citrusy cologne drifted into the cell, not the kind of scent I'd have paired with a guy like him. His dark eyes narrowed on me, and his mouth thinned even as his nostrils flared. Like he really didn't like what he was looking at. Or maybe he could smell the poo?

"I am the district prosecutor. Mr. Langley. What did Corb Walker mean when he said, 'look for Kink'?" When he spoke, his mouth barely moved, almost as if he were a ventriloquist. It was all kinds of weird, and a warning shot down my spine that this one was trouble. "Is this some sort of sex cult you're involved in? Is that why you killed your ex-husband? Did he discover your depraved ways?"

He tucked his hands behind him and stepped back as if he thought my supposed depravity might be contagious.

So the phone was tapped, no surprise there.

"Are you afraid of me?" I'd purposefully answered his question with a question, something Alan had hated—mostly because it worked so well with men who had outsized egos.

Speaking of, Alan swooped in beside me. “Yes, keep him on his toes. Don’t give him anything.”

I wanted to point out to Alan that it didn’t really matter what I said. They fully intended to string me up for his murder and gawd only knew what other charges they’d trump up along the way.

Mr. Langley shook his head. “You are not in a position to be asking questions. I would think you’d want to answer them and gain some—”

I raised my cuffed hands, palms facing him, effectively shutting him up. And put on my I-used-to-be-married-to-a-lawyer-and-helped-him-in-his-office persona. “Let’s be straight with each other, Mr. Langley. You and your boys are back there spreading Alan’s blood all over my things to make a case against me that is *not real*. You and I both know that. Whatever your reason for wanting me dead, you’re so committed to it that you’ve bumped up the trial to—” I waited for Alan to whisper the new date in my ear, “—tomorrow at nine in the morning.”

Mr. Langley paled. “You can’t know that. Only I know that.”

“Can’t I? I would think someone being charged with such a serious crime should at least know when her trial is. Or do you mean I can’t know that because you hadn’t told anyone else yet?”

I smiled, and Alan grunted beside me. “Maybe you could have been a lawyer.” That from him was a high compliment. “He’s sweating now.”

Mr. Langley glared at me and I smiled back. “Go back to trumping up charges, asswipe. I’m not dead yet.”

“Correct,” he said in that weird marionette way of his. “‘Yet’ is the word you need to remember, Ms. O’Rylee.” He spun on one heel and stomped from the room, the sway of his hips reminding me distinctly of the realtor who’d auctioned off Gran’s house.

Monica had seemed fairly normal until she stomped outside of the house three times—stomps that packed a metaphysical wallop—and awakened something. She had a connection to the shadow world, and now this strange prosecutor had her walk. My instincts told me it was no coincidence. They hadn’t been wrong yet, so I decided to trust them and act on my gut feeling. Even if this was weirder than most of my guesses.

“Monica?” I called out.

The prosecutor spun around so fast, he had to grab the edge of the doorframe.

My jaw dropped, and beside me, Alan spluttered. “How can that be?”

I didn’t know the answer. What I *did* know was that somehow Monica the realtor was also Mr. Langley the prosecutor. Which did not bode well for me. The shadow world was really going for broke. It also confirmed that Davin wasn’t the only one who wanted to take me out.

The person in front of me, who was maybe two people in one, glared at me. “You need removing, and that is all there is to that.” Something had shifted, and the entity now spoke in Monica’s voice.

Edna tsked. “Something ain’t right. That one isn’t human.”

I agreed with Edna—silently. Fancy Pants sucked in a sharp breath at the voice change, but otherwise kept quiet. I’m not sure our final cell mate even noticed, as she was snoring on the cement floor.

The door slammed after the prosecutor. Him? Her? Them? Yes, them it was. They were pissed, and I didn’t really know why. Who did they work for? Because I didn’t really think that Monica/Mr. Langley was (were) the powerhouse behind this thing. More like a deliverer of bad news. A memory whipped through my mind of a man with no face. I’d met him on the same night I’d met Roderick, and even now couldn’t figure out what he’d looked like. His facial features had been a blur when I’d seen him in the hotel, and the feeling of menace that had rolled off him was nothing short of knee shaking. Was No-Face Bruce even on the council? Or was he a thug for someone there?

Could he—Bruce—be Monica?

I had no way of knowing. Just one more mystery added to the pile at my feet.

Alan stormed around the cell, hands flinging in every direction, rightly peeved that he’d been “had,” as he put it. He’d thought Monica was a woman. He’d slept with her, so of course, she was a woman. How could she be a man too? His ranting made Edna laugh.

“So you like both? I wouldn’t have pegged you as bi. You seem too uptight to be open to a back-door entrance.”

“I’m not!” he yelled back at her, and then blinked. “Wait, you’re dead too?”

She grinned. “Yes, longer than you’ve been, you switch hitter, you.” She laughed again and waggled her fingers at him. I might have laughed too if I weren’t so tired.

He spluttered and started going off about not being gay, and never being gay, and, and, and . . .

“Can you keep it down, Alan?” I snapped. “Nobody wants to listen to your homophobic tirade. Just . . . *enough*. I suspect they’re some sort of shifter and can be anything they want to be in a given situation. Man. Woman. Whatever works for them in the moment, or whatever the hell they feel like.”

Once more Fancy Pants gave me the side-eye. I nodded at her and then looked away.

Rubbing my hands over my face I plopped onto the closest bench, unable to do anything but wait. Wait and wonder why Monica/Mr. Langley of all people was so intent on my death. Was there really a connection to the council?

The house had gone for a decent price, so I doubted Monica’s commission was the issue. There had to be some other motivation, but my mind was too numb to turn it over. At nine in the morning, I was going on trial for a murder I had not committed, with evidence that had been fully planted. If I’d been able to, I’d have put big bucks on the trial being done by noon, and my execution wrapped up before dinner.

The afternoon slid away, and I found myself dozing, listening to Alan pace and mutter while Edna goaded him on, poking at him any way she could. Near the end of the day, as the sun was dipping low showing through the one tiny barred window that sat above our heads in our cell, and the other inmates rattling about asking for their dinner, a sound I recognized tugged at my ears.

I sat upright, my back protesting the sudden movement after lying on the hard bench for so long, muscles cold and slack. I twisted around to look at the one window that let fresh, humid air into the small cell. The flutter of gossamer wings and the tinkling of bells were music to the ragged bands of hope I had left in me.

I breathed out her name like a prayer. “Kink.”

The fluttering of Kinkly's wings kept my eyes locked on the window until she appeared, all dressed in black, which was not her color. She was an autumn-toned fairy from her skin to her hair and eyes, and she normally wore various shades of browns, golds, and yellows that blended with and complemented her natural tones. The black clothing only made her four-inch stature look smaller.

"What the hell kind of bug is that? Gross!" Fancy Pants yelled and threw a shoe at Kinkly.

"Stop it!" I tried to grab the shoe in midair but ended up just knocking it to the side, which was better than it hitting the small fairy. I hurried to the window as Kinkly slid through and dropped onto my upturned palm.

I guess just like Crash, Kink made humans see her as something else.

She shuddered as she pushed on one of the handcuffs with her foot. "These are old school iron. They did that because of your fae blood. It dulls your magic."

Damn, I hadn't even thought about trying to magic my way out of this other than to boss the officer around. Mostly because I didn't understand my magic or how to use it. "What's happening? Corb said you'd tell me."

"You know your trial is set for tomorrow?" She grimaced. "I mean, trial isn't really the appropriate word since it's an absolute farce and

they just plan on killing you ASAP.” She drew her finger across her neck for good measure

I nodded. “I know.”

Fancy Pants came to stand at my shoulder. “Um. Are you talking to a bug?”

I turned so my back was to her and found myself staring down at the woman who still lay on the floor. She was staring up at me. “That bug talks. She’s pretty.”

Well, shit, apparently drugs could heighten the ability to see through the glamor disguising the shadow world. Not that I’m suggesting you try it. Don’t do drugs, kids, bad idea that.

Kinkly fluttered her wings, hovering over my hand. “I have a way to get you out of here.”

She shot upward, dodged an amazingly fast swinging fist from Fancy Pants, and slid back through the window. The window was a good two feet above my head so I couldn’t see what was going on outside. I did, however, hear a low growl that could have been Sarge in his werewolf form. My hopes surged again.

Maybe this was a breakout?

As soon as the words passed through my mind, I *knew* that was the case. This was a damn breakout! Giddiness flowed over me, washing away the fatigue as I danced on the spot with the sudden urge to pee. I locked my knees tight together and focused on my Kegels for a second to get control of my bladder.

“Kinkly!” I whisper-yelled her name, and she peeked back through the bars and down at me.

“What?”

“I’m going to need my bag and all the stuff they’ve got in the evidence room,” I said.

She bobbed her head. “We have someone on it! We got you, Bree.”

Warmth fluttered through my belly and spread outward. My friends were amazing. How in the world had I ever made it through life without them?

Then she dragged a container through the bars that I recognized on sight. “Boy butter? Do you think I’m going to smear it on me and

squeeze through the bars on the window? They are way too close together!”

Fancy Pants groaned and stumbled away to the far side of the room. “I’m going over here to lie down because I did not just see a big ass bug drag expensive lube through that window.”

“I do not have a big ass,” grumped Kinkly. “I have a pert, tiny ass.”

I kept my eyes on her, not wanting to be distracted. “Seriously, how are we making this happen?” Had they emptied out the lube and replaced it with a magic potion that would make me smaller, maybe even Kinkly’s size? I could slide through the bars, and we’d be gone before anyone noticed. That’s what I would have tried, anyway.

Apparently my ragtag crew of friends weren’t so much into subtlety.

Kinkly unscrewed the lid of the *Boy Butter* jar, slid on the tiniest pair of gloves, then reached in and scooped out the thick paste, smearing it up and down the bars in a move that would make a stripper envious of her skills. Of course, she had to throw in a few body rolls up and down, just to add to the image.

I grabbed the edge of the window and with a jump and a serious strain on my shoulder and back muscles, pulled myself up for a better look, thinking I was missing something. Okay, so I ended up barely getting my nose above the edge, but it was enough. “Kink, what are you doing? Even with lube I won’t squeeze through.”

Alan stepped up to the window and shot me a look. “She’s right. Even though she lost some weight, she’s still no skinny mini. Kind of thick in the middle if you know what I mean.”

My hand snaked out and I grabbed his ear, something I seemed to have a knack for with the ghosts. “I may not have a bag to stuff you in, but I’m sure I could cram you into my boot.”

He swatted at me ineffectively, but I let him go.

Kinkly kept on smearing the bars. “Don’t worry. Corb and Sarge came up with this idea. They think it’s the best chance we’ve got, and I agree with them.”

I squinted my eyes. “What about Suzy and Eric? Did they think it was a good idea?”

“Oh, no.” Kinkly grinned at me. “Corb said he ran it by them, and they thought it was a terrible plan. So Corb told them to get lost, and they did. You know the bigfoot though. He’s not terribly brave, even if he is loyal and smart.”

I wasn’t sure I agreed with her assessment, but then I suspected that Kinkly might have finally realized that Eric had been more than a little interested in her. She’d shot him down, thinking it was a joke, and . . .well, he had moved on with Suzy. Kinkly had the whole “I don’t really want him, but I don’t want you to have him” vibe going on.

I sighed. Later. I could help them with their love lives later, but only if I was still alive and free of this cell. Gawd help me, I’d tackle any weird love life right then if it meant I was getting out.

Kinkly pulled off her gloves and laid them at the base of one of the bars. “You’re going to want to step back for this next part.”

I didn’t move. Maybe my brain didn’t quite process what she’d said, or maybe I just couldn’t imagine that Corb would pull off a stunt so big. A breakout so epic in style there was no way I’d *not* be missed.

A faint sizzle curled through the air and then came the sulfur smell of a freshly lit match.

“Oh, you better get down,” Edna said in my ear. She pushed me, which was impressive, her being a ghost and all, more so that it was hard enough to knock me to the ground a split second before the world exploded in a shower of stone, mortar, and bits of steel bars.

The roar that ripped through the air made my ears ring and my chest feel like it had been kicked by a donkey. Hot flecks of something or other from the explosion landed on my back, and I yelped and rolled to either side to fling it off, only I wasn’t sure if I made a sound or not since my ears were dead. I started to get to my hands and knees, dust and smoke filling the air, obscuring the world.

Maybe I could have stood on my own—it’s hard to say—but I didn’t get a chance to try. A mouth full of teeth appeared out of the smoke and clamped down on the chain connecting my handcuffs. The werewolf attached to those teeth took off running, dragging me over the lip of the destroyed outer wall with a quick jump and then bouncing me along the rubble of what was left of it.

I looked back to see Fancy Pants and the other gals escaping, taking advantage of the situation as they scrambled over the debris and out to the freedom of the back lawn of the police station. Edna saluted me. "Get that piece of fae ass. Trust me, you won't regret it!"

I couldn't respond, mostly because the air was being repeatedly knocked out of me with each bump of my butt or hip hitting the ground. Expulsions of air escaped my mouth as if I were the one running.

"Dying. Slow. Stop. Please!" I yelled, even though I knew he was rescuing me.

Sarge bounded along, and all I could think was that I was going to be covered in bruises by the end of this little jaunt, but better than dead. A minute or two later he slowed to a stop next to a black van that looked suspiciously like one of the council vans I'd seen Corb and Davin use in the past.

The side door was open, and two men in black hooded robes pulled me in. Sarge followed with a leap and proceeded to swipe his long, pink and panting tongue up the side of my face. The hooded figures started shutting the door, and Kinkly shot in through the rapidly shrinking opening. A third figure in the driver's seat got us moving with a lurch that threw me against Sarge's black-furred body.

"Dog breath," I said and then gave Sarge a hug around the neck. "Thanks. I think. I'm going to need a hot bath to work out the bruises."

He gave a woof and winked a big golden eye at me, then lay down in the back of the van at my feet. I turned to the two robed figures in the back.

"Who do I have to thank for saving me, besides Kinkly and Sarge?" I lifted a hand, and Kinkly high-fived me.

"That went better than I thought it would," she said.

Corb threw back his hood first. "In case the police saw us, we needed to make sure we couldn't be identified." He reached over and pulled me into a tight hug, and I just breathed in his cologne and the ocean scent flowing beneath it, his magic a distant tingle that soothed away some of my fear. "You okay?"

"Considering I was basically put on death row for no reason? Peachy," I mumbled against his chest, clinging to him. I'd known

Corb longer than anyone else in my new life, and the familiarity of his arms was comforting.

The other figure cleared his throat.

I turned, still in a half hug with Corb, to see Roderick throw his hood back. “The council does not know I’m helping you. And it has to remain that way. Understood?”

“So why are you here?” The question popped out before I could catch it. Roderick was a bit of a mystery, and I still wasn’t sure about his loyalties. He seemed intrigued by me—not in a romantic sense, more like a scientist trying to identify a new bug and wondering just what it was capable of.

And if he could make use of it.

“Because I do believe that Celia—your gran, that is—was on to something. She was killed for what she knew, and that means it was important. You are our best shot of finding out what that was, despite what the remainder of the council believes. You have ties to your gran that only come with blood.” He frowned and smoothed out his cravat. “A shift is happening in the shadow world. Change does not come easily for those of us who have lived a long time. We must be ready to deal with it.”

I stared at him. “How many are on my side in the council?”

“One short of the number you need to make this all go away,” Roderick said.

Well, hell. That was . . . good and bad. “Any chance I could convince them to come around?”

He shook his head. “There are political undercurrents in the council. People vying for more power. It’s a bad time to be on their radar.”

Awesome, just my luck.

The van careened around a few corners and then slid to a screeching stop. The door was yanked open, and the person who stood waiting beyond it was completely unexpected. I stared up into his gold-flecked blue eyes, one arm still around Corb’s waist. “Crash? I thought you were going to go all lawful to get me out of there. You know, play the lawyer card and find me a loophole.”

He stood there with my hip bag in hand, still dressed in his suit from earlier. “You need to get out of town for a while. Go with Corb

and get somewhere you can hide out until Roderick and I figure out how deep this goes.” He took my hand and smoothed his fingers over the handcuffs, the metal dripping off my skin as if it were hot, but there was no pain. The cuffs were just gone.

Blacksmith indeed. Fae he might have been, but he had a knack for manipulating iron. I’d just had no idea it included melting it with his bare hands.

He slid the strap over my shoulder and pulled me in for a hug, which coincidentally pulled me out of Corb’s arms. “Robert is in there, I made sure,” he said. “Keep him close.”

I hugged him back. “Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me yet. Nothing is as it seems, and even the fae are in on it, keeping me busy,” he mumbled into my hair. Then he tipped my face up and kissed me in front of everyone. I probably should have felt some embarrassment over the PDA (public display of affection, for those of you who aren’t up on the current lingo), but all I could feel was his touch.

The kiss wasn’t over the top, but I could feel the passion behind it—the promise that there would be another time, another kiss, that was less restrained. He pulled back just a little. “I’m sorry for earlier. We’ll talk when this is done. When you’re safe and we have a moment to breathe.”

I gave him what I thought was a wry twist of my lips and eyebrows but by the twinkle in his eyes I wasn’t doing a good job of it. Probably just looked like I was trying not to fart.

Again.

And that thought led me back to the memories of our shower together. The way his hands had glided over my soaped-up skin, the tremble that had started low in my belly and . . .

“We have to go.” Corb took my hand, snapping me out of the haze that Crash had put me into. Not that I’d gone there unwillingly—I’d gladly take a Crash-induced haze any day.

“Time is not on our side,” Corb pressed. His fingers tightened, pulling me away from Crash.

I let him drag me for a moment and then got my legs moving toward his Mustang. “Very inconspicuous if you ask me, not possessive at all.” I lifted both brows at him.

Kinkly burst out of the car's open window and grinned. "Come on, the air conditioning is heaven! I love it!"

"Not with the window down!" Corb barked. "Fairies, they just don't get the real world."

Wow, that hadn't been a shot at Crash, *at all*.

I let it slide for now. I could use some air conditioning after being stuck in that stifling hot jail cell. Oh, and surviving an explosion, kissing Crash, dealing with the reality that we were about to go on the run from the very human police who wanted my head on a pike, and the adrenaline load from all of the above. Sweat rolled down the sides of my face, between my boobs and, lucky me, into my ass crack.

I sighed and slid into the front passenger seat and shut the door, looking out the window. Roderick and Crash stood talking, Roderick shaking his head and Crash looking exasperated.

One word drifted to me, and I instantly wished it hadn't. Roderick had said "undead." I'd hoped the whole let's-make-vampires plan had died with Davin, but I supposed I couldn't be so lucky.

Kinkly flew down to sit on my knee, taking my attention from the two men. "How was it in the slammer? Did you get to be somebody's bitch? I bet they loved those leathers!" She patted my knee for good measure, slapping it enough to make a good noise.

Turning my head back to watch Roderick and Crash, I caught them shaking hands and parting ways. I just smiled and shook my head. "Kinkly, I think you've been watching too much TV."

The other door of the Mustang opened, letting in a wash of warm, muggy, Savannah air. Sarge hopped into the back seat, still in his wolf form, and lay down with a heavy sigh. Corb slid behind the wheel, and a woman who bore a resemblance to a fish got in directly behind him.

Feish smiled at me and I grinned back.

"Boss says I should come with you for now. Keep you safe."

I leaned over the seat and hugged her, pulling her tightly to me. The lump in my chest and throat came as a surprise. When had this river nymph become a friend that could bring me to tears just by being here?

At first, she didn't react, but then she hugged me back. "You missed me."

"I think I was afraid I would never see any of you again." I whispered the fear. "That I was going to die alone."

She patted my back and gave a burble from her gills. "Bah, that's ridiculous. Too many people like you now. You'll die with a bunch of us."

I laughed and let her go, but I found myself hanging on to her webbed hand. She might be one of the most unusual friends I had, but in my heart, I knew she was the truest next to Robert.

Corb started the engine. "There is a cabin about four hours from here, not tied to any of us. Roderick gave me a key and said we could go there. It's hidden from human eyes with several layers of spells cast on it."

Making myself let go of Feish, I put my seat belt on as I studied him. "Seriously, you'd trust him?" I'd seen Crash shake hands with the council member, but even so. Shaking hands with the guy was one thing, and putting our lives in his hand was another.

"He's one of those on your side, Bree," Corb shifted into fourth gear as he powered up the muscle car, taking corners fast enough that a cop would pull him over.

I reached forward and put my hand on his resting on the stick shift. "Slow down."

A shudder slid out of him, and he eased off. "Sorry, this is . . . This whole situation has me tense. I don't like how fast they found you at Alan's, how fast they were stringing you up."

"Tell me about it," Alan growled from the back seat. "And stop holding her hand."

I looked down to see that Corb had indeed flipped his hand to lock his fingers with mine. I pulled away not because of Alan, but because . . . because I didn't really know what I wanted with the two men in my life, and right then it was my last concern. I could figure out my love life once I was certain I was going to *have* a life. That had to be my top priority. Corb's words sunk in, and I shook my head when I looked at the scenario he'd laid out.

"Go to the Hollows first. I think we need to see what Eammon knows."

“Eammon isn’t aware of any of this.” Corb shot me a look. “You know the Hollows isn’t a well-respected group. I was in it as a cover to make sure they weren’t stronger than they were letting on. You know, a wolf in sheep’s clothing.”

I did know that, but Eammon had mostly been upfront and honest with me, maybe more so than anyone else in the shadow world, and he’d been around the block a time or two. My gut was saying to go to the Hollows.

“Please, it won’t take long,” I said.

Corb sighed. “Okay, okay. I doubt that whoever is after you would think you’d go to Eammon anyway. It’s not like he’s actually going to be able to help. It’s a waste of time.”

I shook my head. “It’s not. Please, Corb. I think he can help.”

With a heavy sigh, he did as I asked, though he didn’t say another word along the way.

It didn't take long with Corb driving, about twenty minutes to get to the Hollows, and only a little bit of muttering that he thought it was a waste of time. He pulled into the cemetery that hosted the training grounds, and I slid out of the car and strode toward the angel tomb that hid the entrance to their training room. The larger than life statue had a broken wing, not because the statue was broken but because it had been carved that way.

I put my hand on the marble base, and it warmed against my touch. A slight tingle made me snatch my fingers back. I rubbed my palms together and took a step away from the tomb, the feeling fading a little, sadness flooding through me from my fingertips instead. The sorrow of a lost soul.

An affinity for the dead was all well and fine, except when I was in a cemetery. I could almost feel the pressure of a soul pushing out from the tomb.

"Not tonight," I said, turning away, and looked down the steps that curled around into darkness as if leading down to the fiery pits of hell. My imagination was getting ahead of me. "Eammon?"

"Yeah, I be here." His thickly accented voice rolled up out of the darkness, and he appeared in the shadows of the steps moments later, blinking up at me.

Being a leprechaun, he almost always had to look up at me.

"Eammon, I need to talk to you."

“What, suddenly you want the Hollows’ help?” His eyebrows shot up. “I thought you be too good for us now.”

He puffed past me, swinging his arms a little more than he had to, and smacked me in the process.

“Where is everyone?” I blurted. Suzy had come with me when I’d left the Hollows, but there had been three other recruits. I didn’t see hide nor hair of them, or of the other two mentors, Tom and Louis.

“Gone. They buggered off after you and Suzy left. Luke hangs around a bit answering the phone, mostly hoping to get with Sarge. He’s too jumpy to be of any use except doing office work.” I glanced back at the car where the others had chosen to wait (okay, I’d asked them to wait), and Sarge shrugged his wolfy shoulders in the back seat. Of course, he could hear us with those gigantic ears of his.

I led Eammon farther out into the cemetery, wanting to get some privacy for this conversation, and not even really knowing why. I trusted my friends.

Didn’t I?

“The human police tried to string me up for a murder charge, and not after a fair trial or anything. As in the trial’s tomorrow, and my execution will immediately follow it. I think someone in the shadow world paid them to get rid of me. Shit, I’m sure of it.”

He stumbled and shook his head, muttering something under his breath I didn’t understand.

“What?”

“It’s just . . . trouble comes for those who stand between us and the dark. Your gran . . . your mum.” He looked up at me and grasped my hand between his callused, dry palms. “Celia made me promise not to tell you what you were born to be, what she trained you to be, and breaking a promise to her is not healthy for any man. Even if she is a ghost.”

He adjusted his stance as if his pants were suddenly too tight, and I grinned. “She cursed you?”

“Something like that. She said she knew you’d be coming home soon and if she weren’t around, she wanted me to look out for you as long as I could.” He sighed. “Didn’t last long, did I?”

I put my other hand over his and took a knee so I wasn’t looking down at him. “Eammon, is there anything at all that you can tell me?”

Like who might want to off me?" I held my tongue about the whole suspecting the council business. I didn't want to sway him.

He closed his eyes and shook his head, then opened them again. "The O'Seans were tied to a good many people, and none that be the good kind. You've upset the world of Faerie by pissing off Karissa, and the council isn't sure what to make of you. Until you brought it to their attention, they had no idea Davin had gone bad, or that he'd been working with that ding-dong Derek. And while you'd think they'd be grateful, you made them look like fools even if you didn't be meaning to." Again he shook his head. "You've basically irritated every faction of the shadow world, Breena O'Rylee. What do you want, a damn medal?"

His sharp tone didn't fool me—I heard the pride in there as if he'd trained me all by himself. Gran was the one who'd done most of my training, but he'd shown me the path back to what I'd been born to do. *Apparently* born to do.

Speaking of which. Now that I was out of jail, and my life wasn't currently on the line, I had a job to do.

"I'm going to find my gran, Eammon. Someone took her spirit. Someone powerful, and . . . maybe someone who would know I'd come looking for her."

Could that be the reason I'd been framed?

He grimaced. "Possibly, but more likely it's Celia herself they wanted. She knows a lot about every faction of the supernatural world. She wasn't just a witch, she was a historian. If they can find a way to unlock her memories, they'll have access to more knowledge than you be having in that book of hers." He tapped a finger on my hip bag. "Which I don't think I have to tell you would be downright deadly in the wrong hands—not just for our world, but for the humans too."

I worried at my bottom lip. "Eammon, what does your gut tell you?"

"A big fight is coming," he said. "Until your gran died, everything here was quiet. Savannah had been the same for years and years. But I guess those undercurrents of darkness never really left our city. In that silence, I think they were growing, strengthening, and the rest

of us did what Savannah always does. We pretended not to see them.”

“What do Louis and Tom think?” I asked after the other mentors. I really liked Tom. Louis was a posturing buffoon, but I still asked.

Eammon took a step away from me and leaned against a tombstone. Evangeline’s tombstone. While I’d never met her (she was apparently a friend of Robert’s), I knew her grave. I tried not to take notice of it, seeing as it was where I’d buried the fake fairy cross I’d initially stolen for Karissa. Yeah, it’s complicated. Bottom line: the cross is a powerful magical artifact, and I couldn’t let it end up in the wrong hands.

“Well,” he sighed, “Tom is hunkering down, stocking up on food and toilet paper, of all things, as if we’re about to breakout in a pandemic.” He waved his hands in front of himself. “Louis is . . .well, Louis gave me this.” He turned his hand over, and a ring flashed on his hand. Nothing fancy, just a silver band.

I stared at it. “He made a move on you?”

Eammon guffawed. “Nah, he said it would protect me if anything bad happened while he was away. Said he needed some time off and felt bad leaving the Hollows while things were so unstable here.”

I laughed. “Time off from what? He’s not even training anyone anymore.”

“That’s what I be saying!” Eammon barked and then rubbed a hand on his jaw. “But he be a good one, even if he is a stuck-up Frenchman.”

We were quiet a moment, and in the distance, I could hear the shush of water over the banks of the river. I could almost feel the pull of a siren, the magic a whisper of Corb’s. Like that first night I’d worked so hard to get into the Hollows, I knew this was where I belonged. Maybe not right here, but in this world.

“The dark is darker now,” Eammon said suddenly. “Those that hide their faces from the light, those be the ones to watch for.” He looked down at his hand. “Here, you take the ring. I don’t know that it’ll do much, to be honest—I think you and I both know just how ‘talented’ Louis is—but just in case . . .” He slid the ring off his middle finger and gave it to me.

“Are you sure?” I cupped the silver ring in my palm. “Louis doesn’t much like me.”

Eammon gave me a wink. “But I do. And you be going into danger. This is about all I can give you to help, other than my thoughts.”

I waited for him to say more, but he kept his mouth shut in a thin line as if he regretted saying as much as he had.

I pushed up to my feet, my knees locking about halfway up, making me grimace. Gawd in heaven, I could use some oil in that one knee. “Eammon, thank you. I should go. If anyone comes looking . . .”

“I’ll tell them I fired you and we don’t talk no more.” He took my hand again. “Good luck finding your gran.” He reached up and touched the amulet around my neck, the one from Gran. “She’s looking out for you even now, when you be looking for her.”

PART OF ME WANTED TO LINGER, FEELING A PULL TO THE Hollows like I hadn’t experienced in a long time. I hurried to the car and got in. “A little help,” I said before Corb could ask me what I’d gained. I slid the silver ring Eammon had given me onto the chain that held my gran’s amulet of protection. The two tinkled against each other, like my own personal set of bells.

Feish leaned forward. “Leprechauns can be good for luck. Maybe you just needed more of that. Your luck is terrible. The worst.”

She wasn’t wrong.

“Maybe,” I said as Corb drove us out of the cemetery. In the side mirror, I watched Eammon’s figure diminish in size, one hand raised in the air.

“Okay,” Corb said, “let’s get to Roderick’s cabin. That’s the best place for us to hunker down and ride this out until we can figure out who is after you. Sarge can patrol the woods around it. Kinkly can help him. And I’ll stay in with Bree.”

“What about me?” Feish leaned forward. “I can stay with Bree, and you can patrol too. Probably better that way so you stop trying to get laid by my friend.”

I made a choking sound, Kinkly laughed, and Sarge let out rather large wolfy yawn.

Corb frowned. "Yeah, no, that isn't going to—"

Feish burbled at him. "You don't get it. I'm not just here to help. I'm here to keep you away from her. I know what you can do, Mr. Siren of the Ocean Can't Keep it in Your Pants. I know why, too, so that's a big nope, nope from me."

The veins in Corb's neck popped up under his skin. I found myself just watching this back and forth between the two of them. They both had a connection to the water, which only seemed to fuel their rivalry. Which one was stronger though? The river maid or the siren?

Kinkly perched on top of my left boob so she could watch. "This is fascinating."

I wouldn't go that far, but I did rather enjoy seeing Feish give other people shit, and not just tell me how it was as bluntly as possible.

"You weren't supposed to be here," Corb said. "You can patrol with the others."

Feish blew a rather loud, long raspberry. "No. I am Breena's friend, and friends don't let friends get laid by men that just want one thing. A cat."

I had to blink a few times to put together what she meant. "You mean pussy?"

She bobbed her head, big eyes blinking at me with complete and total innocence. "Yes, I said cat. That is what I said."

Cat. Pussy. Holy Dinah, I was going to hell in a handbasket for suggesting she read romance books to get a feel for how to flirt. I could just see her going up to her intended date.

You want to see my cat?

I have a cat. It's very nice, but it does not meow.

I hear men like cats. It seems strange, but I have the best of all the cats.

And in my mind I could see her holding up an oversized tabby cat with green eyes that would be about as confused as the man Feish was flirting with.

Sarge started to shake, huffing through his teeth in doggy laughter as if he could see inside my head. More likely he'd come to the same conclusion: Feish really didn't know what she was talking about and had taken a romance book totally out of context. I took note that he had not shifted back to his more human shape.

"Coward," I grumbled at him. Corb shot me a look, and I shrugged. "She's looking out for my cat. How can you deny her the rights of a good friend?"

Kinkly giggled. "Feish, will you look out for my cat too?"

She smiled. "Of course, girls must look out for their bitches' cats."

And that was it. I broke into a laugh I couldn't hold back, Kinkly joining me. Feish joined us, even though I doubted she knew why it was so funny.

Corb just drove with his hands wrapped around the steering wheel, scowling at the windshield while we hee-hawed like a herd of donkeys.

"Let's just get to the cabin. We can figure things out once we are there," he finally said as we came up to the highway exit.

My laughter froze in my chest. I leaned over and put a hand on his leg, feeling the tension in his thigh. "Here's the thing. We aren't going to the cabin," I said. "Get on the highway and head southwest for Montgomery."

Corb's frown deepened, which I hadn't thought possible. "No, that's not the plan. Wait, why do you want to go to Alabama? That makes no sense. There's nothing there, no place to hide."

I leaned back in the seat and closed my eyes. "We aren't going to Alabama, we're just stopping there for gas. And I'm not hiding. I can't." I paused and put a hand on my bag, which held Gran's book, my knives, and the book of curses.

"We're going to New Orleans."

My announcement about going to New Orleans instead of some cabin in the woods that belonged to Roderick was met with silence for about 3.2 seconds.

“Are you insane? The council knows that’s where you were headed before you got arrested!” Corb barked the words as if a raised voice would make me back down. The boy had lessons to learn about strong women. The thought caught me off guard, and I smiled to myself.

Other people had told me I was strong, but this was the first time I’d really believed it. Okay, let’s be straight, I believed it in that moment. And then the rest of his words sank in. “Wait, so the council really does want me dead? And how the hell do they know I wanted to go to New Orleans?”

Corb gripped the steering wheel and twisted his hands around it a moment before shifting gears again as he took us onto the highway. Not headed toward Alabama. Damn it, this was going to get rough if he was going to be pig headed.

He stared out the window, checking his rearview mirror more than he really needed to.

“I don’t know for sure, but they have the power and connections to make something like this happen. When Rod brought it to the council’s attention, they denied his request for help. Officially, the numbers were against you, like he said. So if they find out he helped

anyway, he'll be in as much trouble as we are. So I trust him when he says you'll be safe at that cabin. He wouldn't risk it otherwise."

"You didn't say who told them about New Orleans," Kinkly said. Feish nodded.

"Yes, who spilled those fish guts to the wrong people?" Feish looked hard at Sarge, who shook his head, ears flapping.

Corb blew out a slow, heavy breath, and I looked at him. He didn't, did he? "Before I realized they might be behind it . . . I told them we were headed that way. I was trying to convince them to help by pointing out that Celia's ghost is missing." Well, shit, he did.

A chorus of groans escaped me, Feish, and Kink. Feish slumped back in her seat, and Alan scrunched up to one side. I was impressed he'd stayed mostly quiet the last few minutes.

Feish on the other hand . . . "You are not going to get her cat after that. Idiot. What a fool!"

She wasn't wrong on either count. Why in the world would he have offered up that kind of information? Then there was Corb's belief in Roderick, which wasn't necessarily misplaced, but if the council found out the Boy Butter spell stuff was connected to Roderick, his cabin was one of the first places they'd look.

"Pull over," I said.

"No, we're going to the cabin," he said, giving me a quick glance. "I can keep you safe. I know what I'm doing, Bree."

I was no longer sure he did.

So I put a hand on the stick shift, and forcibly geared the car down while Corb yelped and the engine gears ground rather unhappily.

"Goddamn it!" he roared. "You're going to kill my car!"

I jerked the stick shift hard and he hit the clutch so I wouldn't do more damage.

He put his hand over mine and pulled over to the side of the road, his whole body shaking.

Once we were stopped, I looked him straight in the eye.

"Since you trust him so much, *you* can go to the cabin and wait for it to get burned down by a rogue dragon that spits acid, or whatever other weird shit will inevitably happen. Now get out of the

car. I'll drive, because I'm not going that way." I pointed down the highway in the direction we were facing.

He gave me a hard look as I tapped the stick shift.

"I'm doing this for you, Bree. To keep you safe," he growled. "Why can you not let others help you?"

I didn't take my hand off the stick shift. "I didn't ask you to keep me safe. Did I? And I *do* let other people help me."

Alan snickered from the back. "A lover's spat? Oh, this is too good. She used to fight me on stuff like this too. When she complained about not going out more, I told her I'd take her more places if she spruced herself up and lost some of those extra pounds."

Corb and Alan were cousins, which apparently allowed Corb to see his ghost. I don't think anything could have slowed him down faster than realizing he was pulling an Alan on me—making a decision that was not his to make, even if his heart was in the right place. He lowered his head on the steering wheel.

"Jesus. I'm sorry, Bree. I was just trying to help . . . honestly, I didn't think . . ."

I put a hand on his shoulder and felt him tense and then slowly relax under my palm as I gave him a gentle squeeze. "Look, I know it's coming from a good place. I get that. I do. You saved my life. All of you did." I swept a look at everyone in the car, including Alan , which seemed to surprise him almost as much as it did me.

"But there is something bigger going on in Savannah. Roderick said so. We can't just let that slide, we—no, not we, *I*—have to find out who killed Gran and why. Why is NOLA so important to all this? What connections are we missing? My parents, Gran, and Alan were all killed there in the same fashion. Which brings up another point. If Alan was killed in NOLA, why didn't the Savannah PD hand me over to their police force? Everything is pointing me toward NOLA, and so there I will go. Carefully, of course. Very carefully. And if y'all don't want to come with, I do understand. But I have to go. For Gran."

"I don't have a choice," Alan grumbled, then rubbed at his mostly bald head, which made his remaining hair stand in weird directions. Not a good look, but I kept that thought to myself.

I pointed a finger at him. "Believe you me, first chance we get, we are going to un-attach you from me. Again. Then you can move on, and so can I."

"But not with him," Alan tipped his chin toward Corb.

I didn't answer that shot from him.

Sarge sat up, his body sliding from wolf to man in a breath. Naked, hunky, well-muscled man. I looked across the back seat and grinned. "Nice of you to join us."

He covered his jewels, which took both of his hands, and gave me a smile, albeit a small twist on his lips. "This is not for the ladies. Besides, you can't handle the two men you have."

Kinkly sighed. "Oh, but it's so fun trying to handle multiple men. I did it once, had four going at the same time. So. Much. Fun."

I shook my head as Feish opened her mouth, no doubt to derail the conversation further and ask just how many cats she would need for four men. "Focus, team. Focus. We are going to NOLA to find my gran and figure out what's going on while we are there. Or at least, I am. You in or not?"

Sarge nodded. "I like NOLA, haven't been in a while. I can be your guide dog. Least I can do."

I sighed. He'd tried to kill me while under the magical thrall of a powerful pair of mages, and he still felt bad. No point in arguing with him. He'd just tell me it was an honor thing. Besides, I needed all the help I could get.

"Okay, Sarge is in. I know Robert is in." I put my hand on my hip bag, and one of my fingers came away smeared with something red, tacky, and mostly dry. I took a beat, grabbed the edge of the bag and flipped it open, then reached into its magically expanded interior for a small container of disinfectant wipes.

I used the wipes to get Alan's blood off my bag, doing my best not to think about it too much. "Corb, Kink? What about you two?"

"Of course, I'm in!" Kinkly flew around my head. "There are some sexy as sin fae men in NOLA, so let's get our drink on and throw out some beads!"

Feish tipped her head. "What do beads have to do with catching men? If it's like fishing, I could find great success in this place."

I wasn't going to encourage that line of thought. I needed focus from my team—

“Oh yeah,” Sarge said. “I could use a hurricane or three. And I'd put beads on a few guys.”

I was pretty sure he meant the drink and not the natural disaster, but my oh-crap meter went off. “Don't say that out loud—about the hurricane that is. It sounds like you're asking for trouble.” Sarge laughed at me, and I reached back and slapped his very bare leg. He kept laughing and I kept smacking him, but even through all that, I heard Corb.

“Yes. I'll go with you,” he said softly as he put the car in gear, did a very illegal U-turn, which was beyond stupid considering we were on the run, and headed in the other direction on the highway.

We hadn't been driving very long, maybe five minutes, before Sarge grabbed the back of Corb's seat. “We've got company. I can hear them coming. I think they are ahead of us.”

I looked all around but didn't see anything out of place. No cop cars. Nothing. It took a solid minute for me to hear them.

Sirens.

Another minute passed and a stream of cop cars crested the slight rise ahead of us, going in the opposite direction at what looked like Mach 3.

“One, two, three, four,” Kinky counted. “Holy goddess, how badass do they think you are? There are seven cars!”

She wasn't wrong. Corb's hands went all white-knuckled on the wheel, and Sarge patted his shoulder until he visibly relaxed. “Easy, man. Easy. They're looking for the van, not your car. At least, they aren't looking for it yet.”

“They're headed toward the cabin,” I said, sure of it in my gut, the same way I'd known Mr. Langley was actually Monica the realtor. “Did Roddy boy tip them off? Or did the council figure out the connection?” I wasn't entirely sure, but it seemed inevitable he was behind this somehow. Of course, Roderick might have screwed up rather than actively betrayed us. People were fallible, limited by their own pride and belief in others. Just look at how Corb had slipped up.

“No idea,” Corb said.

Sarge leaned back a little farther and pulled up a blanket from the floor, wrapping it across his hips. “You sure it’s not just some regular old police call out?”

“Yes,” I rubbed at the back of my neck, feeling as though I’d dodged a bullet. “I’m absolutely sure.”

And after that I couldn’t quite relax.

The drive to Montgomery went smoothly . . . considering we had a homophobic ghost in the back seat, sandwiched between a naked gay werewolf and a river nymph who was getting dating tips from the fairy perched on her hand. Oh, and the siren in the driver’s seat kept throwing out waves of magic that washed over my skin, making me horny as hell. Damn it, this was not the place or time.

I tried sleeping to distract myself.

I tried thinking about almost dying.

I tried to think about where we’d find Gran in NOLA.

I tried staring out the window, but it was dark and there wasn’t a lot to see.

I tried breathing exercises to slow my rising libido, clamping my legs at the knees as if that would help.

“Are you having a heart attack?” Kinkly asked as she sat on the dashboard, her tiny legs kicking against it in staccato drum. “Or is this just how old ladies breathe when they are tired and want to get laid?”

I put my hand over my face. “Kinkly, shush—”

Alan made a choking sound in the back seat. “You’re horny? You almost died, and you’re thinking about getting laid by that troll back there?”

Sarge chuckled. “Honey, she ain’t thinking about Crash right now. That cousin of yours is seriously agitated, so his siren magic is swallowing us all up right now. Which means we all want to climb on him and go for a ride. Maybe all at the same time. Which could have its merits. Like a Corb sandwich.”

I dared a glance back because I had to see the look on Alan’s face as the realization hit him that Sarge was not straight. Did he know Corb was bi?

Alan’s face did not disappoint. It went from a look of confusion, to shock, to horror, and then he whipped around to tap his cousin on

the shoulder. "Are you gay?"

I couldn't help myself. I announced to the car, "Alan wants to know if Corb is gay."

Kinkly giggled. "Oh goddess, this is seriously the most entertainment a girl could ask for on a Tuesday night. Please do answer him. Oh, I'll answer for me, I swing both ways."

Feish tapped her lower lip. "I like men, but I suppose the right woman could entertain me, though I don't know what we would do with two cats. Would the two cats fight?"

I choked on a laugh, swallowed it hard, then blinked innocently up at Corb. "Corb? Your cousin asked you a question."

He shot me a look, and maybe it was the way I was smiling at him, maybe he could tell I really didn't care who tickled his fancy as long as he was happy, but he relaxed and some of the tension went out of the air. "Some days, Alan. Some days. Depends on my mood."

Alan slumped in his seat. "Bree. I can't take this. My cousin just came out of the closet, and I'm sitting next to a naked gay werewolf who keeps looking at me." I wanted to laugh at him because I wasn't even sure Sarge could see him.

"I can't. I just can't do this!" Alan whispered.

"Yes, well what would you like me to do about it?" I asked. "These are my friends, the people who are my family now, and I love them just the way they are."

He sighed and shuddered. "Put me back in the bag."

That discussion about sexuality was the highlight of the drive to Montgomery, and after that, things really did quiet down. It was late, closing in on midnight, and now that Corb's tension had eased off some, he seemed to be controlling his magic better. Or at least enough that we could all breathe a little easier.

Now that my libido was no longer tormenting me, fatigue set in even stronger than the bruises I could feel blooming all over my hips and butt from my dash along with Sarge. Finding a comfortable spot was harder than I'd thought it would be. But I leaned my seat back and slept—fitfully, but at least I got some rest. At one point, Corb reached across and took my hand, once more tangling my fingers with his. Not a bad way to sleep. I'd slept—and I mean that in the literal sense—with him before, and he was warm and smelled good and was nice to curl up with. Despite his overprotective tendencies, he meant well. Far better than Alan ever had.

But if I compared him to Crash . . .well, that's where things got murky in my semi-asleep state. If Crash hadn't been around at all, I was pretty sure Corb and I would have moved on to the next level, and our sleeping together would not have been so platonic. His magic sang to me in a very different way than Crash's did. They were like night and day, fire and water, and not just in a metaphoric sense. Which was why it was so hard to choose between them. Especially when I was alone with one of them and the other was far away.

“Never mind. Not now,” I mumbled, not really awake, not really asleep. Time for men later. Surviving and dealing with a missing gran was first on my to-do list. The demon’s master had taken her somewhere in New Orleans for reasons I didn’t understand. Yet. I would find out if it was the last thing I did. I cringed at my own thoughts as if I were jinxing my efforts. No need to think about dying, not anytime soon. I needed to focus on things I could control. Like searching for Gran.

When I was a girl, Gran had taken me to New Orleans to meet some of her coven friends who didn’t live in Savannah. Most likely a few of the witches would still be kicking. I hoped. Maybe?

I had my reasons for the gas stop in Montgomery, although I didn’t understand them. It was one of those nudges from my gut. A ripple of memories long since forgotten. We approached the first exit, and Corb glanced at me. I waved for him to keep going, then pointed adamantly at the next one. “Here, this exit.”

His only answer was the engine of the Mustang revving down a gear, then another and another as we slowed.

“Any particular reason you wanted to get fuel here?” Corb said as he pulled into a gas station off the interstate. He hadn’t said it with a tone, but it was clear he was still kind of annoyed I’d taken over his “rescue.”

I looked at the station. “No, not this one, keep going.”

Corb’s jaw ticked as he kept the car moving down the street. “What are you looking for? I don’t even need to fill up. I’m at half a tank.”

I just shook my head. “Keep going,” I said again, my eyes sweeping the area. Like an image superimposed over reality, I could see things as they had been. My magic flared a little, and my gut tensed as the world brightened. Suddenly it looked as if it were daytime, and not the middle of the night.

A memory, I was inside a memory.

I sat next to Gran as she drove us along this road, and she smiled at me. “Almost there, honey child. You’re going to love NOLA, but this place . . . it’s special too, just don’t forget it.”

I blinked and the sunlight faded, the dark of night sweeping through my vision again.

“Slow down,” I said.

Corb muttered under his breath, but other than that was quiet.

My head suddenly snapped to the left and I was staring down a street that only had one thing on it. A gas station about a block off the main drag.

“We need to go to that one.” I pointed and he didn’t argue. Then again, my hand had already drifted back toward the stick shift.

“Do we want to ask why?” Sarge asked.

I frowned and rubbed at my head, seeing Gran beside me again, smiling, happy and alive. “No, it’s a feeling. Like I’ve been here before. And that something important is here.”

I was following my trust in Gran, and that trust said stop here. As simple as that.

As soon as the car stopped moving, I was out and stretching my legs. My body was still sore from the big fight in the goblin arena, not to mention bouncing along behind Sarge, and sitting for hours on end had not helped. But more than that, I wanted to look at this place. Why in the world would I be drawn to this gas station?

I tried to dredge up another memory, but there was nothing. Not even a whisper of Gran saying, *Here. This place is the right one.*

“Damn,” I muttered under my breath, wincing as my back twinged.

Feish got out of the back seat, something in her hand. As she approached me, she shoved a bottle of Advil and a water bottle into my hands. “Here, I brought you the magic pills. Looks like you need them. Again.”

“God bless you.” I opened the bottle and downed three pills, chasing them with half the water.

“You need to be in tip-top shape, which you are not, for New Orleans.” Feish sighed. “There is even more magic there, and it’s more in the open than in Savannah. In many ways, it is not as dangerous, but it’s so different you might not see trouble coming until it is too late.”

I glanced at her, my river maiden friend who’d once disliked me enough to try feeding me tea that would make my ass explode . . . and then later fed it to me because she needed to save my life.

Funny how things could change. “You were very quiet while we drove. Something bothering you?”

She burred a sigh and motioned with her head for me to follow her. We walked across the parking area of the gas station, the dull green neon sign flickering and buzzing. She stood under it, and I joined her despite the obnoxious noise of the slowly dying neon light above us.

“Talk to me, girlfriend,” I said.

Another big sigh and she bobbed her head from side to side. “I’m worried about the boss. He said there was big trouble with Faerie.” As in the land of the fae.

Ah. That made sense. “You think he won’t be able to make tea for himself?” I couldn’t help teasing a little.

She gave me a sharp look, eyes narrowing. “I’m worried that he’s going to get into trouble without me there to point out how stupid he’s being. He is always in trouble. Kind of like you. You two need a Feish around.”

I bit the inside of my cheeks to keep from smiling at her. “And you keep him out of trouble?”

Feish shrugged. “As much as can be said for keeping a man out of trouble, yes. He said to come with you and protect you because you are important. Which I did because we are friends, but being on his own is dangerous for his health.”

I looked past her to the road where the cars flowed past us like a river in the night, their lights brightening the world for a flash and then gone, the smell of exhaust in the air almost overpowering the smell of a rose bush we stood near.

She closed her eyes. “I shouldn’t tell you, but . . . feels like someone is taking him away on purpose. I don’t know why. Maybe Karissa again? She does not give up easy.”

I blinked a few times and put a hand on her shoulder. “I think Crash is more than capable. He can handle whatever he’s got going on, even if it’s something you don’t understand—”

Feish clamped a free hand over my mouth and tugged me backward so hard and fast that I nearly bit the palm of her hand. She tucked us in behind the three-foot-wide post that held up the large station sign that had tugged on my memories.

“That’s not good.” She pointed at four figures heading toward the blue Mustang where Corb was fueling up and Sarge sat in the back seat in a pair of sweats and nothing else.

The four figures were tall, over eight feet easily, and super slim, built like sticks, not unlike that strange Halloween Jack character I’d seen in an animated movie years before. And while no one else seemed to see them for what they were, I knew right away they were supernatural. I mean. . .they were basically animated stick figures, so that alone gave them away. But the flowing gray mist that rolled around their feet was the clincher. It hid their feet and left me wondering if they were walking or floating.

“What are they?” I whispered. I’d never seen anything like them before.

“Wraiths. Bad business those. Like hired thugs but worse of course. Make your limbs into noodles.” Feish held me tightly as if she knew I was thinking of running over there.

“Do we go and help the boys?”

Feish gave a surprised gurgle as if she couldn’t believe how dumb I was to even think it. “We stay here. Probably the council is using them to hunt for you. But how they find us so quick? Maybe tracking Corb’s car?”

I grimaced and crouched a little more. Wraiths? I couldn’t remember learning anything about them from Gran or Eammon in my training, but I pulled Gran’s book out of my hip bag and flipped through it. I really needed to alphabetize the thing. But the wraith section was near the front, and I found it quickly and skimmed the section as fast as I could.

WRAITHS ARE THE DARKEST OF ALL THE SOUL-BOUND creatures, but they can be bargained with and bought off if you have what they want. They cause confusion of the mind, as if you were drinking too much tequila. Particularly effective against groups because they can mask what you see in front of you. Under the influence of wraiths, you may end up fighting and killing your own friends. They’ll let you attack each other, then strike when you are already injured and damaged by your own allies.

They can be contained by using a combination of circles and spells. Said spells and circles don't have to be tidy, but they must be completed, or the results can be dire.

Prominently used by the darker magics as enforcers, kidnappers, and assassins.

I LOOKED UP IN TIME TO SEE THE FOUR WRAITHS SURROUNDING Corb, who was yelling at Sarge to start the car. Those two were adept fighters, and if they started fighting, I had no doubt one of them would die. I stuffed my gran's book back in the bag and pulled out one of my wicked knives and managed to unhook her webbed fingers from my arm. "Stay here, Feish."

She made another reach for me, but I was already running, limping only a little, and headed straight for the back of the Mustang. The three wraiths had fallen in around Corb. They weren't touching him, but they had their noses in the air, sniffing, and he was on his knees with his head in his hands. "Don't. Get out of my head!" he growled, and I was pretty sure he didn't mean me because his eyes were closed.

Sarge was in the back seat with his arms wrapped over his head. "I can't hear you! This isn't real!"

So they were both being affected by these things, and I had to hurry my butt up.

Drawing a circle around a beastly was pretty simple if my memory served me right. Usually chalk was used, salt would be better, but I had my knife and it was sharp and I had no doubt it would dig into the ground.

I bent at the waist and put the tip of the knife to the pavement and ran around the backside of the car as quickly as I could, as one of the wraiths turned and followed me, up to the front and down the other side until the blade touched where I started. The circle was etched clearly into the pavement, and it took me a split second to stand and snap out the closest thing to a spell I had at the front of my brain.

"Beetlejuice, Beetlejuice, Beetlejuice!"

The four wraiths turned as a unit to look at me, Corb opening his eyes to stare in apparent bafflement, and even Sarge leaned out of the window with his brows furrowed.

“What the hell? That isn’t a spell to contain anything!” He twisted his head to the side, for all the world like a large dog.

“I don’t know!” I yelled as the wraiths floated toward me, going right over the damn circle I’d made because, of course, it wasn’t complete without a proper spell. “It was the first thing I thought of!”

A hand clamped on my arm and I was yanked backward by Feish. “Maybe I was wrong. I think you do need me more than Boss.”

Feish tugged me again, and we were off and running away from the gas station, down the side of the road.

Running. Limping running.

The bane of my existence, and yet I always seemed to be doing it. “Feish, we can’t run forever!”

“I know you can’t. But we need a better place to stand our ground.” She seemed to be searching for something in particular.

I grimaced and dared to glance back. All four wraiths were following us, keeping pace with their long weird stick legs, each step covering ground like they were freaking giraffes. Dead giraffes with giant black bug eyes that reflected the lights off the gas station. Their deep gray coloring matched the mist that spooled up around their legs and seemed to carry them along. They wore tight fitted clothes that only accentuated their inhuman appearance.

Those solid, black bug eyes locked on me from their spindly heads, and it was all I could do to rip my gaze away. Something about them drew me to stare hard into their eyes and, call me crazy, but that seemed like a very bad idea.

Feish suddenly pulled me hard to the left, away from the road and into the bush. “Feish, this will slow us down!” I gasped out as I stumbled over a lump of vegetation. She only paused long enough to yank me back onto my feet.

“Them too! They all gangly goofs, they will fall too,” she threw back at me. “Come on, hurry!”

The rev of the Mustang’s engine caught my ears, and I fought the urge to turn back and check on the guys and Kink. The wraiths were too close for me to risk it. My hip bag bounced hard, and Alan

grumbled something about being left alone in peace and quiet. I thumped the bag once for good measure. The last thing I needed was for him to fly out and distract me.

The brush around us was alive with the sounds of bugs and the smell of growing things, the heat pulling on my limbs as if it were an actual weight.

“Here, here! I thought I smelled it!” Feish yelled as she gave my hand another sharp tug. We tumbled out of the long brush that had been tangling around my legs and into an open space. I picked up speed, stumbled over a stone, and went to my knees.

The ground seemed to pull my hands down into the sod, trapping me there. “Feish! I’m stuck!”

My hands were being pulled farther down, and in a matter of seconds, I was—impossibly—almost armpit deep in the ground, my hands above my head. Quicksand? But that wasn’t possible. There was no quicksand in Alabama!

Both my amulet and Louis’s heated as the talismans fought off the spell that was softening the ground and sucking me under. A spell to trap me in the ground, to keep me in one place and easier for killing.

The wraiths behind us let out a wail, like hunting dogs on the scent of their prey, and by the time I looked up, they had me encircled, bug eyes and freaky giraffe legs stalking around me.

My knees began to sink further, pulling my lower half down. I fought the hold of the earth, terror quickly silencing any smart-ass comment that might want to slip past my lips.

The wraiths did what I’d been trying to do. They drew a circle around me and them, using their long, spindly fingers in the dirt, and cut Feish out with a speed that caught us both by surprise. A wall of mist spilled up around us, mimicking the mist on the wraiths’ lower limbs. I could just see Feish on the other side of it.

Oh man, was I ducked.

Feish battered at the wall of mist with her webbed hands, and a moment later, Corb joined her. “Hang on, Bree, we’ll get you out!” he yelled. He was there then gone, the mist blocking my view of him.

I was inside the circle, and most of my friends were on the outside.

But not all of them.

“Robert!” I yelled for my skeleton friend, jammed one hand into the soft earth and dragged my bag up out of the ground at a frantic pace, jerking the bag hard in case it got stuck on a root or something. Almost crying with frustration, I yanked and tugged until it was free even as I continued to sink. “Robert! I could use some help here!”

I expected he’d show up, swaying and growling *friend* at me, and drive away the wraiths. That was what I’d hoped for anyway.

What I got was Robert as he had been in the demon home next door to Gran’s house, human-looking and totally giving me a *WTF did you do now?* look.

Robert was tall, and the hair that was dull and unkempt in his skeleton form was now long, dark, and glossy, pulled back in a leather binding so nothing hindered my view of his icy blue eyes. He held his hands palms up as he looked down at me, confusion written all over his features.

Yes, I was stuck in the ground and I had wraiths all around me. “I know!”

He arched a dark slash of an eyebrow at me. “Seriously, again? How are you doing this? And how do you get in so much trouble? Even I wasn’t this bad!”

“Gawd, if only I knew, I’d stop!” I yelped as one of the wraiths reached down and brushed long, spindly fingers across my arm. The touch burned like ice on fire, and I couldn’t help the scream that ripped out of my mouth. “Hot potato, man! Help me!”

Robert twisted around as I screamed, opened his mouth and was back to his skeletal self in a flash of light. Some kind of magic washed over me, warm and comforting like a blanket’s embrace, washing away the pain of the wraith’s touch and loosening the earth’s hold on me.

The wraiths were there, and then in a blink they were gone as if they had never been. But I’d done nothing, and as far as I could tell, no one else had done anything either.

I struggled upward, the barrier gone along with the wraiths, and then Corb was pulling me out of the ground and into his arms. I

stood there with him, breathing hard, not quite sure what happened, my arm still throbbing.

“Why did they just disappear? Not that I’m complaining.” I twisted around, looking for the tall, stick-figure wraiths. Sarge and Robert stood to the side with Feish, all three shaking their heads.

Movement behind us caught my attention. I turned and saw an old woman working her way toward us between the headstones, following a path I couldn’t see. She was bent at the waist, leaning hard on a walking stick, and her hair was braided back in a thousand little braids that had different beads and bits of ribbons tied onto the ends. Some of them were bone white, a striking contrast to her deeply darkened skin. I wasn’t sure if she was someone to be worried about or not. I’d met some mean old ladies who I wouldn’t want to cross again, no matter that they were twice my age.

Then it hit me that we stood on top of graves, surrounded by headstones. Shit, we were in a cemetery? I looked at Feish. “Why did you bring us here? We had dead things coming for us, and you brought us to a boneyard?”

She shrugged. “You have an affinity for the dead. Boss said get you to graveyard if you get in trouble. And look, here we are. In trouble again. But now safe.”

The tapping of the lady’s walking stick on stone turned my eyes to our . . . what to call her? Hostess? Savior? Enemy?

“Hello?” I said. “Did you do this? Did you bring the wraiths down on us?”

She answered my question with one of her own. “What you doing here in Alabama, Bree? Your gran would have your hide and then some if she knew you’d come this way.” She’d rested her walking stick on one of the flat gravestones, and I just stared at her for a moment. Trying to place her. Because she spoke to me as if she knew me and Gran. Hell, she’d even used my name.

Memories bubbled under the surface of my mind again, more insistent. Was this woman why I’d wanted to be on this side of the highway?

“I’m sorry, do I know you?”

“Course, you do, though maybe it’s been a few years and neither of us look like we did twenty-five years ago. Hell on fire, who does?”

she huffed at me and tapped her stick twice on the stone at her feet. "What you doing with wraiths chasing you?"

I opened my mouth to say I didn't know, but Feish cut in before I could get it out.

"She been accused of murder. They tried to execute her, but we got her out of the jail, and now wraiths after her," she said. "Trouble follows her, you know."

Kinkly made an appearance then, covered in what looked like pink powdered sugar that dusted into the air with each beat of her gossamer wings. "What did I miss? There was an open bag of candy at the gas station. I couldn't help myself. I think I might be a little drunk." And then she giggled.

I sighed and stood, pushing Corb back a little, and nodded at the woman leaning on her walking stick. "Thank you for your help. Assuming you're the one who sent the wraiths packing?"

The old woman smiled and waved her walking stick in my direction. "It's nothing to me to knock a few wraiths back on my own land, I've been protecting it for years. But they know better than to come into my territory, which tells me you have someone powerful after you. The wraiths didn't realize where they were, girl." Her eyes narrowed as she swept her gaze up and down my body. Assessing. "You know what your gran was after, what got her killed in NOLA, don't you?"

She could have knocked me down with a feather at that point. I struggled to breathe around the shock, trying to find my voice. "You know what she was doing? What got her killed?"

"Course, I do. I don't have all the pieces, but I know what she was after. Same thing that got your mama and daddy killed too." She tapped her stick a couple times on the stone. "You think 'cause I'm old I can't help?"

"Nope. I do not think that at all," I said. "But are you going to tell me what they were after, or is it going to be some riddle or half-truth that I have to figure out because the shadow world does not give its secrets easily or some garbage like that?" I didn't even bother to lift one eyebrow, skipping straight to raising both.

Her smile was wide, and she flashed perfect white teeth at me. "My name is Penny, and I am one of the last of Celia's coven."

And just like that, the memories finally surfaced. A twenty-five-year-younger Penny having tea with my grandmother in this very graveyard while I wandered about looking at gravestones, touching each one as if I could memorize them. I could almost feel the rough stone under my fingers again, could almost hear my grandmother's laughter as she and Penny talked about this and that, things that had seemed inconsequential at the time.

"Penny Hannington?" Corb said her name in an almost reverent way, which told me two things. She was well known in the shadow world, and she was powerful. But I could have guessed that part anyway. Gran had been powerful too, and Penny had said she was in her coven.

She gave a genteel nod of her head and curled one hand into a sweeping wave as she did a mock curtsy that obviously cost her some effort and was stiff as hell. I was impressed. "The one and only. Most people think I'm dead, but I've just kept a low profile. Especially with all my friends dying." She leaned heavily on her stick and narrowed her eyes on me, sharp as knives. "You killed Hattie, didn't you?"

I nodded slowly, reluctantly. "Yes, she was going to sacrifice a bigfoot to raise some sort of demon. And she tried to finish me off in the midst of it."

Penny sighed and rubbed at her chin with her free hand. "Could be she needed his heart's blood. Potent stuff that, and it plays a significant role in several of the most powerful spells that I know of. Hattie would never have been strong enough to make a spell like that happen on her own. Likely she was working with or for someone else. A stronger witch, or warlock. She wasn't one to come up with ideas on her own."

I didn't look at Corb, but he'd been working with Hattie undercover for the council, and maybe he'd learned a thing or two about her plan he hadn't shared with us yet. I waited for him to say something, and grimaced when he didn't. "That's a guess I've had too. But . . . Penny, what was it that got my gran and my mom killed? I know they were killed by the same kind of creature."

"Same as me," Alan grumbled from my bag.

Penny tipped her head and looked at my hip. "That I don't know, not any more than you apparently." She paused, "Who is that in there?"

"Ex-husband," I said. "He was killed in the same manner as Gran."

Penny gave a short, sharp laugh. "Good place to keep one of them. In a bag that is. Ex-husbands can be a right pain if you don't bury the body deep enough." She snorted and the mirth fled quickly. "It's a story I've got for you, so you should come to my place. You can stay for what remains of the night. It may help you throw off some of those looking for you. My place here has a tendency to repel those who mean harm, and draw in travelers who are looking for help."

With that, she turned and limped away, leaning heavily on her walking stick. I looked at my friends, and Sarge was the first to nod. "She's a good one. She smells right. I trust her. Besides, we easily outnumber her."

Kinkly fluttered about and settled herself on top of my head. "I'm tired, so whatever you want."

Feish shrugged. "Fine by me. Another woman means we outnumber the men."

I started after Penny, avoiding the graves wherever possible. Glancing at Robert, I wondered what he thought. "Robert? A penny for your thoughts?"

"Friend," he whispered softly.

Good enough for me.

Penny had gotten rid of the wraiths, so that had to count for something, on top of her history with me and Gran. And I *remembered* her. Gran had been happy and smiling in the graveyard that day. She'd liked Penny.

My memories of Gran had brought me to this place, to Penny. I couldn't discount that.

Then again, Gran's other friend, Hattie, had tried to kill me, and a third friend, Missy, was a right bitch. While I had no proof, I had a niggling feeling she was somehow involved in Gran's abduction by the master of the (now dead) blood-born demon in the Sorrel-Weed House.

Which meant Missy was on my shit list.

Which also meant I needed to be careful with Penny. Besides, even if she'd been a peach twenty-five years ago, people changed.

"We won't stay long," I said. "No point in bringing the heat down on you if we don't have to."

Penny wove through the grass that had grown up between the grave markers, some large and ornate, others low to the ground and perfect ankle twisters. But I didn't have to worry about tripping if I followed in Penny's footsteps: a well-worn path wove between the graves as if she walked it multiple times a day.

Another bit of memory rolled forward—that was how she kept the spells protecting her and her place intact. She walked this way daily, refreshing them the same way Gran had weeded and fed her garden to keep *her* house safe from evil.

We circled to the far side of the cemetery, and a small house appeared in front of my eyes, wavering into existence like a mirage in the desert.

"I keep it shaded from the eyes of the world," Penny said over her shoulder. "I like my peace and quiet. Only those who truly need help can find me."

The house had two stories, and I idly wondered if she was able to get to the second floor anymore given the way her limbs and body were bent. Penny grabbed the balustrade next to the stairs and pulled herself up the two stairs to the porch. A few more steps, and she turned and sank into a thickly padded chair. "There, that is much better. Now, sit and I will tell you what I know, and then you can make an informed decision. No more of this guessing shit."

I took the steps quickly and grabbed a wicker chair to her left, pulling it around. And that was when I realized that Penny and I were alone.

My friends were nowhere to be seen. "Where are they?" I stood and stared into the yard.

"They can wait out there." She waved a hand. "To them, you'll be gone for just a blink, but we'll have time to chat a bit without intrusion. It'll be easier to speak freely if you have just me to worry about."

That made me frown and pause from my looking for my friends. “What are you saying? Who should I be worried about in my group?”

She snapped her fingers and a teapot and two cups materialized on the table next to her. “I feel like a little tea to get us started.”

Penny poured herself a mug and then reached under the table and pulled out a bottle of whiskey, uncapped it, and sent a goodly amount into her tea. More than two shots worth.

I liked her already.

I tapped the top of my teacup. “When in Rome. And make it a good one, it’s been a long day.”

She gave a cackle and poured more than a triple into my cup. “Your gran never drank with me. This will be fun. And to answer your question about your friends . . . I’m not saying they don’t all mean well, but each of them has other ties. The sexy as sin siren to the council and his own urges, the wolf to his pack, the fairy to her queen, and of course, the river maid to her boss. The only one without any conflicting loyalties is your bony friend.” She made a motion, and I looked over my right shoulder to see Robert swaying there quietly. Interesting that he’d been allowed to come and no one else.

I picked up the teacup and took a good slurp. The whiskey was sharp and oaky, and the burn in my belly helped ease the fear the wraiths had caused. Whiskey in a teacup, how classy of me.

“So I can’t trust them? That’s what you’re saying.” I held the cup in both hands and watched her over the rim.

She waved a hand at me, her knuckles prominent, the skin pulled taut over them. “No, but . . . you know already that the shadow world is rarely one thing or another. You can’t say all werewolves are good or bad. You can’t say that every goblin is a stinker, or that every fairy is helpful. The shadow world has far more shades of gray than it does simple black and white. And no matter how devoted your friends are to you, their previous ties will tug on them. Their very natures will tug on them. I imagine you’ve already seen that?”

I frowned and took another swig of the whiskey, focusing on the heat as it rolled down my throat and settled into my belly. She wasn’t wrong. I’d seen it with Corb and his ties to the council . . . and even with Crash and his unwilling connection to Karissa and the goblins.

Hell, Feish had caused trouble trying to be loyal to Crash during the whole Hattie mess.

I felt a soft weight on my head and realized Kinkly had never lifted off. I reached up and scooped her off the top of my head. She was passed out, and I flipped open my bag and slid her into it. She mumbled something but didn't stir.

"Smart," Penny murmured. "See, you know I'm not wrong."

I took another swallow from my drink and got down to business. "My gran's ghost was taken," I said as I lowered the cup. "Everything is pointing to New Orleans. I'm going to find her. While I'm there, I want to find out why she and my parents were killed there. And Alan," I added as an afterthought.

Penny closed her eyes, and her lips moved silently for a moment—in a prayer, maybe?—before she spoke. "Damnation. That woman gets herself into trouble even when she's dead."

My lips quirked. "Seems to be a family trait. Finding trouble that is."

She snorted, then tapped the rim of her teacup with a fingernail. "True enough. You more than her, I'd guess?" She arched a brow in question.

I gave her a reluctant nod. "Seems that way. I'm not a witch like her. But . . . something else?" I let the unspoken question hang between us, but she didn't answer it any more than Eammon had. I wondered if she'd been spelled not to tell me. It was frustrating that no one could. If I knew what I was, then maybe I could figure out what I was capable of. That would've been good, wouldn't it?

Yeah, I thought so too.

"Your gran, Celia, she was looking for pieces of a spell," Penny said. "She had part of it she was trying to decipher. A few stanzas on a sheet of paper. A list of ingredients, if you will." She sipped her tea, which was mostly whiskey, her dark eyes thoughtful. "I don't know what exactly the spell was for, she never told me, but she was determined to find the components and keep them out of the wrong hands. Course, you and I both know she never came back from NOLA, at least, not alive."

I clutched the teacup so hard, I worried for a moment it would break. I forced my fingers to ease off the bone china. "A spell? What

spell could be worth dying for?”

Penny kept tapping the rim of her cup. “That is the question. Something powerful, for sure. Something that could change the world if it was used. Knowing Celia, it wasn’t because she wanted to complete the spell, but rather because she didn’t want anyone else to. Being a Coven of Silver, we are guardians of both worlds: human and shadow filled. But how do your parents figure into this? That is the place to start, I think. With their deaths.”

My hand dropped to the bag at my hip. Gran’s spell book was in there, a piece of her I still possessed. A niggling, half-drunk memory tried to surface, but it settled back under the murk before I could take hold of it.

“Hattie was raising a demon,” I said. “She wanted the blood of a bigfoot to do it. You said there were only a few spells that would call for an ingredient like that.”

Penny’s eyelids lowered and she pursed her lips. “That will help narrow down which spell she was hunting for. There are maybe fifty or so that use the blood of a bigfoot. Assuming there is more than one copy of the spell to find. Goes along with what Celia was hunting for, I think, something very rare, something very hard to find.”

A chill of apprehension twisted up with a curl of excitement. “You know for sure what Gran was looking for in New Orleans? Won’t that help narrow the search down further?”

Penny gave a sad smile and took another swig of whiskey before she answered me. “It would. She was looking for the wings of a fallen angel.”

I tried desperately to quirk one eyebrow at Penny, because sitting there on her tiny porch drinking whiskey out of fine china teacups, I was sure she'd just said that Gran had been looking for the wings of a fallen angel in NOLA.

Then again, New Orleans was known for being a sinful city. Maybe it wasn't so surprising it had hosted a fallen angel or two at some point.

"What?" My mouth moved before I could think better of it.

"Rude," she muttered. "You young ones forget your manners too quick. What? Eh? How about a proper response?"

It had been some time since I'd been called a "young one," let alone called out on my manners, but I suppose next to Penny, who was likely in her nineties, I *was* young. "Pardon me," I tried again, "but could you repeat what you said about angel wings? I thought maybe I misheard you."

Penny nodded. "That's better. Now, Celia told me that she was sure that if anywhere in the world she'd find the wings of a fallen angel, it would be in New Orleans. Popular place for the otherworldly as you can imagine, and more temptations than even an angel could resist. Apparently." She leaned back in her cushioned chair with a sigh, holding her cup to her chest. "Whoever took your gran's ghost likely knows the knowledge of the location of those wings is locked somewhere in her soul. Of course, I'm assuming a new player hasn't stepped into the arena in the six months since your gran's murder."

Something about the matter-of-fact way she stated it got to me. *Murder*. I mean, I'd known that Gran hadn't died naturally, but hearing it like that made my throat tighten. Which called for another swig of whiskey to loosen things.

Robert growled a little. "Whiskey. Please. Friend."

I handed him what was left in the bottom of the teacup, and he grasped it with his hands, bony fingers clacking against the bone china, and then the distinct sound of the whiskey hitting ribs as it slid down and dripped to the ground beneath his feet.

Penny sighed. "You got several problems, girly. Someone in Savannah is trying to kill you, that much is obvious, and whoever took Celia won't hesitate to do the same to you and your friends if you get in their way."

"Tell me something I don't know," I mumbled as I took the cup back from Robert. As tempting as it was to pour another full cup, I restrained myself. I needed my wits about me for what was coming.

Drinking could come later, during a celebration of some sort. Like a *yay, we're alive and the bad guy is dead* sort of celebration. Maybe I'd get some champagne and really class things up.

Penny snapped her fingers, and a small square card appeared in her hand. "You can stay at our coven's safe house in NOLA. Room on the third floor at the end was the one Celia liked. It's on Rampart Street, right near a small unmarked cemetery and not far from the river. This should help you out some. It's a hidden house, like this place here, so don't lose this card or you won't find your way in."

"Will my friends be able to go in?" I asked.

"If you lead them in by the hand, one at a time," she said with a heavy sigh.

I stared at the woman across from me, seeing what time had done to her skin, her hair, and her body, aging her and giving her aches and pains. She wasn't spry in any sense of the word, yet her eyes glittered with life and intelligence and more than that . . . fun. She had a spirit of mischief about her that made me smile, and I suspected it was what had drawn Gran to her. If I was the type to find trouble, Penny was trouble in a nutshell.

"Why are you smiling at me?" She tipped her head to one side and squinted at me.

I grinned as the idea flowed out of my mouth before I could think better of it. “You want to go to NOLA with us? See what we can figure out together?”

Her cackle filled the air as she slapped the table. “You trust me?”

“Oh, hell no.” I waved a hand at her. “But you’re fun, and I think you can help me find Gran. Some memories came back to me in the graveyard. She let herself relax with you in a way she never did with Missy and Hattie. And I think she brought me here for a reason back then, maybe so I could find you again.”

Penny pushed to her feet. “I thought you’d never ask. It would be against the coven’s rules for me to suggest it, but you can ask for assistance and I can agree to give it, which we’ve just done. I will help you find your path, Bree O’Rylee.”

I nodded. “Do you need anything before we go?”

She tapped her cane on the porch. “Nah, got my cane. The safe house is stocked with food, clothes, and spell books.”

I held out an arm, and she settled her hand in the crook of it as I helped her down the stairs . . . and back into view apparently.

Corb stood at the bottom of the stairs, so close he should have been able to see them, yet his eyes never landed on them, only on me. “Shit, Bree, you just disappeared!”

“How long was I gone?” I asked as I helped Penny walk through the long grasses toward the cemetery. The others turned to follow us.

“Five seconds. Less maybe,” Sarge answered. “Wait, what is happening?”

“Penny is coming with us,” I said. “She was one of Gran’s friends, and she’s got a place in NOLA that will hide us.”

The silence of the two men was telling. But Feish stepped toward us and said, “She is not your best friend. I am. To be clear, that is the rule.”

Kinkly pushed the lip of my bag open and hung over the edge of the leather, yawning. “I don’t care who comes with us. I just need to sleep off this sugar.” Her jaw cracked on the next yawn, and then she tumbled back into the bag.

There was a grumble from my hip bag as Alan asked who was coming with us. I lifted the flap and helped Kinkly out. Alan’s face

stared up at me. I said, "A witch who knew Gran is coming with us. She can help out. Also, she likes whiskey in her tea."

Alan grimaced and withdrew. "A pair of luses, just like you and Mavis."

I smiled to myself as I let the leather flap drop on his face.

Every girl needs a girlfriend to drink with who won't tell your stage-whispered secrets to anyone else. Sometimes that girl is your own age, and sometimes she isn't.

We cut through the cemetery, past where the wraiths had tackled me and then on through the bush to the side of the road, where Corb's Mustang sat waiting. Sarge must have driven it over while Corb ran after us.

I slid into the backseat, squished between Sarge and Feish, and let Penny take the front passenger seat.

Corb was silent through the whole walk from Penny's place to his car. Not a peep out of him as he turned the key, cranked the wheel, and got us going once more toward New Orleans.

I wondered just how long he could hold it together before he burst out with something about bringing someone new in without his say-so.

Sarge leaned in close to me and whispered, "Want to bet on how long before he freaks out?"

I sighed. "Five minutes after arrival at the house. I think he'll hold out until then."

"I say it'll happen as soon as the car door shuts, still in the driveway," Sarge whispered.

Kinkly mumbled. "Before we hit the outskirts of NOLA."

I looked over at Feish, who pursed her fish lips before speaking. "Sooner is better so you can see that he is not the man for you. Boss is. This one is just horny."

Of course, she didn't whisper that at all. Corb shot me a look in the rearview mirror, and I shrugged. "You know Feish; calling it how she sees it." When he tensed, I gave him a smile. "Doesn't mean she's right, Corb. It's just her opinion."

I wiggled in my seat until I could pull my hip bag around and open it. I reached in, pushing Alan to the side, and pulled out my gran's spell book.

Penny somehow knew what I was doing without turning around. “I heard that you gave Missy your gran’s spell book. That true?”

“I gave her a spell book, that’s for sure,” I said. “But not the one she wanted.”

Penny laughed. “I don’t know that Missy is as bad as she comes across. She’s always been sour. Bad upbringing on her, but she does her best.”

“Pretty sure she’s the one that untethered Gran from the house, which made it possible for her to be taken. She was there, demanding the spell book, and then suddenly Gran got snatched up? No coincidence as far as I’m concerned,” I muttered as I flipped open the book on my lap and pulled out a small flashlight to read by. I’d have to move fast because reading in a moving car made me nauseous.

Sarge leaned his head back against the seat and slumped down, closing his eyes. “Wake me up when we get close.”

Kinkly was already back asleep, snoring lightly from her place which was now in the curve of the top flap of my bag.

Feish looked out the window. “Still think the boss is better for you.”

That made me smile as I looked down at the book. “Love life later, work right now,” I said.

I flipped to the section on wraiths and poked through it until I found what I was looking for. I’d review the rest of the information later—in case we actually had to fight them next time—but first I wanted to know what type of supernatural had likely called them.

A necromancer. Well, that made my guts tighten in an uncomfortable way.

I put my finger on the word and thought about all of the men in the council. One of them had definitely been a necromancer. He’d made Alan shut his mouth, which had been amazing. I tried to think about his features, but he really hadn’t stood out except for his amazing ability to silence Alan.

“Penny?”

“Yes?”

“A necromancer would have been able to raise up the wraiths, right?”

She didn't twist around in her seat. "If it was just one, it was what you'd call a top-of-the-class necromancer. Normally, a necromancer can just hold one or maybe two, and there were four on you."

I looked down at the book. "There's no mention of anyone else being able to call them forward."

The old woman turned in her seat. "That's because no one else can do it, not even a witch as powerful as your gran could have called up and held onto that many wraiths. Maybe one, if she was working with another witch, but not four. That's power in a nutshell." Penny tapped her walking stick on the floor of the car with a steady thump. Her tapping seemed to coincide with her thought process. "Don't know many necromancers who could have done it. At least none that are alive. He could have help though, I suppose."

"But I'm guessing a necromancer could have taken Gran's ghost?"

Penny gave me a grim nod. "Yes, that's a distinct possibility."

I reached forward and touched Corb on the shoulder. "Could you call Louis? Would he know some of the necromancers?" Being the resident necromancer for the Hollows, Louis should have some connections. While he was a bit of a snob and, from what I could tell, not much of a necromancer himself, he still might be able to help us. And he'd been worried about Eammon, which made me think he knew something was up.

Corb's shoulder was tense under my hand and his tone was sharp. "No. He wouldn't help us if he could, and you and I both know he's useless when it comes to the dead. He can't even see your skeletal friend. His own coven. . .they booted him out of their inner circle."

My eyebrows shot up. "Necromancers have an 'in crowd'?"

Corb's eyes never wavered from the road as he spoke. "Every species does. The council is supposed to look out for everyone, but we've all seen how that works."

I leaned back in my seat, thoughts running rampant in my head, trying to form connections. I panned through the book until I found the section on necromancers.

There was not a lot of new information. I let my finger trail along the words, following the flashlight's illumination. Necromancers could

raise the dead, call up wraiths, and bring someone back from the brink of death by driving the specter of death away—not indefinitely, but long enough for the person to be healed. I flipped the page over, but the entry didn't continue on the other side.

I tried looking up angels, but there wasn't anything in the book about them. Tried devils on the off chance there might be a connection. Nothing there either.

My stomach gave a roll, and I grimaced as the motion sickness set in. But I couldn't stop. I hadn't found anything yet about angel wings, certainly not in conjunction with necromancers.

I frowned as another memory tried to jerk its way out of that murky spot in the back of my head. It gave another wriggle before falling still.

I flipped through the book, doing what I could to memorize the order of things so I'd have an easier time finding information on the fly. My guts twisted up and I swallowed hard. A few more pages, and I'd have to give it up.

Another jerk of memory. Something to do with angel wings. Damn it, I'd almost had it that time.

I shook my head again and tried to force the memory to reveal itself. . . .something about Robert and the oak tree. I touched my head. "But not this book. Another one? Another book?"

Sarge glanced at me, and I waved him off and tried to read another page.

A bigger swell of nausea rolled through me, putting an end to reading time. I closed my eyes, flipped Gran's spell book shut and slid it back into my hip bag.

With my eyes closed, I tried to think about anything that would distract me from the growing need to lose my lunch. It would not win me any points with Corb if I puked in his very nice car. I swallowed hard as the saliva rushed through my mouth, only making the need to vomit worse. But the smell of dog bombarded me from one side, and saltwater from the other, and it was pushing me over the edge.

Sweat beaded on my forehead and dripped down my spine.

"Windows down, please," I said. "Now!"

A moment later, the fresh night air swept in around me.

Eyes closed, I focused on the issues at hand. We needed to find the necromancers who'd done this. The ones who'd taken Gran and set the wraiths on me. Were they the ones looking for the spell?

Angel wings.

My nausea eased, my breathing deepened, and I tumbled into a dream. I found myself beneath the oak tree with Robert, drunk as a skunk, reliving a moment that hadn't happened all that long ago.

I LOOKED AT THE BOOK IN MY LAP. I'D FLIPPED ALL THE WAY TO the back looking for a silly saying about houses. The top edge of the back page curled ever so slightly, separated at the corner like . . . it was glued together?

I picked at the edge with a fingernail, still drunk as a skunk but pleased to have a distraction from everything. The glued pieces crackled as I pulled at them, and it slowly gave way under my persistence.

A slip of paper fluttered out, hidden in that pocket between the pages. I picked it up and stared at the words, not really understanding what I was seeing. Of course, I read it out loud.

*"Of death and power, of magic and pain,
"That which comes shall find those slain,
"Raised anew and given life,
"A warning alone, this call is strife."*

I frowned at the paper, turned it over to see nothing but a number on it. Three. What the hell did a three have to do with whatever it was I'd just read?

I JERKED AWAKE IN THE BACK SEAT OF CORB'S MUSTANG, HEART pounding and adrenaline roaring through me.

"I think I have part of the spell."

As soon as I woke, I blurted out what I'd remembered. Which happened just as Corb pulled into the driveway of an ornate house with scrolling ironwork and several balconies on the four-story frame. He drove forward as Penny startled awake. "Where are we now? Holy damnation, we're here already? Good. I have to pee like a racehorse."

She quickly mumbled a spell under her breath, and I could feel something slide over us even in the car.

"There, easier than taking you all in one at a time," the old witch said. "Much less work this way."

A spell prickled against my skin, one that was all about hiding us.

I looked through the back window in time to see a shimmer slide over the rear of the car, like a glimmering sheet of gossamer material that cut us off from prying eyes.

Magic, I would never get tired of seeing it in action.

"What did you say?" Sarge mumbled, his shoulder bumping mine.

"The stanza," I repeated, then reached forward and touched Penny on the shoulder, wincing as my muscles pulled tight. "The spell, I think I've read part of it. I think I've actually maybe got a piece of it."

"Did you hear me?" How could any of them be ignoring something so important? Then again, I could feel my own bladder demanding action.

Penny swung a hand back and caught me in the face with her palm, covering my mouth. "Stop blabbering, girl, there are ears everywhere. You got to learn not to tell all your secrets in the wide open." Penny let herself out of the car and the rest of us piled out behind her. My hip bag rumbled, and I flipped it open.

Alan spilled out and stretched as if he had any muscles. "Hardly comfortable, but better than sitting next to him." He gestured toward Sarge with a thumb.

I rolled my eyes. "Even if you were alive and gay like him, Sarge wouldn't hit on you. You've got no hair and a pot belly, and that's not even taking into consideration your shitty attitude."

Sarge looked over his shoulder at me. "Alan chatting you up about little old me?"

I nodded and Sarge grinned. "I'd induct him to my side of the bed if he lost some weight and got hair plugs. Assuming he hasn't changed since I last saw him alive, he needs a little help being beautiful."

I rolled my eyes, but Alan stumbled back like Sarge actually meant it. I mean . . . he could not be more homophobic if he tried. "I think the lady protests too much," I said.

Alan shot me a look. "What are you saying?"

"Just that you . . . never mind." I really didn't want to remind him about our lackluster sex life and the things that had made me wonder about his sexuality. I was too tired for a fight of that magnitude with my dead ex-husband after the day and night I'd had.

"She's saying she thinks you still in the closet," Feish announced to the air, unable to see Alan, but picking up on our back and forth. "You just too dumb to realize."

While Alan spluttered and yelled that he was not gay, not in the least, just ask all the women he'd pleased since our divorce, Penny opened the door to the four-story house and waved us in.

"Children, do move quickly," she said. "Eyes are everywhere in NOLA."

I motioned for Sarge and Feish to go ahead of me. Kinkly was still passed out on my shoulder, where she'd moved to sleep at some point, her arms tangled in a lock of my hair to keep her in place. Robert swayed to one side of me.

“Friend,” he said softly but didn’t move to follow us inside.

“Yes, you stay out here, keep an eye on things.” I patted him on the shoulder and he grabbed my hand, holding it there.

For just a moment his image wavered, and the other Robert, the one who had flesh on his, well, bones, looked back at me. His eyes were deadly serious. “Death, in all its forms, is haunting this city, Bree.”

Just that one line, and then it was skeletal Robert again. I patted his hand. “I got it. Danger abounds. We will be careful.”

Corb waited for me at the door, his face drawn tightly. I smiled up at him. “I’d really prefer for you to lose your cool inside, if you don’t mind.”

“I’m not going to lose my cool,” he said.

“No yelling?”

He shook his head. “No.”

“No freaking out that I brought a witch with us?”

His jaw twitched and his throat bobbed, but he shook his head. “No.”

I motioned for him to go ahead of me and he did, leaving me outside for just a moment on my own. Which meant I was the only one who saw the black-robed figure across the street, staring in our direction. The hood of the cloak swept one way, and then the other, and then the figure moved up the street.

Searching. But I would bet my last dollar that he couldn’t pinpoint us. Score one for the secret house of the Coven of Silver.

Three guesses what the mysterious figure was looking for, and the first two guesses don’t count.

“Well, that’s just ducking great,” I muttered as I shut the door, leaning into it hard and flicking the lock for good measure. There was a powder room at the entrance, and I let myself in and relieved the mounting pressure in my bladder with a sigh.

Washed up and feeling better, I followed the sounds of low discussion through the house into the kitchen where Sarge stood at the counter and was dutifully whipping something up. I didn’t care what it was, only that it was food and I was hungry.

“The stanza—” I said.

“Let’s eat first.” Penny pointed her walking stick at the fridge. “Get them eggs going.”

I knew better than to argue with a woman over eighty who still had the strength of will to wallop you with her walking stick if you walked too close, or smack you in the face when she thought you should shut your mouth. So I cracked a dozen eggs and scrambled them, adding milk and a big shot of hot sauce. Sarge did pancakes and bacon, and I used the remaining elements to cook up the eggs. In no time, everyone was eating (minus the still sleeping Kinkly). The sun was just rising as we finished our very early breakfast.

As we finished, Feish yawned. “I’m tired. Going to read my romance book and go to sleep. You aren’t going anywhere?” She gave me a pointed look with her bulbous eyes.

I shook my head. “Going to talk to Penny and then get some sleep.”

Sarge stretched. “Yeah, you can fill me in later too. I’m not one for riddles or stanzas.” He kissed me on top of the head. “I’m glad you’re safe.” Warmth suffused me, and I patted his ass as he went by. He gave a little hop. “Saucy.”

As Sarge and Feish wandered off to find their respective beds, I noticed a small spider hanging off the back pocket of his loose pants. I did a double take as Jinx gave me a wave. Good thing I hadn’t swatted the other cheek.

This obsession of hers was not going to end well, but as unpredictable as she was, Jinx had proven handy more than once. I figured I’d let this ride, even if she was crushing hard on a guy who would not return the attention. After spending some time with Sarge during the whole goblin king ordeal, she’d decided it was meant to be because they were both shifters. She wanted to make a go of it with him.

I wished her luck, but didn’t have much hope for her.

I stood and cleared the table, Corb helping quietly. I knew without asking that he wouldn’t leave until Penny did. No matter what he might think of her abilities, he clearly didn’t trust her.

“Now the stanza,” Penny said. “Let me hear it.”

I paused at the sink and rolled the words through my mind again before I spoke them.

"Of death and power, of magic and pain,
"That which comes shall find those slain,
"Raised anew and given life,
"A warning alone, this call is strife."

I paused as I lifted both brows. "What do you think? It sounds like it could be important."

Penny pursed her lips, tapping the floor with her walking stick. "Could be. Was it in your gran's spell book?"

I wiped my damp hands on a tea towel and flipped open my bag, slung over the back of a chair. "No, it wasn't. The stanza was in this —" I dug around in the bag and then handed her *Black Spells of Savannah and the Undead*. I'd picked it up on a whim in the used bookstore, egged on by Oster Boon, the leprechaun who'd sold me Gran's book. And I'd found the stanza hidden in the back.

She didn't take the book, just stared at it. I laid it on the table in front of her, then sat in the closest chair. I flipped the book open to the back cover, which I peeled apart to retrieve the piece of paper that had the stanza written on it. "See, there is a number three here. And inside the book." I let the book go, and it flipped around *on its own* until it stopped on the same line as before.

Of demon skin and angel wing.

I pointed at it. "This, this is why that stanza came back to me. Because I saw this at the same time."

Penny sucked in a breath and her walking stick trembled against the floor. "I don't know for sure. I'll have to do some research. See what I can find, but if this . . . if this is real." She stood. "I need to think on this. I need to call on my guides to direct me. This is more than just a bad spell, Breena O'Rylee. It could be devastating to our world. It could literally be the worst spell imaginable. One that is only told of in whispers and legend. A spell that is not supposed to exist."

My jaw dropped. I'll admit it. I mean . . . saving the world sounds good in the movies, but not so much when you were in the middle of it and didn't really know what the hell was going on. I would've asked her more, but she stood and held her hand out to me as if sensing my questions and stopping them. "Let me think on it. We'll discuss it tonight at dinner. Get some sleep, we all need it."

And with that, she shuffled off, leaving me and Corb in the kitchen. He had his arms elbow deep in soapy water as he cleaned up the dishes and cutlery. Acting for all the world like he was content to be doing menial work.

“I didn’t thank you yet, for getting me out of there. Out of the jail that is,” I said. I chose not to say anything about Crash helping. No point in poking the bear if I didn’t have to.

He nodded, his words short and sharp. “Couldn’t leave you to die. I thought you’d know that.”

Yeah, he was still upset. I sighed, tired and painfully aware this conversation was only going to make me more exhausted. “Corb, why are you upset now?”

He turned, his shirt stretching across his broad shoulders. “You just made a decision that would affect us all. Like it was nothing to you to make it for the rest of us. Especially when you accused me of doing the same thing.”

I stared at him, not really shocked this was the direction he’d taken. “Right. But I didn’t tell you that you *had* to come with me. I gave you a choice at the beginning. This is my journey, Corb. You didn’t want to give me a choice—you wanted to just stuff me into a cabin.” I paused and let that sink in. “As for Penny, she is part of this. And what I’m hearing is that you don’t trust my judgment.”

“I do, but—”

“I never would have asked Penny to come if I’d thought she would hurt any of you. I remember her from when I was a girl, Corb. She was a good friend of my gran’s. My memories of Gran *took* me to her.”

“So was Hattie. So was Missy.” He tossed the frying pan into the water, and I cringed. Cast iron. Didn’t he know not to wash it with soap and water? I pulled it from the sink and dried it with a paper towel.

“Yes, you’re right about Missy and Hattie. But a coven is thirteen witches. I only knew a few members of Gran’s coven growing up—they were spread out across the south. You think they’re all out to get me?” I stood up a little straighter. “What is the real issue here, Corb? That you aren’t running the show?”

“That you don’t love me,” he whispered.

He couldn't have caught me more off guard if he'd thrown the frying pan at my head. And those five little words could not have hit harder than said frying pan.

He didn't turn around, his head lowered with his chin to his chest. "I'm a siren, Bree. Love doesn't come to us the same way it does to the rest of the supernatural world. We rarely get to be with one person—our very nature won't allow it. We flit between relationships and people all the time, and I've always been fine with that. But with you . . . you consume my thoughts. I can't get you out of my head, and you don't seem to feel the same way. It's eating me up inside."

I stood there stunned, and he took my silence and ran with it.

"Feish keeps saying that you belong with Crash. I don't know if that's true, maybe you believe it. Either way, it doesn't matter. I can't walk away from you. Before, I thought I could share you, but now I . . . I don't think I can. I don't understand it. It's like you're calling to the siren side of me, which is impossible, because you aren't a siren. I want to protect you, but you keep throwing yourself into danger as if you don't care if you live or die."

I went to stand next to him. His hands were buried in the water, his forearms showing every line of tension in his body as the muscles flexed and twitched, his head bowed as if he couldn't even look at me. "I don't particularly care to die, at least not yet. I mean, if that was the case, I would have just refused the ride out of the jail."

He didn't laugh.

Shit, I was shit at this. I bit my lower lip and then plunged in. "Corb, I don't know what to say. You have to know that I care about you, that you are an important part of my life, but love isn't on the table right now. Not for you, and. . ." I swallowed hard. "I don't think for Crash either."

Some of the tension flowed out of him, and he lifted his head to look at me. "You don't love him?"

"I'd love to jump on him." I shrugged and fought the emotions tangling inside of me. "But I'd love to jump on you too. I haven't had anyone in my bed for a long time, and you're both so freaking hot, it's hard to think around you." The tension ramped back up as I said that last part, his gaze taking on an intensity that I felt all the way to the center of my bones. Which was not the goal here.

I was supposed to be defusing this situation, not making it worse. “I’m just being honest. I don’t know that *either* of you are good for me. Let’s be straight, neither of you have been particularly upfront with me. You both try and fail. So maybe that’s on me. Maybe I just have shitty instincts when it comes to men. Look at my first choice, after all.”

Corb blew out a big breath. “Yeah, I never understood you and Alan.”

“Honestly, neither did I, and it’s even more baffling now that I know what I gave up for him.” I frowned. “Maybe when we find Gran, I’ll ask her what she remembers about that time, when I left town because I was gaga over him.”

That thought might have stayed with me longer, but I was rudely interrupted.

Corb put his still soap-covered hands on either side of my face, warm and soft, and kissed me.

Here's the thing about kissing a guy who has magic humming under his skin mere hours after surviving yet another threat on your life: it doesn't leave a lot of room in your head for anything like "there might be a better time than this" or "let's save Gran first and make out later!" or even "you don't know who you want, you really want to make out with both guys?"

Nope, all those thoughts blew out of my head as if whooshed away with all the force of a hurricane roaring in off the open sea.

Corb's mouth moved across mine with a silken skill that left me breathless, his siren magic cascading over my skin and calling up images of swimming naked in the ocean with him, of the waves washing against my skin and his lips following the path of the water.

He groaned into my mouth as one hand trailed down my neck, across my collarbone, down my arm, and then skillfully found its way around to the small of my back. He slid his hand under my shirt so he could press his palm against my bare skin.

I pushed myself against him, going onto my toes so I could get even closer. My hands found their way under his shirt, sliding up over his perfect abs to his chest, feeling every inch of him.

His skin was hot under my fingertips and I let my hands drift lower, closer to his belt buckle. Another whispered groan slid from his lips as he grabbed my ass and lifted me to sit on the kitchen counter.

“Better,” he growled as he tugged me to him, our bodies fitting all too well. His hands were at the edge of my shirt, and he pulled it up over my head. His shirt swiftly followed. Pressed together as we were, skin on skin, I couldn’t think past the feeling of his magic rolling through me, or maybe that was my magic answering his. I couldn’t be sure.

What I knew was that this felt like nothing else.

Our mouths barely left each other as we kissed harder and deeper, more frantic with each passing second, his magic pulsing harder through my veins, driving all sense out of my head. I wanted to roll around on him naked in the sand at the water’s edge, wanted to feel the waves wash over me while he pushed into me. A whimper slid out of me, and he kissed it away as I twisted where I sat, feeling him hard against me in every sense of the word.

Nothing mattered but Corb in that moment, him and his body, him and his touch and kisses that were slowly drowning me.

Not Gran.

Not almost dying.

Not finding out that there was a spell that could ruin the world . . . and I might know part of it.

That realization was what slowed me. It was no small thing to pull myself out from under the waves of desire.

And that was why I pulled back. If his magic was making me forget why we were there, then that wasn’t right. I put a hand on his chest, his heart hammering under my palm. My own heart was beating so hard, I could feel the pulse in my neck and other areas that were definitely below my belt.

“Corb, stop,” I whispered even as I planted another kiss on his lips.

He leaned his forehead against mine, kissing his way along the side of my face. “Bree, you undo me.”

A shudder slid through me, and I wanted nothing more than to take him to bed and find out where this tidal wave would carry us—if I could truly undo him. If this feeling of drowning while still being able to breathe would rock my world.

Part of me whispered *yes, please*.

The other part said I was a fool to even consider it. A romp, it would be nothing more than a romp. He flitted between relationships, and I would just be another notch in his belt. Maybe not right away, but at some point . . . I would just be another past tense girl.

I didn't need my heart trampled on, not in the middle of a life-or-death situation. I needed to be smart, and that was hard when my body felt like a Niagara Falls of hormones.

Smart. I was smart.

I put both hands on his bare chest and gently pushed him back, much as the rest of my body protested. "I need to sleep. So do you." His eyes lifted to mine, and I shook my head. "In our own beds. Alone."

I slid off the counter and my legs barely held me up as I my feet touched the floor. Corb put his hands on my waist, helping me steady myself. Again I brushed them off. "Goodnight, Corb."

I mean, it was first thing in the morning, but I wasn't about to say good day. I grabbed my shirt from the counter and pulled it back on, inside out and backward, so the tag fluttered with each breath I blew out.

I grabbed my bag, then made my way through the house until I found the room that Gran had always liked. It felt like her. I opened the closet and, sure enough, I recognized a few of the tops on the hangers. "Hey, Gran," I ran my fingers over the deep purple satin top, a color she had loved. "I'll find you."

Throat tight, I went to the attached bathroom, closed the door, and leaned against it. I just needed a minute.

I made myself move lest I end up in a crying puddle on the floor. I stripped out of my clothes down to my bra and underwear, and let myself back out into the bedroom and put my leather hip bag on the bedside table.

A whisper of cool air alerted me to Alan's presence before he spoke.

"Made out with Corb, did you?" he said with surprisingly little venom.

I slid under the covers. He sat at the foot of the bed, his shoulders slumped and his belly hanging slightly over the edge of his pants. If he'd been kind to me, if he'd loved me the way I'd needed to

be loved, I wouldn't have cared that he was balding. Or had a pot belly. But he'd belittled me for every perceived shortcoming, and it had made his own imperfections glaringly obvious. I sighed. "Yes, I made out with Corb. You have something to say about it?"

He shrugged. "He always got the girl, Breena. You should keep that in mind."

I yawned and put the back of my hand to my mouth. "Why would that bother me? I'm the girl, remember?"

Alan shook his head. "Do you see him sticking it out with you? You think you could put up with him cheating any more than you could handle it with me?" Alan snorted. "I mean, I didn't know he was a siren. I knew he always got the girl, and then the next girl, and the next. He's not made for monogamy. And if I know anything about you, it's that you are. You are a one guy kind of girl."

I frowned and closed my eyes, rolling my back to him.

"Just like old times," he muttered.

I held up my hand and flipped him off.

"Again, just like old times. Real mature of you," he said as he began to pace the room. Not that he made any sound with his feet, but I could sense him moving around. The swirls of energy as he passed me made me want to swat him.

Instead, I sat up, grabbed a t-shirt from the closet and slid it over my head, then snagged a pillow and a blanket, and made my way down to the first-floor sitting room. The house was quiet, everyone else was sleeping, and I just wanted . . .hell, I didn't know what I wanted.

I wanted to see Crash. I wanted to know if anything I'd felt with Corb was real.

More than that, I wanted my gran back. I wanted to lean on her strength and ask her how in Hades we were going to get through this mess. I wanted to hear her laugh and see her smile, and yes, she was already dead, but this was like losing her all over again.

I put my head in my hands and a few tears slipped out. I missed my gran, and I was scared that I wouldn't be able to bring her home. NOLA was no small city to take on, especially when you were looking for a ghost. There was probably a ghost on every damn corner.

I rubbed the tears away, but they kept coming as I stared out into the gloomy streets feeling sorry for myself.

The sun may have come up, but the clouds had stuck around and a steady drizzle coated the outside world with a gray tint. I think I drifted in and out of sleep, my eyes only closing for ten minutes at a time. Unable to really sleep, and unable to really be awake.

How to find Gran, that was the question that kept swirling through my head.

I snapped my fingers and hurried upstairs.

Back in my room (okay, Gran's room), I dug through my bag and pulled out the folder with the case files for Gran's, Alan's, and my parents' murders.

I spread the papers out, trying to see a link between them beyond the obvious. Alan leaned over my shoulder, sending a cold wash of air through me.

"What are you looking for?"

I flipped through the pictures, few as they were. "I'm not sure exactly." Then, swallowing my pride, I asked, "What would you suggest from a lawyer's perspective?"

He leaned closer and motioned at the stack. Without a word, I spread the papers out farther so he could see them all individually. My bed was covered with the three different files.

As Alan studied them, frowning, I studied *him*. "Alan. You died here, is there anything at all you can remember about why you were here?"

He stepped back and frowned, brows creasing deeply. Rubbing at his forehead, he was quiet a moment before answering, "A business deal? I think . . . someone hired me?"

Holy schnitzel. "A client was here in NOLA?" This changed things.

Alan paced the room. "Yes, I don't remember anything else like a woman—"

"And we both know that you hate anything supernatural, so this would not be your chosen vacation destination," I said as I started yanking clothes on. Simple clothes from the closet, jeans and a tank top. From the looks of things the closet had clothes in a few sizes for

whatever woman came through the safe house. The jeans were tight and the tank top loose, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

Alan nodded furiously. "I remember . . . there was a large house, something very big like a mansion on a street corner. Three stories, I think?"

That wasn't going to narrow it down for me, not here, but I kept my mouth shut as I laced up a pair of runners. I didn't want to set him off. A ghost remembering anything about their death was a freaking miracle. "What else? Any detail could help."

He blew out a long breath. "A sign on the house? I thought it was strange to meet there. Just a feeling."

So maybe a tourist spot? That only slightly narrowed it down. "Color of the sign? Or a specific word that stood out to you?"

Alan left the room and started down the stairs. "I think I can find it."

I followed him, leaving the files spread out on the bed. Before opening the door at the base of the stairs, which Alan had already glided through, I scrawled a note on one of the sticky notes on the foyer table. That went on the inside of the door, and away we went.

Going with Alan to do recon.

Yeah, like that wasn't going to freak everyone out.

But Alan was jogging now, and I couldn't lose sight of him. I hurried after him as he made his way off the coven's property and deeper into the city.

I was quiet and let him take the lead. He'd stop at an intersection, sway a little like Robert, and then burst into action again, taking a left here, a right there, straight across. Because it was still so early in the morning, the streets were relatively quiet. The few people I saw? Well, I wasn't even sure they were alive.

In fact, more than one person we passed had terrible wounds that bled onto their clothes, even though they were just going about their days. Ghosts.

I blinked, and more of them swirled into being, rising from the ground as I passed. Some wore modern clothes, others clearly had on clothing from long ago, history coming to life in front of me with hoop skirts and top hats.

I jogged through them, the coolness of their specters washing over me. I shivered and nearly lost sight of Alan.

But then I saw him, stopped in front of an oversized mansion with a big plaque out front that was supported on two wooden struts.

"Here. I was in here. He said it was fitting that we should meet here," he whispered, turning to face me. I saw the fear in his eyes. "Bree. I don't want to be here. I don't want to remember."

I grimaced. "Who said it was fitting?"

"I don't know." His voice was softer yet.

I reached out and put a hand on his shoulder, about as comforting as I was going to get with my ex. "I don't have my bag for you to hide in. Can you . . . can you wait outside for me?"

He gave me a tight nod and turned his back on the big mansion. "I think that's best."

"If I'm not out in fifteen minutes, go back to Penny's and tell them I'm in trouble. Okay?"

Another nod, but his jaw was tight and I didn't want to point out that his eyes looked pretty shiny. This place scared him.

That alone would have put me on edge. Plus, I knew he'd died here and someone, probably his murderer, had said it was a fitting place for them to meet. No question about it, I was walking into a bad situation.

I walked up to the edged pathway and finally took a good look at the plaque.

Madame Lalaurie Mansion.

I frowned. A whore house maybe? Was Alan killed for trying to get a freebie? I wouldn't put it past him, but that didn't explain the fear that had him shaking and glassy-eyed. Nor did it explain the connection to Gran and my parents.

I walked up the front steps of the mansion, the wood creaking beneath my feet. Now that didn't bother me, not really. Old houses sounded like old houses, simple as that. But the door swinging open on its own? That was a bit creepy.

Because I'd had similar things happen before, with the blood-born demon at the Sorrel-Weed house in Savannah.

Mouth dry, I made myself go into the old house. I wasn't a chicken shit, and this could not be worse than a blood-born demon.

“Anybody home?” I called out, hating how shaky my voice was.
The reply was immediate and full of laughter and menace.
“Always.”

The door to the Madame Lalaurie Mansion slammed shut behind me, and I yelped as I leapt toward it, grabbing the handle. No amount of jiggling loosened the lock.

“Seriously?” I hollered, and from outside I heard Alan yell, “You want me to get help?”

“YES!”

I turned and plastered my back to the door. Slowing my breathing, I stared into the brightly lit room. There was an abundance of sconces, every last one filled with glowing candles. From somewhere deeper in the house came a distant scream followed by begging.

Begging not to be hurt. I blew out a breath. This place was ugly, but there was no feel of demons here. Just ghosts. Lots and lots of ghosts.

I swallowed hard and took a step forward. “My ex-husband was killed here.”

“He was,” the voice said.

Okay, okay, I could work with this. Ghost hunter it was today. “Can you tell me who did it?”

“The tonton macoutes killed your man.”

I blinked a few times because my head immediately went to *Star Wars* with the Tonton. “Can you tell me who you are?”

The ghost of a woman about my age stepped through the wall. She wore a dressing gown and had deep-set dark eyes and dark

hair pulled off to the side. "I am the owner of this place, though they have made it far less grand than my home."

Her eyes swept over the floor, the black and white marble seemingly insulting her. She sniffed. "What do you want ghost talker?"

Ghost talker? Was that what I was? I felt like it was close, but not quite everything.

Around me came the whispers of other ghosts, heard but not seen.

Run away!

"My husband was killed by tonton macoutes?" I repeated.

She smiled. "That bald fellow out there? Yes, I remember. I remember every death that has happened here. You are not afraid of me? That is strange."

My eyebrows shot up. "You're a ghost, which I suppose for some people would be terrifying, but me . . . well, I've seen my fair share of scary shit. Demons. Werewolves. Men with no faces." I shrugged. "You get numb to it."

Her eyes narrowed, and I could see she did not like my answer. A fluttering of what I knew were fairy wings tugged at my ears. I looked up to the ceiling, fully expecting to see Kinky.

And while it was a fairy, this one had dark red hair and an outfit that matched. Her face was twisted up with what could only be called rage.

"Get out of here, mutt!" She zinged toward me, a three-inch sword in her left hand. She swung it at my face, and I sidestepped as the weight of the sword pulled her past me. Shooting a hand out, I grabbed her by the wings.

She stopped struggling immediately. Wings were a delicate thing, and easily ripped, which we both knew. I held her up.

"Do I know you?"

The ghostly woman let out a snarl. "I will not be ignored!" A crack rent the air, and a sting shot through my shoulder, slashing my T-shirt and opening a slice in the skin underneath it.

I yelped and tossed the fairy into the air.

The fairy squeaked as she fought to get her wings going, but I turned from her to stare at the ghost, who now held a long bull whip

in her hand.

I pointed a finger at her and snapped one word, putting some serious bite into it. “Sit!” Whatever power I had over the dead seemed to ripple between us and the woman sat, her eyes wide and her mouth open in a big O. Take that, you nasty piece of work.

The fairy chose that moment to take another literal swing at me.

The tip of the sword cut across my cheek, opening up a thin line, and I stumbled back so I didn’t lose an eyeball. I wanted to smash the little ducker, but the fae were with Crash and I didn’t want to hurt his people.

“I’m part fae, you dumbass!” I yelled as the fairy danced and dodged around me.

“Not enough fae for our king!” she yelled back. “You are mud, you are nothing! You stole him from our queen and now—” She screeched and went flying backward as a second fairy joined us.

Kinkly swept between us, her own weapon raised. “Scarlet, being a bitch as usual?”

I did a double take when I saw what she was packing. A freaking battle axe? I mean, sure, it was miniature, but who would’ve thought Kinkly had an axe just sitting around?

Scarlet shot upward and out through an open window. Kinkly looked at me. “I’m going to chase her a bit, you good?”

I nodded. “Anyone else coming?”

“Penny.”

Good enough.

Kinkly shot upward and out the window. I turned back to face the ghost, who was now sitting in a crumpled pile of her skirts on the floor. Skirts now, no longer a dressing gown?

Her eyes locked on mine. “I own these souls, you won’t take them from me.”

Run, run, run, run.

“A married couple died in New Orleans thirty years ago, do you remember them? They would have died the same way as my ex-husband,” I said, hoping I was right.

She smiled again, although there wasn’t a bit of friendliness to it. “The tonton macoutes have killed four times in my home, and the bloodshed has been glorious each time.”

Four times.

Mom and Dad, Gran, Alan.

Four deaths all tied to me.

I stared at her, and a nudge of intuition prodded at me. “You killed people you enslaved, didn’t you?”

The door burst open behind me and I turned to see Penny step in, her eyes flashing. “Bree, Alan said you might be in trouble.”

I looked past her to the sidewalk where Alan stood, his back to the house. “That was quick.”

“I Ubered.” She smiled at me.

Alan had come back at least. I’d give him that. “Yeah, I wasn’t sure. Not as bad as the demon last week, but not good either.”

The ghost gave a low hiss. “You will fear me!”

I rolled my eyes. “You might have been dangerous in life, but not now.” I snapped my fingers and pulled her to her feet. Her eyes widened further and her fingers wrapped tighter around the handle of the bullwhip.

Penny’s eyes had locked on the ghost sitting on the floor. “That bitch killed and tortured a lot of people.”

So I’d guessed correctly. Feeling another nudge of intuition, I stalked forward and plucked the whip out of her fingers. “Without this, I’m guessing the others here can’t be hurt by you?”

The ghost screeched at me, her face contorting like putty, melting and reforming over her bones until her appearance was as ugly as her soul.

From all around us, other ghosts crept forward. The woman with the whip had been given power over them for no reason other than their dusky skin, but they were no longer powerless against her. I had her damn whip.

And they knew it.

The former enslaved converged on their tormentor, and the mass of bodies went down in a tidal wave of screeching and limbs, sliding through the floor and disappearing in a matter of seconds.

Silence seemed to echo through the big house.

Penny looked at me. “How did you take her whip? When the house burned down, they never found it.”

I looked down at my hand. The whip was no longer there, but I held in my palm the tiniest fraction of a piece of leather. “I don’t know. I just took it.” I tucked the leather into my pocket.

Penny tapped my arm. “I hate this place.”

“This is where they all died,” I said softly, “Gran, my parents, and Alan. By something called a tonton macoutes.”

Penny sucked in a sharp breath. “That is . . . that is very bad, Bree.”

I stared hard at her. “How bad. What is it?”

“They. It is an army of the undead, Bree, raised to control people. They’re not supposed to exist anymore. I thought . . . I thought our coven had put them to rest years ago. They kill with their bare hands and tear out throats with sharp, claw-tipped fingers.” Her arms shook as she clutched at her cane with both hands.

An army of the undead. I could only imagine the terror of my parents, of Gran, and even of Alan, when they saw what was coming for them.

I looked around the house, trying not to dwell on the thought of the tonton macoutes.

“Okay, an undead army is damn ducking bad. But what if the thing we’re looking for is here in this house? What if that’s why Gran and my parents came here? Because this was where the thing—the ingredient—is?”

Penny closed her eyes and nodded, giving the floorboards a single tap of her cane.

Which was how we ended up searching the house room by room despite the fact that the place made our skin crawl. As we searched, Penny filled me in on the whole undead army angle.

“The tonton macoutes aren’t really dead, and they aren’t really alive. They don’t feel pain, but they can be killed.”

“Head shots?”

She gave me a look. “This is not fantasy, Bree. A wound that could kill you or I would kill them. Head. Heart. Removal of limbs. They don’t feel the pain though, so if the blow is not an immediate death they will keep coming until they bleed out.”

I grimaced as I flipped open a closet. A small ghost huddled inside. I held out my hand. “That terrible woman is gone. You are

free now.”

Dark eyes looked up at me, and then she smiled and streaked past me, a rush of cold air that was there and gone in a flash.

An hour ticked by, and then another. The sun was fully up now, and if I hadn't been exhausted before, I surely was now.

Sitting on the third stair from the bottom on the main floor, I gripped the wooden banister and pulled myself upright. “Penny, I don't think it's here.” Okay, so I was a little afraid to say out loud that we were looking for angel wings, because let's be honest, who was listening? A bunch of ghosts for sure. Maybe others.

Penny joined me. “Let's go then. This place . . . it is terrible to be where those you loved were killed. Their last moments might have been spent here, but this is not where you should remember them.”

She was right. I didn't want to be there, and while part of me wondered where it had happened, the rest of me didn't even want to guess.

Swallowing back tears, I let Penny tuck her arm into mine and lead me out of the house. We headed down the sidewalk, making our way toward the coven's safe house. Alan fell in beside us, to my right, and I made myself speak to him.

“Thanks, Alan.”

He startled. “For what?”

“For getting Penny and Kinkly,” I said. “I wasn't in as much trouble as I thought, but you went and got them.”

He cleared his throat. “Sure thing.”

Penny was quiet.

A few minutes later, the sound of Kinkly's wings snapped my eyes upward. She heaved a heavy sigh as she dropped onto the top of my head. “You okay?”

“Scarlet's such a bitch,” she growled and punched the top of my head.

“Ouch!”

“Sorry, sorry,” she muttered. “She's going on and on about how we shouldn't be here, saying that *she* should get the wings! I pointed out she already has stupid wings. What a dumb runt.”

I'm going to pretend that she said runt. I can't even say the other one in my head without cringing.

I paused and looked at Penny, who shook her head. Yeah, we needed to talk about this when we got back to the safe house.

Because the real question burning through me was what in the world was a fairy doing looking for the wings of a fallen angel?

Back at the safe house, I took note that no one else was awake. Corb, Sarge, and Feish were still in their rooms.

“Thank you, Kink,” I said to the now incredibly grumpy fairy. I made a small hot chocolate with extra sugar and pushed it toward her. “Drink up, you deserve it.”

“Oh, you are my favorite,” she breathed out, and then all but inhaled the entire mug. Impressive since it stood half as tall as her. She stumbled to one knee and I held out my hand.

“Maybe you should sleep it off?”

“Shgood ideash.” She mumbled and slumped in my hand. I took her up to the bedroom I’d claimed and laid her on the pillow. Obviously, I’d planned it like that. Not that I didn’t want her to know what we were talking about, but I was taking Penny’s words to heart. Maybe . . . just maybe my friends might be pulled in other directions. And given that another fairy was looking for the wings of the fallen angel . . .

Down on the main floor, I found Penny waiting for me, a large leather bound book in her lap. “What was a fairy doing looking for the wings of a fallen angel?” she mumbled to herself as she slowly flipped through it.

My question exactly.

“You said some spells have a lot of the same ingredients, right?”

She nodded. “But the two we know of, the blood of a bigfoot and wings of a fallen angel, help narrow it down. Still, I don’t think the

one Celia knew about was written down in any of these.” She tapped the book in her lap. “I’d bet she spread out what she knew in several places, only places that made sense to her. To keep it as safe as possible.”

That made sense. “And they’d be numbered.” I thought of the 3 etched onto that one slip of paper. Third stanza maybe? I shook my head and focused on the moment again.

“You think the fairy queen might want the same spell as . . . whoever took Gran?” My brain hurt from trying to put those pieces together.

“No, no I don’t,” she said. “Karissa is not evil, but she is controlling. It’s why she doesn’t like cats.” I snorted and Penny went on. “I’m not sure what Karissa’s trying to do, but from what I’ve seen, the options range from a healing spell, to a spell of protection, to a spell to give a fairy back their wings.”

That last one seemed to make the most sense. Scarlet’s words about Crash rang in my head, reverberating. “Any sort of controlling spells attached to angel wings?”

Penny shook her head, but she took my question differently than intended. “Nothing like the tonton macoutes.”

I was quiet as I mulled over what we’d learned. Where Gran, my parents, and Alan had been killed. What they’d been killed by. I rubbed my face. “I guess it doesn’t really matter why the fae are looking for the wings, unless they are working for the person who has the tonton macoutes?”

“That is unlikely,” Penny said. “The tonton macoutes will be controlled by a very dark person. I doubt such a person would even think to reach out to Karissa.”

That was good, I guess.

She looked me over. “You haven’t slept. You should try to get at least some rest.”

Penny was not wrong. I was exhausted. But I didn’t want to go up to my bedroom. It wasn’t really mine and I couldn’t bear to look at Gran’s stuff right then. “I’m good here.” I stretched out on the couch and pulled a loose throw over me. Good enough. My eyes closed, and I heard her leave, listening to her steps as she slowly made her way up the stairs.

I lay there a long time, thinking I would just drift off. I *felt* Alan drift away, *felt* him go upstairs. Weird. I didn't like that I was even more tied to him.

I might have dozed, but I found myself jerking awake every few minutes, the sting in my shoulder irritating me. That leather whip score was nasty.

Sleep was avoiding me, so I thought I might as well do something productive. I got up, retrieved my hip bag from the room upstairs, putting the files on the three murders away, then returned to the sofa to study Gran's big spell book as well as the smaller book of curses.

The book of curses flipped itself open again, showing the same page as before. I looked through some of the spells, trying to find ones that used the blood of a bigfoot and/or the wings of a fallen angel, but I didn't see anything else of use.

Gran's book didn't help me in that department either. Groaning, I put my head on the book and closed my eyes.

A memory whipped through me.

GRAN SAT ACROSS FROM ME AND TAPPED HER FINGER AGAINST a small stone cup. "Spells fade, Breena. It's why my garden must be tended to regularly. It's why we must renew our strength on the nights when the moon is at its zenith." She tapped the cup again and a curl of smoke swirled upward.

"I'm not good at this," I said. Twelve, I was twelve years old and no good at typical witch things.

"You are good at what you need to be good at. Now, remember this, all spells fade, but the ones designed for protection fade the fastest. Especially if the caster of the spell is no longer alive."

I OPENED MY EYES. "HOLY SHIT, GRAN. YOU SPELLED THE ANGEL wings to be hidden, but the spell is fading, isn't it?"

I looked at the clock. One in the afternoon.

The tapping of a cane on the floorboards lifted my head and turned me around. Penny stood in the doorway to the sitting room.

She'd changed into a long flowing house dress with a pattern of skulls and crossbones and some drooping white lilies that had no doubt been thrown in to soften the look.

I gave her what I knew was a tired smile. "Couldn't sleep?"

"Strange thing about getting older. Some days I could stay in bed for a week, and others I can't sleep for all the money in the world," she said. "Would you like to talk? I could feel your energy all the way across the house. Sad. Jittery. Shocked."

I sighed. "Sure." I pulled the chair across from me a little closer. Penny made her way to it and carefully lowered onto the cushion, her joints creaking until she was settled.

She waited for me.

"I think that Gran put a spell on the angel wings, a protection spell. And with her gone, it's fading. That's why this is all happening now. Is there like a deadline on spells?"

Penny gave a slow nod. "Yes, but I would have thought . . .well, I wouldn't have thought it would last so long. Then again, I think Celia concealed her true strength from us."

"That's why it's happening now," I said again, "Why the fae and whoever has the undead army are pushing hard to find them, because now they *can* be found."

She nodded. "Yes."

The way she said it . . . "Wait, you knew?" I spluttered.

She shrugged. "Celia wanted you to find your way, to make mistakes and learn from them. I told her if you came to me, I wouldn't lead you by the nose. Besides, it's fun to watch you figure it out, to see all the knowledge she gave you," She tapped my head with her cane, "Come flowing out of you. Amazing really that the spells she laid on you were with you for so long, and are only now dissolving."

Spells on me? I knew about the glamor that seemed to be fading, but did this mean there were others?

Nope, nope, I would come back to that at a later date. "It's making this harder, you know. Guessing. Finding trouble."

She smiled, then let out a low laugh. "Trouble, trouble, and more trouble. That's how it goes for some of us, Bree. You got away with none of it for years, blocked off from your abilities and from seeing

the shadow world. I think you've got about twenty years stored up, and it's crashing down all at once."

I stared at her. "Seriously? This is like stored karma?"

"Not quite karma." She shook her head. "But the shadow world always has shit going on, just at different levels, and sometimes it waits for a person like you to come along to sort it all out. It's about balance, and your balance has been out of whack for a long time."

"Charming." I stood and stretched, the need to move sweeping over me. "You think it's safe to go for a walk? Or would that be asking for more trouble?"

Penny stood slowly. "Not safe for you even in full daylight, but let's see where your feet take us. Maybe we'll learn something new. Something helpful."

I sighed. "You don't have any friends here we could talk to? Someone who could point us in the right direction?"

A sad smile flitted across her face. "The old coven, the one your gran and I were a part of, has been mostly wiped out. The new coven that is spread out across the southern states is not inclined to discuss anything with me."

I frowned. "They don't come to you for advice or teaching?"

She shook her head. "The young ones think they know it all. That's partly what makes Missy so damn mad all the time. She hates that she's been written off as if she were nothing, when she is a whomping strong witch, almost as strong as your gran. Maybe put on your working gear this time, rather than jeans and a shirt that can be cut through like wet tissue paper." She touched my shoulder where the ghost whip had cut through my shirt. I winced and nodded.

I hurried back to my room and pulled on my still dirty clothes, the smell of sweat and blood and fear lingering in the fibers. Kinky was still asleep on my pillow, but Alan glanced at me from his perch on the bed. "What are you doing?"

"Going for a walk."

He frowned. "I want to come."

For some reason I shook my head. "Not now. I want to talk to Penny on my own."

"I won't stay here," he snapped. "You could need me again."

I looked him over, not sure that was why he wanted to be with me, and decided against him coming.

I stuffed my feet back into my boots. “Penny and I are going to be discussing menopause, and the way my flow has changed now that I’m older. You really want to take part in that?”

He sat down on the bed, avoiding eye contact. “I’ve changed my mind.”

“That’s what I thought.” I left the room, knowing he wouldn’t follow now. If anything made him squeamish, it was the thought of a woman’s cycle and everything that went along with it.

Because despite the fact that he had gone for help . . . he was Alan. And I really, really didn’t want him around me. Of all my companions here in New Orleans, he was the one I trusted the least.

Back downstairs, I found Penny waiting at the front door. She ushered me out first and then followed a half step behind me, letting my feet lead us.

“You went to NOLA before with your gran, years ago, after you passed by my place in Montgomery. I haven’t been here for a long time,” Penny commented as we walked down the driveway and onto the street, the feeling of magic sliding over my skin as we crossed the line between her home and the city proper. I found myself looking over my shoulder toward the empty spot that had been occupied by a robed figure the night before.

“I don’t remember much of it, to be honest,” I said. “Tell me more about this new coven that won’t talk to you.”

She held out a hand, and I let her lean on my forearm as we walked. “It’s a little more complicated than that. There’ve always been two southern covens, you see.” Penny kept her pace, staying slightly behind me even though she held my arm. I found myself taking the streets as if I knew where I was going. There was a flow of something underneath us, like an unseen river that streamed around my ankles and pulled me forward. It reminded me of the fae magic I’d felt before, so I let it coax and guide my tired feet.

“There is a Coven of Silver witches,” Penny continued, “and a Coven of Darkness. We balance each other, and within each coven there are gradients of good and bad. Missy’s in the silver coven, for

example, but she definitely leans into the shades of gray.” She winked at me, and I snorted.

“And the others?” I prompted after she was silent for a few minutes. “What about this Coven of Darkness?”

“Same thing. Thirteen witches spread out across the south, two or three in a city, in order to keep from being noticed. Both the silver and the dark understood that living close together was more likely to have us found out, and so we agreed to stay separate except for when we had to meet up within our respective covens. It has been that way for years for the safety of all.”

It felt like there was more to this, so I prompted her again. “And?”

A heavy sigh slid from her as we walked. “As the young ones came in, they should have mentored one on one with an older member of the coven, learning and growing. But the young ones brought into the Coven of Darkness started killing the older members instead, stealing their power instead of earning it. Lazy little bastards. It means they are stronger than before, but don’t truly know how to use their strength, which of course makes them dangerous.”

I blinked a few times, imagining how that had gone down. “And the silver coven? I haven’t met any young ones. Gran never talked about bringing more women in.”

“Because we didn’t,” Penny said. “Better to keep our power to ourselves than have it stripped off us in death. We learned from the mistakes made by the Coven of Darkness. So no one has been brought into our inner circle for over thirty years. Any witches that came to us for training were given basic tools so they would not end up killing themselves or others, but that was it. But in doing that, we have weakened ourselves.”

Her words resonated with me. “I’m not a witch. To be clear. So no need to off me.”

“No, you have a lot more going on in you, and it all comes together to make you a rather unique individual.” Penny laughed.

She didn’t say more than that, and I let her words about the two covens roll through my head. The magic that had been tugging me along eased off, and suddenly we were slowing down.

We'd reached a square not unlike the ones in Savannah, only this one was larger.

"Beautiful," I said as I took in the place. The last of the magic that had been ushering me along dissipated, and I knew that I was exactly where I was supposed to be. The view soothed some of the ragged edges in my soul and the flowers flooded my senses, reminding me a little of Gran's garden back home. She would have loved it here. It was early enough in the afternoon that there weren't many tourists either.

"Jackson Square," Penny said. "Lovely on the surface, but so much death underneath all those flowers. You can't cover up death like that and not expect it to come back to bite you in the ass. Just like the mansion. Watch your step, girl."

With her warning ringing in my ears, we moved farther into the square, onto the grass. There was a moment where the ground softened ever so slightly, as if it would suck me down, just like when the wraiths had chased me in Alabama. I danced to the side, dragging Penny with me. She stumbled and I got us back onto the paved area.

I tightened my hold on Penny's upper arm and shot her a look. "I think we're in trouble." I grimaced. "Again."

As the ground under my feet softened I thought moving onto the paving stones would help. But the ground still felt like jelly even there. Jackson square was turning out to be a shit place to visit.

“Not today,” I muttered as I pulled Penny along, faster than she wanted to go, I’m sure, but adrenaline was pumping through me now, wiping away my fatigue and the discomfort of yesterday’s bruises. Even the sting from the whip faded as I looked for the best place for us to take a stand against whatever was coming our way.

I steered us to the right, away from the center of Jackson Square. There was a large Catholic church across from us, a huge monument reaching into the sky, and you’d think there’d be less hanky panky from the shadow world in the church’s, well, shadow. However, I wasn’t getting a ‘come on in and be safe’ vibe off it.

“What is it?” Penny kept up with my tugging, but I could practically feel her energy fading. “Girl, I can’t keep up this pace.”

Crap, she was right. Much as I might not like running and doing all my exercises, I’d gotten into better shape and my body moved accordingly when danger reared its ugly mug. I took Penny to the center of the square, where there was a round flowerbed wrapped around a large statue of a horse and rider. I didn’t spare more than a glance for the statue.

Penny sat on the stone. “What’s got you fussed? I’m not feeling anything.”

I sat next to her and pulled my feet up off the ground like a teenager as I scanned the area with what I knew were unnaturally wide eyes. No doubt the few tourists thought I was on some sort of drug given the way I was staring, my head moving around as if it were on a swivel.

“You didn’t feel that on your feet? The ground got soft.” I said, then lowered my voice. “Like with the wraiths.”

Penny shook her head. “Wraiths don’t soften the ground.” Her eyes got as big as mine probably were. “Which means whoever is controlling them is close. Damn, I’m getting old if I didn’t notice that. I was so focused on the immediate danger.”

I grimaced and stood on the edge of the flower bed, trying to get a better view. But I still couldn’t see over the tops of the tourists’ heads.

I needed more height than the flower bed was offering, so I turned and waded through the thick bed of flora, grabbed the bottom foot of the metal rider and shimmied my way up.

“Hey, you can’t do that!” a woman yelled.

“Listen, Karen, I’ll get down in a minute! Untwist your panties!” I yelled back. The cold metal of the statue was slick from a steady drizzle of rain, making it hard to get a purchase, so I was sweating by the time I’d climbed over the soldier and stood between his crotch and the horse’s neck. Then again, even with the cloud cover it was warm and humid. Yes, I was going to blame the sweat on the heat, what woman wouldn’t?

I did a slow turn, one hand resting on top of the soldier’s head for balance as I looked for someone who didn’t fit in with the tourist crowd. Just in the time we’d been there, a good number of people had shown up. Baseball caps and brightly colored umbrellas littered the area, and the dark hooded character slipping out of the square stood out like a damn sore thumb.

“Hey!” I yelled in their direction. “I see you with your stupid cloak on like some damn Harry Potter wizard! You aren’t fooling anyone, you jerk face!”

The robed figure slowed and turned to look my direction, the animosity radiating off him palpable even with the hundred feet between us.

Well, I'd gotten his attention.

Whoops.

The hooded figure raised a hand and swept it in my direction. There was no visible magic, but I could feel a wave of unseen badness coming at me. Yes, badness, it was the best word I could come up with in that moment, so sue me.

"Penny, we'd better go," I said.

"Found trouble, did you? Who you yelling at?" she barked up at me.

I scrambled to get off the horse and rider statue, slipped and went sideways. My foot caught in the crotch of the rider, and I flipped upside down. "Yelling at bad guys full of badness!" I yelled as I tried to sit up.

Hah, an upside down sit up, who was I kidding? I moved a quarter inch. Maybe.

Sit-ups were not on the menu of my workout. Running was, and maybe some stretching and yoga if Suzy insisted on it and I couldn't escape her. I tried to squeeze upward again, the feeling of *something bad* coming toward me intensifying. Another squeeze upward, and I may have let some pressure off with a cracking fart. In that moment all I could think was *at least neither guy I'm hot for is here listening to this*.

Oh, how damn wrong I was.

"What the hell are you doing?" Crash's voice snapped my head around so I was looking at him upside down. Crash, here in NOLA? I thought he was staying in Savannah to see what he could find out?

Then again, the fae were looking for the angel wings. Was that why he was here?

Damn, he even looked good upside down. A light gray shirt plastered to his body, damp from the rain and jeans that fit him just right in all the right places.

And then I realized he must have heard the roar that had ripped out of my back end.

Jaysus lawd, kill me now.

At least the blood rushing to my face could be blamed on the current angle of my body and not the fact that I wanted to die from

embarrassment. That had been no quiet, ladylike poof escaping my body.

Nope, it had been the rumble of a dual set of trains roaring down the tracks as I fought to sit up and unhook myself from my precarious position, putting pressure on my guts that I couldn't control.

His hands wrapped around my body, and he easily lifted me upright, which positioned me in front of the soldier as if we were riding off into the sunset together.

I opened my mouth as the *something bad* that had been thrown at us hit.

The smell of putrid, stagnant water rolled up my nose, and I snorted and gagged. Crash shook his head and grimaced, taking a step back as he looked at me sideways.

"Not me," I bit out as the smell from the spell coated my tongue. I spat to the side. Again, super unladylike, but what did I have to lose after that last blast?

"That's what they all say," Crash said, and I whipped around to see a distinct smirk on his mouth.

Again, I was going to say something, but the statue under me . . . moved. I blinked and twisted around to see the freaking soldier looking down at me with a pair of very dead eyes.

"Holy shit." I scrambled to get off the horse, and a lot of things happened at once.

Penny intoned something that was surely a spell by the feel of it in the air, and Crash reached to pull me down as the horse statue under me bucked, freeing one of its back legs from the monument.

Were the people around us not seeing this? How were there no screams, no shouts of *Oh my Gawd*?

"I can't hold them away from this for long," Penny said. "Get her off that damn horse, fae king!"

The soldier statue wrapped a metal arm around my middle and clenched me to his body.

"Damn it, this isn't the seventeen hundreds! You can't just pluck me from the field and run away with me!" I yelled as I fought to free myself. I managed to get my legs under me and pushed upright, the

little bit of drizzle working in my favor, making the metal slick against my skin.

The horse below us jerked another back leg free with a plunge forward, which loosened the soldier's hold on me by a fraction of an inch. It was enough.

I managed to stand, so the soldier's arms were just around my legs. Before he could tighten his hold again, I threw myself off, knowing that the ground was going to hurt, but there was nothing I could do about that right then.

I was not going to get snatched by some statue.

A split second from the ground, Crash's arms found me.

"Got you," he said as he pulled me upright. Rather than lock his arms around me, he gave me room to get my feet under me.

I whipped around to look at the horse and soldier.

They were back where they'd started, solid once more, and Penny let out a sigh of relief. "That was too close. I didn't have much left in me to hold the view back from the humans. The spell had a time limit on it, but I think it might have been extended if you hadn't slipped out of the statue's arms."

The closest tourists to us were giving us some serious side eye, and more than a few waved a hand in front of their noses. So they could smell the spell that had come for me, even if they couldn't see it.

Crash shook his head and motioned for me to lead the way. I took a wide berth around the statue. It was, I noticed, in a slightly different position than the artist had designed it. Just a half step to the left on the horse and the soldier's arms were cocked at the elbow in a new angle. That wasn't what kept my attention.

The soldier's eyes followed me. I stuck my tongue out at him, and his eyes narrowed. I contemplated flipping him off, but instead I stepped forward and held a hand out for Penny. She latched onto my arm, her fingers trembling. "Who did you see?" she asked softly.

"Guy in a black robe. Thin, not a big guy. I guess it could have been a woman."

Crash fell in on my other side. I wanted to ask him just what he was doing there, if it had anything to do with angel wings. Not that I was upset he'd shown up, other than the whole fart scene. Not really.

He had caught me, after all, and kept me from landing hard and breaking bones.

“Thanks,” I said.

He nodded and winked at me. “Your friends will always do their best to catch you, Bree. If you let them.”

A flush of warmth settled around my heart and tried to tighten my throat. Nope, I would not cry. Instead, I focused on Penny.

“I’d guess that was our necromancer,” she said. “The kind of power required to animate something like that is no small thing. Necromancer for sure. Heaven help us.”

“What about the tonton macoutes?” I asked. “Could those have been his too?”

“Not the right kind of undead,” Penny said. “It’s possible, but he or she would need help, I think.”

I looked over my shoulder, but the necromancer had disappeared after leaving us with his statue buddy. Why though? Had he done it just to show off? I frowned, thinking about the only real necromancer I knew well enough to say I knew him. Louis was not a showoff. If anything, he hid what he was to some degree, probably because he had nothing much to show. That other necromancer, the one from the council, had real talent. I’d seen him put Alan in his place at the council meeting.

What was his name? Jacob.

Except the council apparently had it out for me, so I couldn’t risk going to him. For all I knew, *he* was the hooded figure.

“That frown says you are thinking hard about something,” Crash said. “If you tell us, maybe we can figure it out together.”

The words tumbled out of my mouth. “I’m going to call Louis. He might be able to help us find the necromancer.” After all, he’d given Eammon a way to stay safe. I reached up and touched the ring on my necklace, the silver cool beneath my fingers.

Crash pulled a phone from his back pocket and handed it to me. “My phone’s safe to use. It can’t be traced.”

I took it from him and dialed through to Louis. Or really, through to Eammon. If he and Louis were pally enough that Louis had given him that ring, presumably he’d also left him with a phone number.

The phone rang twice and then a gruff voice answered, "Eammon here."

"Eammon, it's Bree," I said.

"Bree, you be alive?" he roared.

I frowned. "Why would I not be alive?"

A whoosh of air slid out of him. "Tom was attacked by wraiths. So was I. We barely got to Missy in time. She said if you were attacked too, you'd be dead, seeing as she don't think much of you."

I flipped the phone to speaker so Crash and Penny could hear. "You and Tom were attacked by wraiths? Why? When?"

"My guess? Whatever trouble you've found is spreading, lass." He sighed, and I was sure I heard a feminine snort in the background.

"Is that Missy?"

"It's where we be staying," he said.

"Not for long!" Missy snapped. "And I want that spell book, Breena O'Rylee. You did not hold up your end of the bargain. You gave me a dud!"

I looked at Penny, who shrugged. "Well," I said, "you could come and get it."

Penny grinned and nodded her approval. "That is a good idea, Missy. We could use you here."

There was silence for a beat. "Penny? What are you . . . never mind. You're helping that brat, aren't you? You always loved a lost soul."

"Of course, I am. It's what Celia would have wanted." Penny paused. "And the task is still unfulfilled."

Task? Was she talking about me, or the spell Gran had died to protect?

Missy let out a rather unladylike curse. I decided to cut to the chase.

"Eammon, do you know how to get in touch with Louis?" I asked.

He spluttered. "You didn't even want to ask me how me and Tom be?"

I sighed. "You're alive. That's awesome. Now, where is Louis? I need to talk to him."

“I don’t know,” he said. Missy snorted, and I could just imagine her face twisting up in her trademark grimace.

I rubbed my face. “Okay, look, can you tell me where to find a nice necromancer to talk to in . . .” I hesitated to tell him where we were.

A soft sigh slid out of him. “You don’t trust me?”

“It’s Missy I don’t trust, and you already know where I am.” I lowered my voice as I brought the phone closer to my mouth. “Do you blame me? Someone tried to pin Alan’s death on me in order to have me killed. I’ve been attacked by four wraiths, and I’m no closer to finding my gran.” I didn’t feel like telling him about the statue that had just come to life and tried to run away with me. Or my run in with the whipping ghost in the mansion.

There was the sound of a scuffle. “Give me the phone!” Missy snapped and then she was on the line, loud as life. “I know you’re in New Orleans, Breena. I will arrive shortly. That book is mine.”

Another scuffle and Eammon cursed her in Gaelic. “Damn witch,” he muttered. “I can tell you where to start, or where I would start. Homer Underwood. Not a necromancer, but an acquaintance that knows me well. If you use my name, he’ll direct you to the right people at least. He be your best bet.”

“Thanks, Eammon.” I said. “When I get back—”

“Don’t be making promises you can’t be keeping.” He paused. “Don’t hang up. There be more to tell you. That place you thought was safe, that was keeping the fairy cross hidden?”

My hurt lurched up into my throat, and I could barely answer. “Yes?”

“It’s been disturbed and the cross taken.”

Eammon could not have dropped a bigger bomb on me if he'd tried. Robert and I had been so careful to keep the cross hidden. Hence the ruse of burying a fake cross under Evangeline's grave.

The *real* fairy cross was buried under the oak tree in my gran's front yard, and I'd thought only Robert and I knew about it. Who had seen us? Who had figured it out?

"Aye, that grave has been disturbed. I did see you bury it there, and said nothing, but it's been dug up," Eammon said.

Grave. He said grave, not oak tree.

I breathed out a sigh of relief. "Okay, thanks for letting me know."

"That's it? You don't be more worried? I'd have thought . . ." He paused and then sucked in a sharp breath. "Ah, you be a smart one, just like Celia. That ain't where it is? A second burying spot was it? Somewhere else. A red herring!"

I didn't answer his question or confirm that he was right. "Thanks, Eammon, I should go . . ."

"One more thing," he said. "I hate to even tell you, knowing that you're already in deep shit, but it has to be said. What is happening here is a bad reflection on us all."

I looked at Crash, who shook his head, his eyes narrowed. *No idea*, he mouthed.

"Tell me," I said. I mean, at this point how bad could it be?

Bad. Really, really bad.

“Your neighbor’s kid, the little girl? She went missing, but they only just be realizing it now. When her aunt and uncle came to pick her up, she was already gone. No ransom note, nothing. Me and Tom took a swing by and her little house goblin was in hysterics, saying the house smelled like a pair of dark witches.”

I almost dropped the phone, because I could not process what he was saying. Charlotte was missing? She was the sweetest little thing. Who would want to hurt her and why?

Crash put his hand under my elbow, holding my arm and the phone up.

With difficulty, I managed to gather myself enough to ask a question. “Eammon, did you and Tom find anything? Anything at all?” Because I knew him well enough to know he would have at least looked. If he was telling me, it was because he’d done that much.

“Nothing,” he said softly. “I’m sorry, lass. I only know what the house goblin told us.”

“I’ve gotta go,” I said. “But thanks. For all this.”

I clicked the off button and handed the phone back to Crash. Penny took my chin in her fingers. “A little girl taken? This is a classic move of the Coven of Darkness. That is how they keep their ranks full. They take them young and talented.”

Numb, I nodded. “She’s a good kid. Her mom is in the army, so she’s away a lot, but Charlotte always has a nanny when she’s out of town. Or her aunt and uncle take her.” I rubbed my hands over my face, thinking about the last time I’d actually spoken to Charlotte. I’d asked her about cookies of all things.

“DID YOU GET COOKIES FROM ERIC YESTERDAY?” I ASKED.

“Yes, he sent me off with bags of them. See you in a few weeks, I hope.” Charlotte hurried down the steps, ponytail bobbing, and I watched as she slid into the backseat of a dark blue SUV.

They pulled away from the curb, and she waved at me as she went by, both hands going as hard as she could. I grinned and waved both hands back at her.

ONLY SHE HADN'T BEEN SMILING, HAD SHE? SHE'D BEEN waving, frantic. I'd thought she was just being a goofy kid, being silly as she and her aunt and uncle sped away.

"Oh my gawd." My legs tingled and unhinged, and I slid to the ground while the world buzzed around me. "I saw her taken. I just didn't realize it!" I clapped a hand over my mouth as I struggled with the horror of knowing I'd seen something and done nothing about.

Crash crouched beside me with a hand on my back, not moving, not speaking, just there with me. I leaned into the soft warmth of his hand. Something was itching in the back of my head about Charlotte's kidnapping, but I couldn't quite put it together.

"I can feel you thinking," Crash said. "What did you figure out?"

I held up a finger, forestalling any comments while I mulled it over. Then it hit me—Gran had started acting weird the day Charlotte was taken. Because Matilda, the ghost from the Sorrel-Weed House, had already taken her place. But I hadn't put two and two together until this moment.

"The same day," I said. "Gran went missing the same day as Charlotte, I'm sure of it." But I still didn't understand the connection. What in the world did Charlotte have in common with a dead witch, aka my gran?

Then again Charlotte was able to see her house goblin, Bridgette, and she'd always seemed drawn to Eric and me. I should have put two and two together, but many children could see the shadow world to some extent, even if their parents couldn't. Someone had figured out what I hadn't; Charlotte was part of the shadow world.

Penny thumped her stick hard into the ground. "Someone is up for an ass whooping. I don't know where to find Homer Underwood, do you? I've not heard his name before."

She didn't ask it with any condescension—she genuinely thought I might have answers, and her faith in me was a little unnerving.

I drew in a shaky breath. We could do this. We had to do this. If Gran and Charlotte had been taken by the same people, then at least we were only looking for one group of supernatural jerks. Which, in theory, should be easier, right?

Taking in another shaky breath, I pushed up to my feet. Determination settled in my gut, powered by a spurt of anger. Bad enough that someone took Gran, who was at least dead, but Charlotte too?

Penny was right, someone was in for an ass whooping.

“Homer Underwood,” I said. “We start with him and see what he can tell us. Let’s get back to the house and get the troops moving. We’ve got two to find now.”

Before the police found me and piled some real charges on top of my trumped up ones.

I held Penny’s arm as we walked back to the house. She was trembling, but when I glanced at her, I saw a tight mouth and drawn eyebrows. Not afraid then. No, she looked about ready to spit nails at whoever had taken Gran and Charlotte. Didn’t matter that Charlotte was a stranger, only that she was a little girl who should have been left out of this. I liked Penny more for it.

Despite Penny’s slower pace, her house came into view in what seemed a very short time. Crash held the door open for us, and we stepped inside to a cacophony of yelling.

“Did no one see them leave?” Corb roared, his bare back to me so I could see every line of tension in his shoulders. “What the damn hell? I’m going to have to put a tracker on her!” The smell of fresh-baked bread permeated the air and somehow soothed some of my anxiety.

Fresh-baked bread was life as far as I was concerned.

Feish stood facing me and she pointed. “She back now, brought the boss with her. Good idea.”

Corb spun, and the sight of Crash seemed to kick the air right out of him. The look in his eyes went from freaked the duck out, to as hard as ice in a split second. “Bree, what the hell? You can’t just leave like that and not tell anyone.”

I pointed at the sticky note I’d left on the front door before I went out the first time. “I left a note.”

His jaw ticked as his eyes swept to the bright yellow piece of paper. Men, you couldn’t train them to see milk in the fridge if you tried, so it shouldn’t have surprised me that he’d look right past my note.

His shoulders tensed further. "You should have woken me up at least. You can't just do whatever you want, Bree."

And that right here was why it would never work between us, no matter how hot he was, no matter how much his magic sung through my blood when he kissed me. I couldn't be with someone who refused to let me run my own damn life.

A ribbon of sorrow wound around my heart, but I ignored it. My love life had been pushed even farther on the backburner with this news about Charlotte.

I held up my hand, stopping him, and then pointed to the kitchen. "Come on, we've learned a few things that I need to share with you all."

The group followed me into the kitchen, where the loaves of fresh bread were laid out on several cooling racks. Sarge had been busy. Normally I would have dug into the bread, slathered it in butter and enjoyed every bite.

But my worry about Charlotte and Gran had my guts all twisted and I had no appetite.

I cleared my throat. "I found out that my Gran, my parents, and Alan were killed by critters called tonton macoutes, a sort of undead zombie. All of them were killed at the Madame Lalaurie Mansion. Penny and I checked it out, but there is nothing there. That's a dead end."

"Shit," Sarge breathed out. "I thought the tonton macoutes were . . . just a myth."

"That's rich coming from a werewolf," I said. "There was no sign of them, or whoever was controlling them when we were there. So for now, just keep an eye out for anything . . . undead, I guess."

They all nodded and I went on. "We've got another place to start now. Our little recon gave us that much. Does anyone know a Homer Underwood?"

I pointed the question mostly at Corb and Sarge as they worked with Eammon, but they both shook their heads. Feish shrugged and I looked at Crash.

"I doubt it's the man's real name, but the one that Eammon knows him by," Crash said.

Kinkly flew in and settled in the center of the table. She must have packed for the trip, because she'd ditched the dirty black clothes and dressed in her usual autumnal colors. "Who?"

"Homer Underwood," I said. "He lives here in New Orleans. Eammon thought he might be able to help us find what we're looking for."

She crinkled up her nose and tore off a piece of bread from the loaf next to her. "Bet he works in a cemetery with a name like Underwood."

We all looked at her, but I was the one who spoke the obvious question. "What?"

"Well, it makes sense if it's an assumed name. The dirt under a coffin is *under wood*, right?" She stuffed the bread into her mouth, and her eyes rolled back in her head. "So good."

I looked at Penny, who nodded. "I think the fairy may be on to something. The shadow world is sometimes very literal, and they like their puns and bad jokes because they find it amusing."

I nodded. It felt like as good a place to start as any. "Good job, Kink. Okay. One other thing. We have an added issue, another player." I cleared my throat. "Eammon told me that our neighbor Charlotte was kidnapped, and I think it happened on the same day Gran went missing."

Corb and Sarge could have been a pair of dogs the way they both tipped their heads to the side and frowned at me. Feish, on the other hand, gave a burbling gasp and put a hand to her chest. "Not Charlotte! Who would dare? She is too sweet!"

I gripped the edge of the table and leaned into it. "Yeah. I think . . . I hope . . . that maybe Sarge can look for her?"

He shook his head. "I never met her. I can't track someone I don't know unless I have a scent."

"But you met Bridgette, and they lived together," I said. "I'll admit I'm grasping at straws here. You and Corb can see if you can find a scent trail anywhere. The hint of Bridgette would hopefully be strong enough to stand out to you." I held up my hands as they started to splutter. "I know it's a long shot. I know. But we need to split up our resources."

A giant group of supernaturals would also draw a lot more attention than if we went in different directions in smaller groups.

“I suppose Crash is going with you?” Corb’s tone said it all. Everyone at the table looked at him, but Feish spoke before I could.

“Green-eyed monster looks terrible on you, all up in your gills,” she said. “Besides. I go with Bree. Me and Kinkly. Girls’ day today.”

I nodded because I didn’t feel like fighting about who was going with whom. I didn’t like seeing Corb jealous. I mean, yeah, I’d kissed him just a few hours before, so he had some room for jealousy. Sort of. But I’d also told him I wasn’t ready to give him what he wanted.

Penny sighed. “I need to rest. But when I wake up, I’ll start looking through my books here to see if I can find the spell we’re looking for. Maybe I can find a local witch who would be willing to help. You”—she pointed her walking stick at me—“know what one of the ingredients is. And you know where it isn’t. See if you can find where it is.”

She limped off, leaning on her walking stick more than ever as she made her way deeper into the house.

Sarge saluted me, drawing my attention to him. “All right, you’re in charge, Bree. What do you want us to do should we pick up the trail?”

I thought for a moment. “Mark it, come back to the house. We’ll meet back here at dinner. And watch your backs. There’s at least one necromancer out there throwing spells around in broad daylight.”

Right, I’d almost forgotten that nugget, and I sighed at the series of questions they instantly threw at me. I told them about the poop head in the black hood who’d brought the statue in Jackson Square to life.

“It sounds like you could have been just scooped away if not for Crash,” Kinkly said in a breathy voice. “He swooped in and saved you!”

Corb’s face tightened, and he looked at one of the loaves of bread, bent, and tore off a piece. He stuffed it into his mouth to keep from talking, and within seconds, his cheeks were bulging with bread, like a squirrel preparing for winter. I had to bite back a laugh.

“Timed spell is what Penny thought,” I said. “Basically I got lucky.”

“Not as lucky as you want your cat to get,” Feish burbled and I stared at her. Stared hard at her because she hadn’t just made a sexual innuendo, had she?

By the grin and huge wink, that was exactly what she’d done.

Feish's little announcement hit the air in the kitchen like an atomic bomb going off. Seriously, I couldn't believe all of us weren't thrown back a few feet. Mostly because of Corb.

"Get lucky with who, exactly?" He'd apparently finished the bread in his mouth, and his tone was as silky and deadly as I'd ever heard it. Yeah, he was going to be a problem, and I didn't know what to do about him. I didn't have time to deal with a jealous, lovesick siren.

Speaking of.

His siren magic swept through the room and about knocked me off my feet, driving me backward a few steps, my knees shaking hard. Really, all it did was push me—literally shove me—toward Crash, who once more caught me, his hands settling on my hips to help steady me.

His fiery magic met the cascading night waters of Corb's magic, and instead of canceling each other out, they pressed against and into each other, turning me into a sandwich. My knees buckled as Corb's magic pulsed harder and Crash's magic held steady, a burning flame.

A groan escaped me, and I might have whispered a Hail Mary or two.

"Stop," I whispered. "Both of you stop. I can't . . ."

Now, let's be brutally honest. A sudden image of being squashed naked and writhing between the two of them hit me like a runaway

horse, and another groan slid out of me. If Crash hadn't held me up, I would've slumped to the floor like a pile of jelly.

"Corb." Crash snapped, a command within his voice. Like a parent looking at their kid and just saying their name when they were in deep shit.

And for all that was holy, Corb backed off, and Crash sat me in a chair so I was on my own, nobody touching me, no magic smashing into me. I sucked in a big breath and slowly let it out. That could have been amazing, being flooded with their sexy as hell magic at the same time. But maybe not in a room full of people. I closed my eyes as I tried to get a hold of myself.

Crash sighed and I could imagine him shaking his head. "Feish, you're looking to start a fight?"

I fluttered my eyes open as Feish tipped her rounded chin up in pure defiance. "No, but that one would love and leave her. I won't let him hurt her."

My heart twanged a little. She was loyal if nothing else.

I looked to Sarge for help, but one glance at him told me he was being pummeled by Corb's magic too. He'd taken a step back, eyes closed, and judging from a quick look at his pants, getting control was going to take him a few minutes, and maybe a really cold shower.

Well, shit. So much for support from that quarter.

"I'm not getting lucky with anyone." I finally managed to find my voice. "I need to find my gran and now Charlotte too." Maybe if I reminded them why we were here it would calm the hormones down. And I really hoped it worked. Because I could still hear Corb telling me he was falling in love with me, something sirens didn't do, and I didn't want to hurt him.

Sarge cleared his throat. "Yeah, we're here to help Celia. Corb, this can wait."

Corb didn't so much as flinch. He might have been made of stone for all that he moved not a blinking inch. His gaze was still fixed on me.

I carefully stood and stepped away from Crash, brushing his hands off mine when he offered them, though that meant Corb's magic hit me full force again.

And as good as it felt sliding over my skin, as much as it called to me to shuck my clothes and run naked into the ocean with his arms around me and his mouth on mine, I didn't like that he was trying to force it on me. It sparked an old flame of anger and hardened my certainty like nothing else could.

"Tone it the hell down, Corb," I snapped, channeling my inner cranky, tired-of-this-shit, done-with-men, woman. "My gran is missing and a little girl needs us. Whatever is between you and me, or me and Crash is going to have to wait until they are safe and the police don't want to string me up for an impromptu lynching." I stared hard at him and knew what I said next would change the trajectory of my life, and maybe my heart. "Can you handle that, or should you go back to Savannah?"

Corb's magic hadn't let up, and Alan took that moment to stick his head into the room. "What's happening? It smells like the ocean. Are you fighting with Corb again?"

Corb and I spoke in tandem. "Shut up, Alan!"

I looked back at Corb, and that flame within me fanned higher. Maybe it was my own magic, reacting to his, or maybe it was just that I could almost see my last duck, and it was on fire.

Hand on hips, I gave him a hard stare, seeing that this wasn't going to go well. "You know what, let me make the decision for you, like you keep trying to do for me. Go back to Savannah, Corb," I said. "Go. I can't deal with you right now. People's lives are on the line, and you want me to make a choice I'm not ready to make. Go back to the Hollows, or the council, or wherever you need to go. But it can't be here. You can't be here."

I swallowed hard on the tears that suddenly threatened and the tightness in my throat. I'd kissed him in the morning, and cast him out by afternoon. And I knew this would be it for us. His eyes softened ever so slightly, horror flickering within them as if he realized it too, and then they hardened almost as if he'd never cared about me at all.

It was telling at how quickly he let his anger control him.

I forced my feet to move. "Feish, you ready to go?" I asked as I strode past Corb and Sarge. I knew they were a package deal, and

that was okay. I could do this without them. I had good friends like Feish and Kinkly, like Crash and Penny.

Even so, a few tears slipped down my cheeks as I opened the door to the house and stepped into the gloom of the day. It matched my mood and the ache growing in my chest.

“You couldn’t have them both,” Kinkly said softly. I hadn’t even noticed her landing on my shoulder.

“I know. I didn’t ever really think that I could. I just didn’t think it would hurt like this,” I said as I kept my pace up, knowing that Feish would have no trouble keeping up. Only she didn’t follow me.

I turned at the edge of the property, right where I’d cross over into the visible world. Corb and Sarge followed me out, and the two men brushed past me and went straight to the Mustang. There was no goodbye from them.

No, that’s not entirely true. Sarge lifted his hand and gave me another grimace that said it all.

He didn’t like this either, but he was Corb’s best friend and they’d been an item for a time, so, of course, he was leaving with the siren. I didn’t hold it against him. I waved back and even blew him a kiss.

The engine of the Mustang revved and Corb peeled the car out backward, spinning the wheel in a crank that made the hot rod drift sideways with a squeal of tires and the burning smell of rubber. He didn’t look at me as he drove away, didn’t so much as glance in my direction, though I could see tension in the way he gripped the wheel, in the set of his jaw as he stared straight out the windshield.

A weird mixture of anxiety, relief, and sadness bubbled up from my stomach. I made myself take a deep breath and blow out through my mouth. See, some of the yoga stuff Suzy had taught me was sticking.

I looked back at the door of the house to see Feish standing there. “I have to stay with boss.” She hunched her back, her eyes mutinous. “He says you need time without me. I help him for a bit. He thinks he’s close to figuring out an issue with fae.”

I paused and went back into the house to see Crash standing there, leaning on the table.

“Trying to figure out what Karissa is up to?” I asked.

He blinked at me. “How did you—”

“She’s looking for the wings of a fallen angel, does that help?” I offered.

His face paled and he swallowed hard. “Yes. Goddess help me, it does. But . . . I won’t be able to help you. I have to stop her.”

The thing was, if he found the angel wings, that was one thing off my plate. “That bad, huh?”

“Yes.” He took a few steps closer to me, reached up and put a hand to my face. “I’m sorry for what that cost you.”

I nodded in acknowledgement, because I wasn’t sure what to say, and for a long moment, he just looked into my eyes. Then he let his hand slip and turned away. “Feish, we have to go!”

Emotional fatigue is a real thing, and I didn’t have it in me to argue with Crash about Feish going with him. Nope, not today.

Instead, I gave her a wave and got going on my own path. Maybe some time without my very blunt friend would be a good thing. Tears for Corb still tracked down my cheeks, no matter how many times I dashed them away, and I didn’t want either Feish or Crash to see me cry over something I’d always known deep in my heart wouldn’t work.

Corb would *one day* be an amazing man, but in many ways, he was still just a kid, something he’d just proven with his behavior. It still hurt to see him go. Seeing the potential in someone and knowing it would never be for you was kind of a shit deal.

“He didn’t handle it well,” Kinkly said. “That’s the problem with all those hormones.”

I snorted, which wasn’t a good idea after all those tears. I scrambled to get my bag open and grab a tissue before I made more of a mess of my face. Alan looked up at me from the interior, his eyes scrunched. When had he climbed in here?

“What are you crying about?”

I shoved my hand past him and grabbed a tissue. “That time of the month, Alan, remember?”

He grimaced, his nose wrinkling up and his eyes squinting shut, before he rolled so I was looking at his back. What a weird thing for such a little bag to hold so much.

I wiped my eyes, pulled up my proverbial bigger girl panties, and made my way to the closest tourist shop, a little place called

Reagan's Firepit. I frowned at the painted flames encircling the sign, which advertised all sorts of metal trinkets, thinking Crash would fit right in. I let myself into the store, the smell of iron, wood, and fresh tanned leather washing over me.

The shopkeeper saw me and smiled until I asked if she had a tourist map of the city. With a grimace, she handed one over. "All the shops have them, you know."

I nodded. "Yup, which is why I came in here."

I let myself back out of the store.

Using a pen, I circled the cemeteries. The closest one was St. Louis Cemetery Number 1. I'd start there and see if I could find anything about Homer Underwood.

I got us going in the right direction, telling myself this was why I was here—to find Gran and poor little Charlotte. The last thing I needed was to deal with men and hormones and shedding stupid tears over stupid boys who had to grow up before they'd be worth anything. I may have muttered that last bit out loud.

Kinkly sighed.

"Let me tell you something, girlfriend. Corb told you with his actions he doesn't trust you to make good choices. He tried not to, but he couldn't help it—he wants you to be what he wants you to be, *not what you are*. That's not love. Something about you truly draws him like a fly to honey, but I don't think he sees you for who you are. Strong, capable, and independent." She paused and tugged on one of my curls hanging close to her. "When the right man comes along . . . you won't have to tell him he's acting like an idiot. He'll fight to be what you need from the beginning."

I stopped dead in my tracks. "Kinkly, that's pretty damn deep."

"I have my moments." She laughed softly. "Fairies aren't just all fluff and wings."

"I didn't mean—"

"I saw the way Eric used to look at me," she said. "And I liked it. But I knew it would never work long term—I mean, look at us, we couldn't be more different in size—which is why I pretended not to notice he was interested. Men are dumb. Sometimes they want a woman so bad, they can't see past the wanting and realize it'll never work. Sometimes we have to do it for them, cut those ties and say

goodbye.” She flew off my shoulder and circled around to face me, flying backward. “Like Corb and you. He wants you bad enough to ignore all the stuff that will keep it from working. But I think you already knew that, didn’t you?”

Again, deeper than I would have thought for the little fairy who I’d thought was oblivious to Eric’s attentions. “You’re better at this than me.”

“Then why am I single too?” She laughed and lowered herself back onto my shoulder.

I laughed with her. “Another point to you.”

It was about then that gooseflesh rose up all over my arms and along the back of my neck. The sound of a drum, deep and rhythmic, boomed through the air as I turned the next corner, already knowing what I was going to see in front of me.

St. Louis Cemetery Number 1 loomed ahead of me, the oldest cemetery in the city.

And something in it didn’t want me around.

I rubbed my arms as I eyed the old cemetery gates. Sure, they were open, sure it was the middle of the day and there were all sorts of people walking around the grounds.

But this was New Orleans, and the way my skin had reacted to the proximity of the cemetery was a big fat red flag I was not going to ignore. “Something ugly lurks in there. And I don’t think it likes me.” I spoke quietly, suddenly feeling very exposed.

“Like a troll? They are ugly. Or a boogeyman? Also very ugly,” Kinkly said.

I shook my head and walked along the outside perimeter of the graveyard, about five feet from the fence. “I’m not sure, but I think something else, something . . .” The only word that came to mind was *darker*, but that seemed as weak as the coffee Alan had liked. I pulled my map out.

Begone.

None of your kind are welcome here.

Curses on you.

I paused and looked around, thoroughly spooked. “You hearing that?”

Kinkly shook her head and fluttered around my face. “I hear people moving around inside and your heartbeat picking up speed like you’ve been running. Maybe you aren’t in as good a shape as you think.”

I ignored her jab. “Yeah, so for now, this is a pass.”

I wasn't into proving myself, and if something in there wasn't interested in having me, I was leaving. I was too tired for another fight, run, or even verbal sparring with anyone.

A quick glance at the cemetery, and I headed off in the other direction, ready to check out one of the other cemeteries. Because again, this was NOLA and cemeteries abounded.

"What if that's where Homer Underwood was?" Kinkly flew around my face. "And it was our first stop and you blew it? I think you should go back."

My feet grew heavy, and I stopped about a block away from the place, close enough that I still felt like I was crawling with ants.

"Kinkly, I don't want to go in there." I leaned against the building. "It's . . . there is something bad in there. And it doesn't like me."

"Which is probably what we're after. Aren't we looking for bad guys?" Her wings brushed against my cheek, gossamer thin and soft as a feather.

I put my back to the wall and looked toward the cemetery. I could just make out the tops of a few larger mausoleums from where I stood. She wasn't wrong. And the quicker we figured out where the bad guys were holed up, the quicker we could get Charlotte and Gran home and safe.

Gah, the logic galled me because I really, really didn't want to go in there. I swallowed hard. "We'll take a quick look. If anything goes sideways, we're heading right back out. Okay?"

"Fair enough," Kinkly said. "I mean, sideways is rarely as fun as it sounds."

I pushed off the wall and strode back the way we'd come.

With my vision narrowed on my goal, I kept my feet moving even as the buzzing and drums escalated and the disembodied voice harassed me.

The closer I got, the more I struggled to breathe normally. One foot after the other, and then I was through the open gate and a sudden wash of *darkness* took me out at the knees.

The voices were all over me.

Vile.

Mutt.

Cursed one.

Get thee gone!

Kinkly's voice called to me as I went to my hands and knees, clinging to a tombstone, the cold of the granite seeping into my fingers and spreading up my arm to my elbow.

Well, this was going about as badly as I'd thought it would.

"Robert," I whispered his name, and the skeleton sprung to life beside me, just kind of appearing in the way that he did.

Long dark hair covered his face he swayed in front of me and held out a hand. "Friend."

I grabbed hold of his bony fingers, and the sensations backed off enough that I could at least get my feet under me.

"Help," I whispered, my voice stolen.

"Friend, help, whiskey," he grumbled as he dragged me out of the cemetery and tourists gawked at me. Of course, they couldn't see Robert, so it likely looked like I was being pulled about by a ghost. A flash went off from at least one camera.

Outside the gate and once more across the street, I didn't dare let go of Robert even though the darkness and voices had receded and I'd regained the ability to stand on my own.

He swayed next to me as I stood breathing hard and staring at the cemetery. "Kinkly, that was a terrible idea. I'm not going back there . . ."

A snort from around the corner of my building turned my head. I had to blink a few times because I couldn't be sure of what I was seeing. A man who shared a name with that damn cemetery. A man who was supposedly *on vacation*.

"Louis?" I stared a little harder to make sure I wasn't seeing things.

The sub-par necromancer who worked with Eammon at the Hollows stepped around so he stood next to me, looking toward the cemetery. He wore a lovely bright red shirt that was open at the throat and a pair of skinny jeans that were far too tight. They made him look like he could be a skeleton under them. "That place is not dark, you twit. It just has very many dead people that you cannot handle, because you are a woman, and you are weak and old," he said, his French accent thicker than I'd ever heard it.

Ah, here we were, back to him being rude. Lovely.

I let go of Robert, knowing that Louis couldn't see him anyway. "Really, Louis the piss-poor necromancer who can't even see my skeleton friend?"

His long, thin face went bright red to match his shirt, and if he'd had a cigarette in his mouth, he'd have been able to light it on fire.

"You are sensitive to the dead, yes? Why are you so surprised that they might overwhelm you in a town like New Orleans? And now, what, you want to prove yourself and go back in there? Idiot." He arched a brow at me, and I glared at him.

No, I did not want to go back in there. He was right. There were hundreds of ghosts in there, and the sensation was not pleasant—overwhelming was an understatement.

"What are you doing here in NOLA?" followed quickly by, "I could use your help." I said those words and instantly regretted what I'd said about him being a piss-poor necromancer just moments before.

"No, I do not think so." His lips curled into a sneer. "I am no good, remember?" He pressed his fingers to his chest. "I have been asked to come here to see my old mentor. He is in ill health and I have something special for him." His nose went up into the air higher than usual. "Something *very* special."

I swallowed what little pride I had left. "Louis, someone stole my Gran's ghost, and now they've taken a little girl as well. I am sorry I was rude, you caught me off guard"—only a small lie—"can you please help me find—"

"I already said *no*." Louis sniffed at me. "Perhaps if you were still a part of the Hollows, things would be different. As it is, you are just . . . you. Wretched and useless."

He clasped his hands behind his back, which tightened his loose shirt and showed an outline of something under it. I frowned and found myself grabbing at his shirt because the shape was that of a cross.

Robert and I had put the dummy cross in the grave of Evangeline to throw off anyone who might be looking for the real deal. We'd made sure that we were a bit sloppy with our dig, and I'd known all along that Eammon had seen me. He *must* have told Louis.

"What are you doing, you foul thing?" he screeched at me, but his scrawny arms were nothing to me, brute that I was. "You beast, get

out of 'ere!" He slapped at me as I ripped his shirt to see the fake stone taped to his side. Of course, he couldn't put it in a pocket, his jeans were too damn tight.

"You stole it?" I had to play the part and even went so far as to reach for the fake cross.

He slapped my hands away, and Robert let out a low growl and ground his teeth. For just a moment, I thought Louis flinched from him, but no, he was looking at me.

"You should have brought it to us! To the Hollows!" Louis snapped as he fixed his shirt, backing away from me. "We are the guardians of Savannah, not you!"

There was a burst in the air above our heads, like a series of bright blue fireworks. I frowned and even Louis cocked his head to the side.

Kinkly flew up into the air and did a slow circle. "Bree, I have to go. Something's going on, and I . . . Crash is calling me! He's got Scarlet."

"Is he in trouble?" I yelled after her, wondering how she'd gotten all that from a series of blue fireworks.

"Just needs me to follow the little runt!" she hollered back, and then she was gone in a burst of autumn colors before I could ask anything else.

When I turned back, it was to see Louis's bright red shirt all the way down the street. "Good riddance," I grumbled. "You're a jerk!" I yelled after him, and he flipped me off. The dude had the nerve to flip me off!

I yanked my map out, turned it around three times, and realized that I needed to hold it a little farther away from my nose than usual. "Awesome. And now my eyes are going?"

Nope, I was not going there, and neither were my eyes.

"Come on, Robert, let's see what else we can find in this town."

"Friend," he said and then followed me dutifully as I made my way to three more cemeteries. None of them had a morgue, none of them had nearly as many ghosts like ol' St. Louis Number 1 had, and none of the people I talked to knew a Homer Underwood. I should have pinned Louis to the ground and given him a purple nerple until

he gave up information on Homer Underwood—because if Eammon knew him, I had no doubt Louis did too.

Dinner was fast approaching before I finally gave up on the day. I was tired, hot, hungry, smelled vaguely of B.O., and just wanted someone to shove me in the right direction.

Why did the shows on TV make being a private investigator look so damn easy? Admittedly, I'd had an easier time of hunting people down in Savannah. There, I was on my home turf and everything just . . . worked. Here, I was a fish out of water. I had no grounding here, and it was taking the stuffing out of me.

My feet and back aching from walking on concrete all damn day, I gave up and flagged down a cabbie to take me back to Penny's safe house. Robert crumpled into a single bone as the taxi rolled up, and I tucked him into my bag. Alan didn't so much as flinch, though I could clearly see him.

"Where to, miss?" The driver barely glanced at me in the rearview mirror. His eyes looked about as tired as I felt.

"Well, I guess back to my place. Unless you know a Homer Underwood who works at a morgue?" I laughed with that last bit and the cabbie laughed with me.

"Well shit, I play poker with Homer on Saturday nights. Cheats like a bugger, but he's not too bad otherwise." He grinned. "You want me to take you to him?"

I leaned forward, putting my hands on the back of his seat. "I'm sorry, but you really do know *Homer Underwood*?"

He grunted. "Didn't I just say so? His place is across town. More fare for me if you want to go."

I could hardly believe my luck. "Yes. Take me to Homer."

The drive took fifteen minutes, which gave me time to think about what little I'd learned. I knew where my family had been killed, and how, even though I couldn't figure out how Alan played into it. Louis was up to something, and . . . well, I'd learned precious little else. I hoped Kinky was okay. I prayed that Charlotte wasn't scared, that she was being treated all right.

I found myself circling back to Alan. His death didn't make sense. If he'd been killed by the tonton macoutes, did that mean he had

been at the mansion looking for the angel feathers too? But that made no sense.

I wondered if and how this Homer Underwood could help me.

The cabbie pulled over cutting through my musings. I paid him. “Will you wait for me? Fifteen minutes?”

“Then all the way back to that other address you first gave me?” he asked with a grin, flashing a couple of gaps up the side of his smile. “You bet. Going to cost you though.”

I gave him two thumbs up. At that point, I was too tired and out of ducks to care. This Homer Underwood had better turn out to be one of the good guys.

It was only then that I took a good look at the house. Or maybe *houses* was a better description. In classic NOLA style, the building in front of me was a row of multi-tiered houses with balconies overlooking the road. How the hell was I supposed to know which one was Homer’s?

I looked back at the cabbie. “Which one?”

“Number thirteen near the end there.” He pointed at the section that was painted deep green with garish orange trim. I grimaced.

What a terrible color combination. I wished Kinkly were there—she’d have known if those colors meant anything, or if I was getting into trouble.

I walked down to the door of number thirteen and stood in front of it for a moment, listening to the sound of raised voices inside.

I heard a man’s voice first. “I told you I ain’t got anything to do with any other women! Marge, it’s not like that!”

“Bullshit, Homer! There is no way that you are going to the cemetery for work! That’s a bullshit lie!” Marge—I assumed—said.

Did they even realize their names belonged to cartoons? I could only hope that Homer was brighter than his counterpart.

“Please, Marge, can I have my underwear back?”

And with that, I just knew I was at the right place. Because there was no way that Eammon would have sent me to some powerhouse.

Nope, he’d sent me to a man who couldn’t get his own underwear back from a woman.

I shook my head at Eammon's idea of *help*, and rapped my knuckles on the garish orange door. Might as well catch Homer Underwood off guard, and a man begging for his underwear was definitely already off his game.

Of course, he wasn't the one who answered my knock.

The door whipped open, and I found myself looking straight at an enormous set of breasts that gravity had taken its toll on. I looked up, way up, to see a rather angry Marge, who appeared to be in her early fifties, glaring down at me. She had to be close to seven feet tall even without a massive blue beehive, and I couldn't for the life of me think of one smart thing to say.

"Jaysus, you are a tall woman," I spluttered. The thought that she could hunt geese with a rake crossed my mind, but I suspected that was a line from a show I'd seen once.

Her bright green eyes narrowed and her hand tightened on the edge of the door, the crease in her fingers turning blue. Blue? "You one of his women? If so, I'm going to have a chat with you. You ain't gonna like that chat, girlie."

I held both hands up and took a step back, just out of range. I hoped. "I am here to ask his professional advice, assuming he is the Homer Underwood that Eammon told me to talk to."

Her eyes narrowed further. "Eammon is a little shit disturber."

I sighed and put a hand on one hip, knowing I had to play this smooth or I wasn't going to get through this behemoth of a woman to

speak to Homer, no matter how mad she was at him. “Tell me about it. You know he flat out lied to me on two occasions to get his way? He and my boyfriend don’t get along much, makes my life hard.” Yup, imaginary boyfriend for the win.

Marge’s eyes softened a little. “Men, they are nothing but trouble.”

I nodded. “Agreed. You are welcome to take part in the conversation, it’s not private. I just need a little direction, seeing as I don’t know NOLA well. And I can pay for his time, of course.”

She pursed her lips, and I found myself staring hard at her face as it slid from human to something . . .not quite human. But quick as a flash, it was back to normal.

“Homer, put your ginch on. You got someone asking about you. Come on in.” She stepped back and waved for me to come forward.

“Maybe I should wait, if he isn’t dressed—” I said.

“Ah, he ain’t shy, and you and I have both seen enough twigs and berries that they all look the same, am I right, or am I right?” She gave a toothy grin and then laughed at her own joke.

A slightly nervous laugh escaped me. “Yup, you are right. All the same.”

I wasn’t entirely sure about that. Alan didn’t hold a damn match to Crash in that department.

I swallowed my trepidation and made my feet cross the threshold of the house. The interior was about as gloomy as the sky outside, with only a couple of lights on to illuminate the room. Knickknacks of all sorts were scattered about the room, all about the same size, and . . . I blinked and peered closer at one of them.

“That’s a voodoo doll,” I said as I jerked my head up to look at Marge. She grinned at me.

“That’s what we do, darling. We make voodoo dolls and we have plenty in stock. The tourists love them. Shall I give Eammon’s a poke for you?” She bent and scooped up a smaller than the average doll and showed it to me.

Yup, it had the distinct look of Eammon, complete with a lock of his hair that had been stitched into the top of the head. There were no current pins in him that I could see.

I held a hand up. “No, thanks. I’ll pass. For today. Who knows if I’ll want to kick him in the balls tomorrow?”

She chuckled. “Girl, I feel that all the way to my toes. Homer, where the hell are you?”

There was a narrow opening across the room, presumably the entrance to a hallway, and a man who would’ve made Louis look robust emerged from it. He slid along the wall, moving for all intents and purposes like a lizard, an analogy that fit him right down to his bugging eyeballs and the widespread spindly fingers he kept flattened against the unpainted drywall.

“Who are you?” he asked, and there was a slight flick of a tongue. Yes, he was definitely something lizard-like.

“Eammon said I should talk to you. I need a little help tracking down some people,” I said.

He grinned, flashing some sharper-than-human teeth and a few gaps where teeth had been. “Talking takes time and time is money.”

“How much for ten minutes? Surely that’s enough time?” I asked dryly, then flicked a glance at Marge.

Her eyes widened, and she snorted a laugh. “Two at best, honey.”

Homer frowned. “What are you two going on about?”

“Ten minutes,” I repeated, “How much?”

“Fifty bucks,” he grumbled.

I dug around in my bag and Alan took that moment to spill out, stretching out beside me. “Where in the fiery pits of hell are we now? Where did you bring me?”

Marge grumbled, “Ghost, you better behave, or I’ll stuff you in a dummy.”

I looked at her as I pulled out a fifty-dollar bill. “You can see him?”

“I work black magic, girl. I can see that murdered son of a bitch.” She narrowed her eyes at him and then looked at me. “You do it?”

“Nope. But he’s my ex, so he’s stuck to me. For now. I’m hoping to find a way to unstick him at some point.” I handed the bill over to Homer who took it and licked it before he folded it in half and stuffed it into a pocket. I turned my full attention to the lizard guy and did my best to ignore Alan, who was now strutting around the room touching things. Or trying to touch things.

I took a deep breath and plunged in. "Homer, I'm looking for a necromancer who has a lot of power. He wears a black robe and he made a statue come to life under me. Any idea where I could find him? He's stolen a spirit from me, and I think a living little girl too. I'm not sure what he'd want with her, but he's connected somehow."

Marge grunted at Alan, who immediately yelped, stumbled back, and dropped to the ground next to me. I ignored him.

Homer stared at me. "I work in the cemeteries every day. And I see the necros come and go. Most are weak, or middling at best. I'd have noticed a powerhouse. None in the Big Easy right now." He shrugged and his eyes slid sideways. Very lizardly.

"I saw him just this morning, which means he's here now," I persisted. "I get that you don't know where he is, but maybe you can give me an idea of a place to start? A necro who might help?"

Marge stepped into view. "What about Eammon's employee? Lewis or something?"

I sighed. "Louis is weak at best, and while he happens to be in town, he doesn't like me much. I called him out on how weak he is."

Homer grimaced. "Yeah, necros are a funny bunch, all ego and thinking they're at the top of the heap. They ain't, but you can't tell them that."

"Who is? At the top of the heap that is?" I found myself asking the question even though I didn't need the answer.

"Well, the blood suckers, of course," Homer looked at me like I was stupid. "They always rule the roost."

"Yeah, but there aren't any . . ." I trailed off as I stared at Homer's face, seeing how his eyebrows winged up. "No. No, there aren't any vampires out there. Are there?"

Gawd almighty, this was not the direction I'd thought this conversation would go.

"There have always been blood suckers, kid," Marge said softly, almost like she was trying to ease me into the idea. "The old ones are still out there, hiding. They are not stupid. When they're young, they are foolish and dangerous to everyone, running around like sharks in the sea. But the old ones? More dangerous and smarter than your average crocodile."

I just stared at them. It was Alan who cut in with an unsolicited opinion.

“Vampires are not real. This is ridiculous, Bree. We need to go.”

I smacked him upside the back of the head and grabbed his ear. “Shut your mouth, Alan. I’m working here, and you are distracting me.” Damn it, they hadn’t known my name before that moment. And now they knew his too! Gawd, what a mess!

Marge grinned. “We need more than just your name to make a voodoo doll of you, darling. So far I like you, so you’re all good.”

My time was almost up in this stranger than strange house, so I kept my hand clamped on Alan and asked, “Homer, a place to start looking?” I paused and added, “Please.”

Homer sighed. “I don’t know if I should. You play with a necro who’s that powerful—assuming this person you’ve seen is the real deal—and you’re going to get killed. Eammon won’t thank me if I get you turned up dead.”

Which said that he *did* know of a powerful necromancer in town.

My jaw tightened as I thought of Gran and my parents. “I know the dangers. Which is why I’m not playing.”

Marge let out low whistle. “Oh, Homer, she’s got some spine in her. Let’s see what she can do with a little nudge. Go to the abandoned amusement park. Been empty since Katrina tried to wipe us off the map. Start there, follow the breadcrumbs, and I think you’ll find your little girl at least. That’s where the kids are always taken first. The necro wouldn’t want her, but I’d bet she was close to where your gran was when she went missing?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

She grinned. “Whoever is working for the necro would have seen the kid, and they may have taken the easy snatch and grab. Opportunistic feeders, if you will. And when you’re ready and can afford it, come on back to me. I’ll unstitch you from that ex of yours.”

I nodded again. “Thank you, I’ll do that,” and backed out of the house, making sure not to touch anything, all while trying not to think about just how many kids were being taken if there was a single place they “always” ended up.

Outside once more, I let go of Alan, who stood and dusted himself off dramatically, as if it were even possible for him to get

dirty. I looked closely at him and noted that the wounds of his death were pretty much gone now. He looked pretty normal for a dead guy.

“Why did you have to touch the things? Why did you use my name?” I snapped at him as I broke into a brisk walk toward the cabbie, who waved at me.

“Did you see it? Voodoo dolls everywhere! People who think that works are just—”

“Alan,” I cut him off, “you are a dead man walking around as a ghost, and after all the things you’ve seen, a voodoo doll is going to throw you off? Come on. Pull your head out of your ass. They could have trapped you!”

A chuckling sound came from my bag, and I flipped the leather cover open. A pair of tiny eyes looked up at me. I frowned. “Kinky?”

“Guess again,” said a scratchy, familiar voice.

“Jinx, what the hell?” I didn’t dare scoop her out. “You were with Sarge the last I saw you.”

“He is gay. Did you know that?” She shook a tiny spider leg at me. “And you always have something interesting happening, so I decided to stay here. Crawled into your bag last night. Been sleeping most of the day.”

I got to the cab and let myself in. The cabbie tried to talk to me, but my mind was racing with all the things I needed to do.

Get food. Sleep. Figure out where the abandoned amusement park was, find Charlotte.

Find Gran.

Find the angel wings. Maybe Crash would end up doing that last for me. That would be a help.

The fatigue was well and truly getting to me, and I leaned my head back as the cabbie drove. “That the Homer you were looking for?” he asked.

“Remarkably, he was the Homer I was looking for,” I said. “Thank you.”

“Ah, was nothing. But don’t thank me. Ain’t good to thank a fae, you know.”

My eyes flew open, and I sat forward. “Pardon?”

He grinned. “Crash said you might need a ride. He needed to call Kinky to him for some spy work, so he asked me to help you if you

asked for anything. Personal favor to him. Let him know that I was indeed helpful, would you?"

I could have gotten all huffy and upset that Crash had overstepped . . . except he'd left the choice in my corner. If I hadn't asked the cabbie for help, it wouldn't have been given.

"What name do you go by?" I asked. "So I can tell him."

"Nemeth will do for now," he said. "And here we are. Safe and sound. Though I don't see a house."

I looked up and saw the safe house clearly looming under the cloud-filled sky. Lights were on in the lower levels. I handed Nemeth the money for the ride and stepped out. "Might need a ride or two tomorrow. You got a number I could call?"

He flicked out a business card and handed it to me through the rolled down window. "There you go. Call me any time, day or night, for a safe ride." And then he winked as he pulled away, and I was almost sure he was flirting with me.

I shook my head and slowly made my way toward the house.

I leaned on the door for a moment before entering, not listening, just steeling myself for whatever I was going to be up against in there. Maybe Crash would flip out at me?

The last thing I expected was good news.

Then again, the shadow world did enjoy surprising me.

I pushed the door open, prepared for whatever horrors I might find within, only to be engulfed in the smell of Eric's famous eclairs.

The bigfoot poked his head out of the kitchen, his face covered with flour on one side, his bow tie firmly in place. "You're back! I was making your favorites!"

"Eric!" I flung my arms around him, surprising us both, I think. I wanted to cry. Shit, I was crying.

He patted my back with one big mitt covered in an oven mitt. "Yeah, lots going on. Let me pull these out of the oven and then we can talk."

I looked around and realized no one else was there. "Did Suzy come with you?"

"Of course. The thing is . . .well, Corb gave you information that wasn't quite right." He pulled the pan of puff pastry out of the oven and set it on a couple of cooling mats.

I found the kitchen chair, half blind with the tears, and slumped into it while Eric served me a big bowl of something warm. I started spooning it into my mouth without asking what it was, letting out a *hmm* of appreciation at the Cajun spices, and chased it with slices of fresh bread slathered in butter. My belly was immeasurably happier as I filled it with things that made me feel loved.

"Talk to me," I mumbled around a mouthful. "What happened with Corb?"

Eric sighed and sat across from me. “Corb separated us from you, and he told you that we wanted to be alone. That wasn’t true. I told him Suzy and I were going to my house for the night to get a few things and talk about how to best handle her siren abilities. By the time we came to find you, you were in jail. Corb never contacted us about trying to break you out. Crash did.”

His words halted the spoon halfway to my mouth. “Why would Corb do that?”

Alan appeared and sat next to Eric with a grunt. “Because Corb is like that. I told you he gets what he wants when it comes to women. And for whatever reason he wants—pardon me, wanted—you. The fact that you kept turning him down probably only made him want you more.”

I frowned at him and so did Eric. As a bigfoot, he lived kind of in between realms and could see and hear ghosts.

“She is lovely, despite what you want to see or say,” Eric said. “And as she continues to gain confidence, more men will be drawn to her because confidence is beauty. Especially for a strong man. But you’re not wrong about the way rejection is affecting him. Sirens don’t get turned down.” He blushed a little because, of course, Suzy was a siren and she and Eric were together in every sense of the word. “But being turned down is a new thing for Corb, and he doesn’t know how to handle it.”

Alan’s face twisted up. “You aren’t his usual type is all. He normally picks women who have no brains and big—” He held his hands out in front of his chest, making the classic cupping motion.

Eric lifted a hand. “You made the right choice, sending him away. He . . . is not thinking straight. Sirens are dangerous, especially when their hormones are out of control. It’s not a good time to deny them —”

“You saying I *should* have slept with him?” I spluttered out bits of my soup.

Eric shook his head. “No, let me finish. My point is that he’s not really in control of his behavior right now. Possessiveness and hormones are driving his actions. The effect is similar to that spell that the O’Seans put on the Hollows Group. These are classic symptoms of a male siren going through a change. Add in the whole

turning him down thing, and you have a perfect storm of emotions that even he doesn't know how to handle."

Eric was a psychologist to the shadow world, and I forgot sometimes that he was very good at what he did.

Alan rolled his eyes and leaned back in his chair. "Please, he went through puberty years ago."

Eric glanced at him and then at me, his eyes serious. "Think about it as a second puberty. The one he is hitting now. . . well, it's basically his paternal clock ticking. I think part of the reason he wants you is because he could see you'd be a good mother—"

"She can't get pregnant," Alan spat out. "Couldn't carry to term. All that money spent on in vitro, and nothing. So maybe Corb'll leave her alone if she tells him that."

My stomach turned as the old disappointment—so bitter, so wrenching—tumbled through me.

Eric's eyes softened, and he reached over and put a hand on mine, which had suddenly gone cold. "Bree, I didn't know. I'm sorry."

I stood up. "Eric, thank you. I'm going to go lie down. Alan, if you come near me in the next few hours I will take you back to Marge and ask her to stuff you into a voodoo doll."

Through blurred eyes, I found my way to the stairs and stumbled into a bedroom.

Of course, it wasn't mine.

I bumped into Crash's chest—smelling him before I truly saw him—and bounced back, feeling my way blindly back to the door. I couldn't even speak. There were no words for the wave of emotion and grief that had caught me so off guard.

Years, it had been years since I'd last tried to get pregnant, but those losses still hurt. They still reminded me of the one thing I couldn't do. Something I, as a woman, should have been able to do.

His hands swept up and settled on my shoulders. "Easy. What happened? Are you okay?"

"Corb wanted to get me pregnant, and I can't, and that was the only reason he wanted me. That's not how it works for me." The words blubbered out of me, along with a fair number of tears and probably snot.

The miscarriages, the inability to get pregnant without help, all of it was my fault. Okay, yes, I knew it wasn't a *fault* thing but that was how it felt. Like I was broken, or less of a woman because I couldn't have a child.

A sob escaped me, and I clapped my hands over my mouth. No, I wasn't allowed to break down about this—of all things!—now. Two people I loved were depending on me to find them.

Crash scooped me up then sat in a large chair in the corner of the room, cradling me in his lap.

"Let it out, lass," he whispered into my ear, holding me tightly against his chest.

Those four words undid me, and the tears and whimpers slipped out of me in a way I'd never allowed to happen before. Yes, it was the loss of those sleeping babies. Yes, it was the loss of never being a mother.

But it was also the loss of Gran.

Of my parents.

Of all those years that had been a blur with Alan because I'd been too afraid to step up and demand better from him.

Sitting in that jail cell, thinking I'd be killed for a crime I didn't commit. All those emotions had welled up without getting any release, and they'd come for me with a vengeance.

Crash didn't shush me. He held me tightly and let me sob against his chest as I clung to his shirt, my nails digging into the soft material. The warmth of his body curled through me like a blanket just pulled out of the dryer on a cold night, and I breathed it in. Warmth and safety, he was both, and I needed it more than I wanted to admit.

The emotions came in waves, and I just let them flow through me, out my eyes, and down my cheeks. For the first time, I really let myself process everything that had happened to me.

"It isn't weakness to feel this way, lass," Crash murmured. "You've handled all that's been thrown at you, and that includes me being an ass when you needed me to be better. It was bound to come out at some point."

He kissed the top of my head and a final hiccupping sob popped out of me, and that was the last of it. Not that I wouldn't feel any of

this sorrow or grief again, but the thought of what Corb had wanted from me was gone, washed away. I could put him behind me, once and for all.

“Sorry.” I grimaced and tried to pull away from Crash, wiping ineffectually at the wet spots on his shirt. I wasn’t embarrassed, but I teetered on the edge of it. “I didn’t mean to slobber all over you.”

“Don’t go.” He tightened his hold on me as I tried to pull back, his gold-flecked blue eyes staring hard into mine. “Don’t go, Bree. Please.”

Well, who was I to deny a plea like that? I leaned back into him, letting myself sink into his warmth again. Letting my arms sneak around him. He gave a satisfied rumble that I could hear through his chest.

“Nemeth was helpful,” I said and yawned. “Thank you. Is Kinkly okay?”

“Kink is fine. She is an excellent spy, which is what she is doing now.” He paused, then added, “You asked for help?” The surprise in Crash’s voice was not lost on me.

“Am I that bad?”

I looked up, and he shook his head. “No, you aren’t. I’m just surprised you let him take you to Homer. He’s a scummy little pawnshop broker on the east side of the city.” Crash’s hands trailed up and down my back in gentle circles.

The motion of his hands was distracting me from his words. “No, he took me to Homer and Marge.”

His hands stopped quite suddenly. “He took you to the voodoo priestess?”

I looked up. “Yeah, but she was super helpful. She likes me, I think.”

“What did you give her?”

Crash’s worry infecting me, I sat up straighter and shook my head. “Nothing. I gave her nothing. I mean, I gave Homer a fifty-dollar-bill for his time. Why?”

He puffed up his cheeks and then blew out a slow breath. “You get away with things that would get the rest of us hung up by our toes. You were very lucky if you didn’t have to give her anything else.

Like a lock of hair. She can make a voodoo doll out of anything, even a single hair would be enough.”

I gave him a dry look and once more made an attempt to raise a single eyebrow. Nope, it wasn't happening. “Um, you do remember that I'm being accused of a murder I didn't commit? I wouldn't call that getting away with anything.”

He gave me a quick smile. “I know. I meant your luck with the rest of the shadow world. If I'd gone there, at the very least, she'd have tried to take something to make a voodoo doll of me.” His face paled rapidly as he looked me over, but I shook my head.

“I didn't touch anything, and with the exception of Alan pissing her off—shocker, I know—it went fine. We man bashed and she warmed up to me real quick.” I shrugged. “I have a knack with pissed-off, disgruntled women. What can I say?”

Crash cupped my face with his hands, and I thought for a brief and giddy moment he was going to kiss me, but all he did was press his forehead to mine. “I won't get in your way, but please be careful. I don't want to say goodbye to you.”

I pulled back a little and summoned some of my new self-confidence. “You mean you want all the crazy I got going on?”

His lips twitched. “Are you saying that you forgive me for being an idiot?”

Hmm. I narrowed my eyes. “You told me why you turned away from me after your fight with the goblin king. What has changed?”

Crash didn't let me go, didn't back away from what had to be an uncomfortable question. “The reason is still there. I just realized that I would have to take the chance if I want you in my life. It really is that simple. No matter how much it makes me want to follow you around with bubble wrap, that isn't going to happen.”

“Yeah, no.” I bobbed my head in agreement. “And the note you left? I probably have a screen shot of it in my head.”

He cleared his throat and gave a slow shake of his head. “That was the work of someone else. Who unfortunately you are going to have to talk to at some point.”

I shook my head. “I don't want to talk to Karissa.”

“Wasn't her,” he said. “But I think that should be a discussion for another day. Right now, I can feel the exhaustion in you and you

should sleep.”

I smiled. “I am tired. But some fairy honey would help.” Oh, that would be amazing. Fairy honey was a wicked fae drink that would wipe away the crushing fatigue and keep me going. Sure, there was a kick back at some point, but I was willing to pay that price to find Charlotte and Gran quicker.

“I’ve got none, but if I run across any while I’m here, I’ll grab it.” He stood but didn’t put me down, just held me in his arms. Those big biceps of his had no problem lifting me. If I’d been standing, I totally would have swooned. “You sleep a few hours, and then you can go out again. Hopefully, Kinkly will be back by then.”

I took note that he didn’t say anything about coming with me. I yawned before I could form a question about that.

He laid me on his bed, and as I slid down his arms, my fingers found his. I held onto his hand. “Stay with me. Just . . .until I fall asleep.”

There was no hesitation in him. He didn’t ask me why I wanted company, nor did he imply that I was lesser for it. He just accepted that I needed something he could give me.

And that was how I ended up in bed with Crash.

Again.

The bed was plenty big enough for us to not touch, but Crash pulled me into his arms and I settled against him with a sigh. I wanted to tell him what I'd learned from Marge the voodoo priestess and Homer, her seemingly submissive partner.

"Homer said—"

"Go to sleep," Crash repeated, his body solid and warm and so very safe. "We'll talk when you wake up."

Mind you, being snuggled up to him when he was wrapped in nothing but a sheet was preferable, but this was good too. I'd take it.

He must have felt my smile against his chest.

"Sleep, and stop thinking about me naked." He growled the sound making my skin flush and my hormones perk up in a way that was probably not conducive to sleep.

Don't worry, it's not one of those scenes. You're good to keep reading.

I sighed and snuggled up close to him, drawing in a deep breath that was all Crash. A hint of smoke, a curl of coal fires, and the slightest whisper of something musky and manly. My eyes closed, and while I'd thought sleep would avoid me, I had a full belly, the room was dark, and the safety and warmth of Crash. The only other man who I knew for sure was on my side was Robert.

As if thinking of him drew him to my dreams, I blinked and found myself standing back at the edge of the St. Louis Cemetery Number 1, Robert at my side. The lifelike version of him.

“Hey,” I said. “Dreaming here, do you mind? I don’t really like this place, and it doesn’t much like me. Too many ghosts, remember?”

He turned an icy blue eye my way. “I didn’t bring you here. I’m tied to you, Bree, and you came here. The question is why?”

I turned away from him to look at the cemetery and let the words flow from me. “Because something in there scared me, and I don’t like feeling weak or afraid.”

Robert crossed his arms. “Fair enough.”

“Did you feel it, though?” I asked him. “The menace?”

“I did. Less effective on someone who isn’t really alive.” He grinned and lifted a hand to touch the tip of my chin. “You got rid of the siren. I’m surprised you held out against him, to be honest. He had some serious sex mojo going on.”

I threw my hands up in the air. “Not talking about men right now, Robert.”

He grinned and laughed at me. “Life doesn’t come in nice tidy boxes, Bree. That’s why your relationship status is set to ‘complicated.’ Events don’t happen one at a time. They cascade and snowball and try to crush us. Why in the world you think that your story would be orderly is beyond me.”

I frowned at him. “Robert? Any ideas? And how the hell do you know about relationship statuses anyway?”

He looked away, out across the dreamscape of the cemetery. “This place has seen a lot of death and a lot of sacrifices. And I hang out in the bottom of your bag as a finger bone. Sometimes your phone gets turned on. I’ve seen your attempt at duck lips. Stop doing it, it’s terrible.” He winked at me. Cheeky bugger had the nerve to wink!

My jaw dropped. I’m not sure which part was more disturbing—Robert creeping on my Facebook status and photos, or the idea that this cemetery had seen basically a lot of ritual murder.

I pulled myself together and focused once more. Robert seemed to have a lot of knowledge, and I didn’t want to be swept away before I got some of it. I reached out and took his hand, holding him tightly. He squeezed my hand back as if he didn’t want to let me go either.

“Robert, what’s keeping me out of this place?”

He looked back at the cemetery. “Guessing here, but I’d say our necromancer friend is to blame.”

“Yeah, that was what I was worried about,” I muttered. “So how do I—we—get in there?” I asked. “If Charlotte is being held at the abandoned amusement park with the coven, Gran could be here.”

A scuffle of leaves across the ground at our feet and an arctic breeze pushing in from my right side turned me in that direction before Robert could answer me.

A black-robed figure stood across from us, staring out at the cemetery.

I squeaked, pretty sure I peed a little, and tried to back up. Robert caught me around the waist, holding me to his chest so he could whisper in my ear. “I don’t think he can see us.”

The robed figure took a step forward and touched the wrought iron fence. A sizzle and a snap lit up the air as voices rolled out around him, screaming that he wasn’t welcome. I recognized those voices.

He pulled back with a snarl and a grimace.

Well, well, well. He couldn’t get in either. That was interesting. Maybe he wasn’t as strong as he looked.

And then it hit me.

Gran had been looking for angel wings. This necro guy was looking for something, and a coven of dark witches was waiting in the wings . . . witches who could do a spell for him if he found the ingredients?

“Shit,” I whispered. “What do you want to bet the Coven of Darkness is working with him? That they went for Gran, saw or sensed Charlotte, and took her as a bonus? They could work a spell for him.”

Robert tightened his arms around me, and I clung to him. “That makes sense. But what are we doing at this graveyard?”

He had a valid question. “Maybe there’s a clue to where the angel wings are hidden?” I nodded, already seeing the pieces of the story come together. “It wouldn’t shock me in the least if the ghosts know. Maybe they aren’t bad, but protective?”

Robert’s arms tensed around me. “So you need to talk to them.”

Ugh, I did not want to ask the ghosts from that cemetery anything, but he was right. Eyes on the black-robed necromancer, I took a step back, dragging Robert with me. “Just in case he sees us.”

As if I’d been shouting with a ducking megaphone, the robed figure turned slowly and looked in our direction.

He tipped his head and raised a finger and spoke to me, but pointed at Robert. “I see, so you have found a way to make your mentor teach you. Interesting. Perhaps I should have buried Evangeline deeper. Lovely, then I can kill you both. Properly.”

Mentor? I glanced at Robert to see his face was closed off, giving away no emotion. Evangeline’s grave was where the faux cross had been buried. Robert had said she was a friend, but maybe she’d been more than that?

“You got her killed, too, didn’t you? Always trying to help the pretty girls, always getting them killed,” the hooded figure said softly, his voice annoyingly mild.

I kept backing up, not sure what exactly he was saying, but I was guessing that maybe Robert had been teaching Evangeline? And she’d died.

Well, shit, everyone died.

“Back off.” I reached for my knives, but this was a dream and I wasn’t sure that they were even there. Or that they’d do anything if I found them.

The robed and hooded figure swirled his hands up faster than I could track with my eyes, and a blast of something slammed into me. There was no color to the magical thump, no sparkles, no scent, nothing. I was hit in the chest and thrown backward so hard, I struggled to breathe once I hit the ground.

Jerking my limbs this way and that, fighting my way out of the dream, I sat up in the dark room, panic clawing at me.

An arm was tight around me, and without thinking, I drove a fist toward the darkened figure. Only I think I hurt my fist more than I hurt him as my hand crumpled against his chest.

“Easy, easy, Bree, it was just a dream.” Crash rolled away from me and flicked on a light. The tiny clock on the bedside table blinked a disturbing three thirty-three a.m. My heart raced and my lungs

burned as if I'd just run ten miles. Or held my breath. Or been suffocated.

I sat up and rubbed my arms. Sweat coated my skin, and all I managed to do was smear it around. "Bad dream, but I think . . . I think it was kind of real." I shook my head and then nodded. "Yeah, I think it was real."

Crash sat up and stretched his legs out along the bed. "Was it at least helpful?"

I ran a hand over my face and grimaced. "Maybe?" I told him about the dream and what I thought might be hidden in that cemetery. "And maybe Gran is there too." I rubbed a hand over my face. "I won't be able to go back to sleep after that. I'm going to shower and get going."

His eyebrows rose. "You think that's a good idea?"

I glanced at the clock. I'd gotten about six or seven hours of sleep, and really that was enough. "Yeah, I think it is. It's like I can feel a timer ticking down, and if we get to the end of it and Gran and Charlotte aren't found . . . bad things, you know?"

He tugged me to him. "Yeah, I know. The fae are all riled up here too. Kink is doing what she can to get me info. Something has NOLA on edge."

I gave him a hard stare. "You know what Karissa wants the wings for, don't you?"

"Yeah, I do."

"You going to tell me?" This was his chance to be straight with me, to not keep another secret. My heart beat a little faster as he sat there, saying nothing, and I wondered if he was about to pull a Corb.

Slowly he nodded. "There is a spell that would bind me to her in a way that I couldn't escape. I would be blind to anyone but her and would be compelled to follow her every command. *Semper Mea*. It's an old spell known only to the fae. So right now, I am running a fine line between keeping her loyalists believing that I am not with you, while trying to find the angel wings myself to keep them safe, while having her loyalists thinking I am working with them to find the wings for Karissa."

"You know I'm trying to find them too? As long as one of us gets to them we're good." I paused and smiled. "We're good." That last bit

held a little bit more meaning to it. Maybe he couldn't be with me, but we were okay now that he was sharing.

With one finger, he tipped my chin up and kissed me, his mouth angling over mine. I slid a hand up into his dark hair, holding him close. I could almost feel him keeping his magic in check, as if he didn't want to overwhelm me.

Which was the very opposite of what Corb had attempted. I smiled in the middle of the kiss and pulled back. "One of these days . . ." I didn't finish my thought as I stood and let myself into the attached bathroom.

"One of these days what?" Crash asked as I shut the door in his face.

"One of these days, we're both going to let our magic loose, and then it's going to be a real party," I said.

He groaned and thumped his head on the door. "Don't tease."

Laughing, I flicked on the shower, thoughts of another shower close to the surface. It was tempting to recreate it, but the memory of the dream and the necromancer blasting me out of my socks was still too strong.

Stripping down, I stepped into the hot water, grabbed the soap and shampoo and got scrubbing.

I knew a few things.

I was in the right place, even if I didn't have a pinpoint spot. St. Louis Cemetery Number 1 was going to be a pickle. I needed to find a way to get a bunch of mean ghosts to talk to me.

But that wasn't first on the menu. First was an abandoned amusement park. Charlotte was the one who needed saving, not a pair of wings.

Clean, I towel dried vigorously and caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I blinked and stared at the woman staring back, buck naked. My skin had changed with my weight loss. It was softer in places and in others, like along my belly, it was looser. Apparently my skin didn't bounce back like it once had. Not that it mattered.

Unless I ended up naked with Crash again. Which, if I was honest, was exactly where I wanted to be.

"Later, you horn dog," I muttered to myself. "Gran and Charlotte first, sex later."

A buzzing of wings turned my head up to see Scarlet sitting on the windowsill, reminding me of how I'd first met Kinkly. I tightened my towel around my upper body. "Scar, what are you doing? And how the hell did you find this house?"

She snarled at me. "I can find my king anywhere." Today her clothes were variegated in color, from the lightest pink through a deep, blood-wine burgundy.

I didn't like that she could find this place. That meant we could be found here as long as Crash was with us. Besides, wasn't Kinkly supposed to be following her? "Do you have an appointment?"

"Is he here? With you?" Her eyes swept over me and she gave a sniff of disdain. At least there was no sword this time.

I pointed to the door. "Through there."

The fairy flew past me, and then, of course, stopped at the door. "Open it."

"Oh, that's not polite." I pulled my towel up and around me again. "Ask nicely."

"Open it, you filthy human," she snapped as she swung around, and the cheek of her, she pulled her tiny sword and pointed it at me. I did not need a matching slice on the other side of my face.

I leaned a hip against the counter. "Why don't you tell me why you're here? And I'm not quite human either, if I'm being honest. If you'd been listening before, I actually have some fae in me."

Part of me would like a whole lot of fae in me, but I didn't think telling her that would win me points.

"I will not!" She seemed as horrified by my request as she was at the thought of asking me politely.

"I'm not opening the door"—I smiled at her—"until you ask politely."

She flew at me with an ear-piercing screech, sword pointed at my left eye. I spun to the side, grabbed my towel by the corner, and jerked it off me.

She spun in the air and faced me. "You think to stun me with your hideousness?"

"Nope, a towel flick will do the trick." I snapped my towel like a whip, the corner hitting her hard right in the belly.

Her wings collapsed as the color drained from her face and she went down in a tumble. I leapt forward and caught her, then set her on the counter.

“Bree?” Crash said from the other side. “Do I dare ask who you are talking to in there?”

“It’s an amazingly rude fairy dressed in all red, goes by Scarlet,” I said. “You want to talk to her?”

The door cracked open, and I scooped up my towel and covered up. Not that he hadn’t already seen me naked, but it wasn’t that kind of a moment.

His let himself in and his eyes landed on the small fairy. “Shit. Scarlet, what are you doing here?”

“Trouble,” she wheezed as she held her belly. I wasn’t too worried. There was no blood seeping through her fingers, and I knew from experience that fairy folk were tougher than they looked.

I scooped up my clothes and went into the room to get dressed, leaving them to talk.

The low rumble of Crash’s voice was all I could pick up, no actual words. I made myself go to the empty room that had been mine for about five seconds. There were clean clothes in there, underwear and, thank *Gawd*, a fresh sports bra that would fit.

Much as wriggling into said sports bra was a workout on its own with my skin still damp from the shower, it was nice to have on clothes that weren’t days old. Dressed once more, I headed downstairs, not entirely surprised to see Penny sitting at the kitchen table with a large book in front of her. I’d say it was leather bound, only the leather still had long fur attached to it.

“Good morning,” I said as I sat across from her. She nodded to the pot of tea in the center of the table, an extra cup beside it. I poured myself some of the steaming liquid, dumping a good amount of cream and sugar into it.

“I’m coming with you,” she said as I lifted the teacup to my mouth.

I set the cup down before I took a sip. “You’re coming with me?”

“To the abandoned amusement park,” she said. “That is where the Coven of Darkness is, and it’s where we will find the girl.”

I blinked at her.

“How did you know?” I’d not had the chance to tell anyone about what Marge and Homer had given me.

Penny sighed. “Because the coven phoned me after you left, and they propositioned me.”

I circled my hands around the teacup and suddenly wished I had whiskey in it instead of just tea. I looked at Penny across from me. “You were *propositioned* by the Coven of Darkness?”

“Only Missy and I are left in the south from the original Coven of Silver. The younger members have scattered farther even than I had thought, and the two locals are not willing to help. And so the young ones from the Coven of Darkness came to *me* for help, which I find interesting.” She tapped what I had a feeling was a spell book in front of her. “Apparently they tried a spell that binds demons to the caller. They wanted to make themselves stronger, but something went wrong. Not that I’m surprised. If they had not killed off all their mentors, they would not be in this pickle. It may be too late for me to help them.”

I was already racing ahead with ideas. “Do they have Gran and Charlotte?”

“They have Charlotte,” Penny nodded. “They admitted as much.”

Hope surged within me. Maybe this would be easier than I’d hoped. “What if we make a deal? You help them with their spell, and we get Charlotte? Would they go for that?”

Footsteps rumbled down the steps and Crash ducked his head into the kitchen, interrupting us. “I have to go. Bree. Scarlet says the fae hunting the wings are close to finding them. I have to get there before her, and before the rest of the fae. They think they are in the St. Louis Number 1 Cemetery.”

My jaw dropped open. "So I was right! That's why the ghosts are so mean."

He blinked. "What?"

"The ghosts there, they freaked out when I tried to go onto the cemetery grounds, and they repelled the necromancer too." I stood and went to him. "Be careful, the ghosts were super strong. They dropped me to my knees."

He nodded and then, as if he couldn't resist, he strode to my side and bent to kiss me. Quick, but far from impersonal. My mouth softened under his, the heat rolling between us like a sudden flame that warmed me through and through. "You be careful too." He pulled away, his hand lingering on my face for a moment before he turned and jogged out of the house.

Feish was right behind him, and she glowered at me, lips held tightly together in what was an impressive feat for her. "I have to go with him."

I smiled. "You two be careful. Try to keep him out of trouble."

She snorted, a burbling noise that sounded far wetter than it should have.

Penny waited for the door to shut behind them. "Why is he looking for the angel wings?"

"*Semper mea* spell mean anything to you?" I asked her, and she groaned, her eyelids fluttering closed.

"Damn that Karissa! She just can't let him be!" She thumped her cane to the floor. "At least if he gets to them first, it's one off your list." She was silent for a moment, studying me, then added, "You be careful with that one. Hotter than sin, that fae king, and twice as dangerous to the heart and body."

"Tell me something I don't know," I said. "Actually, tell me how are we going to get Charlotte back." Her mother had to be losing her mind with fear, not knowing where her little girl was, and my stomach twisted into knots of empathy for her. We needed to hurry. I should not have slept so long.

Penny nodded. "The situation is not good. We have until sunrise to get Charlotte away from the Coven of Darkness, or they will mark her as one of theirs, and she will be lost to us forever."

I spluttered on my tea and shot to my feet. “Then what are we waiting for? Sunrise isn’t that far off!” Four hours, maybe a little less.

Penny stood a little slower than me. “The amusement park is a long way off by foot. And the coven, they’ll be watching for me. They made sure to tell me to come alone.”

“They want you too then?” I asked the question but already knew the answer.

Penny sighed and leaned on the table. “Yes, I believe they hope to trap me. There are spells that could turn even an old lady like me into one of theirs. They’d only keep me as long as I was useful, then they’d kill me too and steal my power, I imagine. I’d hoped Missy would get here before something like this came up. Together, we could actually stand against the young ones. They might be powerful, but they have no experience.”

I put my hands to either side of my head and paced a small circle in the kitchen. There had to be a way to get Charlotte out safe and sound without risking Penny. There had to be. “I hate to ask, but is Missy actually coming? Should we—” I swallowed my pride, “—wait for her?”

For Gran and Charlotte, I would work with Missy. For Gran I would do a lot of things.

Penny shook her head and I tried not to feel relieved. “Don’t know. She said she was coming, but it’ll be on her time frame. As always.”

Of course, it would. I started my pacing again, thinking through our options. There was one I kept circling back to.

“I know the amusement park is abandoned, but do you think there’s a map of it online?” I scrambled through my hip bag and pulled out the cell phone that I’d never returned to Crash. I did a search for the abandoned amusement park, and several pictures popped up. I grimaced as I scrolled through the images of the dilapidated buildings, sunk under water, cringing at the faded paint, leering clowns with eyes hanging loose, and rusted metal ride parts. Each seemed to be taken under a gloom-filled sky, as if for maximum effect.

“Gawd damn, that’s freaky,” I muttered as I scrolled through the images until I found a map. I tried to make it bigger, spreading and

pinching my fingers on the screen with no effect. It refused to expand.

Penny didn't speak as I paced and stared at the screen, just let me be as I worked the problem through in my mind. I don't know how much time slid by as a plan slowly formed. It might not be perfect, but it was far better than going in half-cocked by the seat of my very comfortable leather pants.

I closed my eyes and worked over the plan in my head. Satisfied, I showed the map to Penny. "Any idea where in here they might be?"

She looked at it closely, moving it around with her finger. "Here, they said to meet me at *Jocos Mardi Gras*."

I grimaced. Of course, they'd chosen the worst of the rides with a big leering joker character hanging over the very dark entrance to a tunnel.

"Okay, here. Nemeth can take you in his cab. . ." I pulled the card out of my pocket and flipped it over. "He's fae so I'm confident he can get you there safely. Make a deal with the coven, even if you can't break the spell, but keep them busy for as long as you can. I'll get Charlotte out first, then I'll get you out, okay?"

It was the best plan I could come up with short notice, and I hoped I'd gotten it right.

"What about you?" Penny asked, her eyes sharp and considering. "What have you got planned, exactly?"

A hard smile slid over my lips and a burst of adrenaline rolled through me. Fight or flight, and I was fixing for a fight. "I'm going to bring the cavalry."

* * *
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AS SOON AS NEMETH DROVE OFF WITH PENNY, NEMETH rattling on about how honored he was to meet her, I roused the rest of the house, which was basically Suzy and Eric, and filled them in on the situation.

“Charlotte was taken by dark witches, Penny is going to distract them, and I’m going to get Charlotte out. You in?”

Suzy flipped her long blonde hair over her shoulder, her bright blue eyes sharp and glittery with a predatory gleam that hadn’t been there before. “I thought you’d never ask. Let’s see what they think of a mostly untrained siren. Make them all climb over each other.” She grinned and gave a rather lecherous wink, which made me smile. Yeah, Suzy was going to have some fun, and I didn’t feel bad for the coven, not one bit.

Eric touched his throat as if his bowtie were still there. “What can I do?”

“I’m calling up Skeletor,” I said as I showed them the tiny map of the amusement park on the edge of the water. A lagoon sat in the center of it, and it had overflowed, flooding a number of the rides. I pointed them to the *Jocos Mardi Gras*. “I can ride him across town without being seen, which will help me get close to the coven. Robert and Jinx will come with me—”

Suzy put a hand on my arm, stopping me. “Jinx is here?”

I opened my bag and scooped out the tiny spider. “See?”

Jinx waved. “What are we doing?”

“Rescue mission,” I said. “You in?”

She shrugged. “Sure, why not. It’ll take my mind off my broken heart.”

“Sarge is gay, Jinx, and a werewolf,” I said. “It never would have worked.”

“Bah, let me have my fantasy,” she grumbled. “You have yours, thinking Crash is into you.”

I stuffed her back into my bag with a little more force than necessary. “I don’t know if Skeletor can take all three of us.” I looked at Eric and Suzy.

Suzy grinned. “I can get us there through the lagoon. They won’t even think to look there.”

I gave her a quick nod and put a hand on her arm. “Wait on the outskirts. We need to be as subtle as we can—the coven warned Penny to come alone, and she said they’re very strong, if not very good with their magic. My plan is to slip in through the back of the ride and grab Charlotte . . .”

Eric touched his throat. "They won't be able to see me. Perhaps I should go for Charlotte? Suzy can be my back up. You and Robert take the front door."

He was right, and I agreed. "Good idea. And Charlotte knows you."

"She'll be asking for cookies in no time," Suzy said. "Don't worry. This will work, Bree."

Did she see my fear? My worry that it wouldn't work and we'd get Charlotte hurt or bound up in the Coven of Darkness?

I gave her a thumbs up. "Of course, it will. It has to." But even as I said it, my guts knotted up. This was the biggest job I'd tackled yet, not because of what we were doing, per se, but because of what was at stake. Charlotte. Gran. The friends I'd gathered along the way.

I swallowed hard on the bile that tried to claw its way up my throat.

Eric clapped a big hand on my shoulder. "We will get them out, Bree. We're a team."

My eyes watered, but before I could say anything else, he and Suzy jogged out of the house. I took a single cleansing breath and followed closely on their heels. Once outside, I held out a hand. "Robert? You around?"

He sidled up on my left as if he'd been waiting for me, swaying from side to side. "Friend."

"We need Skeletor. Can we call him up here?" Shit, I should have made sure of this before I hinged my entire plan on our ability to call up an undead horse with a home base in Savannah.

But my concern was unfounded. We were in a city of the dead, and all Robert had to do was point a finger at the ground, and the horse pulled himself up out of the lawn one hoof at a time. Once he'd fully emerged, he stood next to me, shaking dirt from his mane and coat.

He was still missing chunks of hair and flesh here and there, but he was becoming more solid with each ride we took together.

Alan float-walked out of the house. "Where are you going?"

"To save a little girl," I pulled myself onto Skeletor's back and held out a hand for Robert so I could help him up. He was surprisingly

heavy for a bony guy, and it took a little bit of grunting to get him up behind me, his bony fingers clutching my waist.

Alan frowned. "Can I help? With the kid, I mean."

For a man with serious narcissistic behaviors, it was a big deal he'd even offered. "If you can listen to me and not get in the way, yes, I think you could."

Who knew how many people we'd be up against? Without Kinky to do recon, maybe Alan really could help. Very few people could see him, and even if they could, they wouldn't know he wasn't just some random NOLA ghost. And he had gone for help when I'd been cornered in the mansion.

I took his hand, and he didn't even complain as I stuffed him back into my hip bag. I double-checked that my two knives were in there, and that was about as ready as I could be.

"Let's go, Skeletor. To the abandoned amusement park." I clamped my legs around the horse's barrel chest, and he took off, plunging forward into the dark of the night. I skidded a little to the left, but Robert helped straighten me out.

The sound of Skeletor's unshod hooves were a dull thud on the pavement and paving stones we galloped across. The few people who looked up as we passed seemed surprised, but they quickly glanced away. That was interesting. They had to be part of the shadow world in order to see us, but they didn't seem intrigued . . . they looked scared.

Maybe they had an inkling of what had been going on in this town.

Skeletor stretched out, his ears perked forward, and I leaned forward with him. With the wind whipping in our faces, I felt a surge of determination. Of hope. I wasn't doing this alone. I was going in with friends at my back and by my side. We would save Charlotte, stop this coven from trapping Penny, and then we would find Gran, and somehow . . . somehow, I'd be cleared of the murder charges too.

All of that had to happen. There was no other option.

"We can do this, Robert!" I yelled out, my words torn from my mouth.

“Friend.” Robert growled back, tightening his fingers on me. Yes, we could do this.

Of course, I hadn’t counted on anyone else showing up to the party besides the coven.

The amusement park reared up in front of us, looming out of the night like a lumbering thug looking for trouble. Bits and pieces of the former rides still clung to the sky, which was currently rumbling like an old man with gas pains.

Gawd help us that we didn't get shit on.

I slowed Skeletor to a walk, the rush of the nighttime gallop still singing in my veins. I patted his neck. "Good boy." A quick check of the time told me the ride had lasted all of three minutes. We were probably here ahead of Penny.

The undead horse blew out a long, low snort and stopped in his tracks abruptly enough to unseat me. I yelped and clung to his neck.

Robert slid off the horse's back and landed lightly on his feet, then looked up and held out a hand to me. Hand, not skeletal fingers. "He can't go farther," Robert said, pointing to a painted red line on the pavement. "The coven has put a protective line around the park, and the horse is a guardian of sorts."

I took his hand, no longer surprised by his appearance as a solid man. Whatever magic held Robert to being a skeleton seemed to be . . . maybe *fading* was the right word? I wasn't sure, but I appreciated his newfound ability to talk, however temporary. I needed all the help I could get.

"He can't, but *you* can?" My legs wobbled as I slid off the sort-of-dead horse.

“I’m tied to you. Wherever you go, I go.” He gave me grin. “Basically you’re stuck with me.”

My hip bag rumbled, and when I flipped it open, Alan came tumbling out. “I am also stuck here,” he said.

Robert nodded. “Different ties. But, yes, you’re stuck with her for now.” For now. Damn, I really hoped that Marge could help me take care of that.

Skeletor blew out a long low snort, pawed once at the pavement, and then nudged me forward with his nose. I stepped up to the red line and looked down at it. I didn’t want to think about what had made it. Blood? It would have taken a lot of blood to go around the whole park.

Robert stepped up beside me and put his hands on his hips. “Probably not what you think. Paint mixed with herbs.”

I snorted. “Amateurs.”

Robert shot me a look and let out a chuckle. “Let’s hope so. Because it would make our lives much easier. But didn’t Penny say they’re strong? Strong but untried.”

Looking at the line, I glanced at Alan. “Can you go in and see if you can pinpoint Charlotte’s location? She has dark hair, big dark eyes, and is about ten years old,” I said. “Look for the *Jocos Mardi Gras* ride. That’s where Penny said she’d be held.”

For once in our marriage, Alan didn’t argue with me. He hurried across the red line as if it were nothing and disappeared into a sudden fog that rolled out of the amusement park. Thicker than pea soup, the mist curled along the ground about knee height, higher in a few places, obscuring any obvious threats.

I nodded as I eyed up the fog. “That could work in our favor. We can’t see them, but they can’t see us either.”

I had the map of the park set in my mind, and while my knee ached and my body felt as though it needed a two week vacation on the beach with some hot young guy rubbing me all over with sunscreen, I knew we were Charlotte’s only hope.

We had to get her out of there.

Robert and I stepped across the red line together.

“You going to tell me how you know our necromancer friend?” I asked quietly. The question had been in the back of my head since

the dream.

Robert sighed. "I know a lot of the old ones, Bree. And I got in their way, the same way you are doing now."

"So you are like me?" I pushed a little on that. "Whatever I am?"

"Yes," he said softly, and a hush crawled over us.

I motioned for him to follow me, suddenly not feeling like I could speak without being heard.

I wanted to get to the far side of the creepastic joker ride the coven had set as their meeting place with Penny. If Robert and I could tuck in out of sight and keep an eye on Penny, that would be ideal.

I wasn't really interested in going in guns blazing if we didn't have to.

The fog swirled up and around us, and for a moment I was sure I could smell funnel cakes and popcorn, but the scent was there and gone, like a memory of what the amusement park had been years before.

Looking about, my eyes landed on one of the remaining signposts. I followed the faded lines that had been painted onto the wood to help park goers find their way. Little pale-yellow arrows here and there, the edges blurred and the points softened from the ravages of everyday weather as much as the meaner hurricanes.

I pulled one of my knives out, the handle giving me a little comfort. I didn't really understand my magic, which seemed to come out in random bursts requiring no real skill (I really needed to work on night school or something for bringing out my magical side), so a knife touched with Crash's magic was all I had to keep me safe from the Coven of Darkness.

Robert walked beside me, icy blue eyes scanning the area. We followed the park's pathways until the tinkling sound of music cut through the air ahead of us.

We both froze, and my skin about crawled off my body even while it erupted in goose bumps. The song was a classic circus tune that I didn't know by name. Robert grimaced.

"Fitting," he whispered.

"Not my circus, not my monkeys." I whispered back the only circus quip I had in my repertoire.

He grunted. "Not even the flying monkeys?"

I shook my head and cringed. "Please no. Let's not invoke fate's weird sense of humor."

Moving even more carefully, which meant I was half crouched and my thighs were currently trying to burn a hole through my leather pants as my muscles screamed at me to stand up straight like a normal person, we turned the next corner, and there it was. The *Jocos Mardi Gras* ride.

Robert and I scooted back so we were hidden from view and then peeked around the corner to get a feel for what we were up against.

Bright jeweled eyes of a leering Mardi Gras clown or maybe a jester in 3-D relief on the sign above the entrance, stared out over the park like some sort of freakish ghoul from a B-rated horror movie. Hands flopped loosely at the wrist, no longer attached to the sign, as if the fingers could clutch you without warning. Wherever the witches were, they weren't currently within view of the ride. Either they were inside, or they hadn't arrived yet.

Basically I didn't like it, not one bit. The entrance to the ride was dark, an open black tunnel with no obvious sign of anyone watching for us. That didn't mean anything, I was sure.

Silently Robert pointed to a heaping pile of old seats on one side of the entrance. It had been blown off a ride by the looks of it. I nodded and we dropped to our bellies, scooting across the ground, the fog covering us.

Look at us go, like we'd been sneaking around for years. And yeah, belly crawling took its toll on me. I mentally added it to the list of exercises I needed to work on as my arms all but groaned with the effort.

With the fog swirling thicker with each passing second, our passage was covered and we reached the jumbled pile of seats in all of a minute. And just in time.

I tucked in behind a seat, my nose crinkling at the smell around me. How the hell could the seats still smell like puke? The red paint had been peeled off in most places, showing a good amount of rust in the metal buckets that had at one point made park goers squeal with delight. But that wasn't what had my attention.

The soft shuffle of feet and the tap of a cane made me peek out around our hiding place. There was Penny, making her way through the fog, muttering under her breath.

Our timing couldn't have been better.

"Damn fools, think they know what they're doing? No, no, they don't and now they need my help because the damn fools killed off anyone in their own coven who could help them!" She thumped her cane a little harder, and the ground seemed to actually shudder under the blow.

I shot a look at Robert, who was staring at Penny hard, but he said nothing.

Through a hole in the bottom of the broken-down seat, I watched Penny approach the open maw of the tunnel.

"Fools, where are you?" Penny snapped. "I've got no time for this. My water pills will kick in, and then you'd better have a place for me to pee, 'cause I ain't squatting out here in the middle of the park."

The music didn't die down, but a voice boomed through it.

"Penny Hannington, order of the Coven of Silver, you dare come to us?"

I blinked a few times, and even Penny seemed taken aback. "You damn fools! You called me!" She threw a hand in the air, following it with a wave of her cane, and then about-faced and started away from the entrance.

The music cut off abruptly, and a figure ran out of the darkness, illuminated by several tiny glow sticks hanging off their waist. I couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman as they were wearing a hoodie, hood pulled up.

"Wait! Please. They didn't realize I'd reached out to you." The young woman's voice was breathless. "*Please*, Aunty."

Aunty? Maybe it was just a title?

Well, shit. Talk about things getting complicated.

Penny turned and looked at her niece. Or maybe great-niece considering their respective ages. "Beth, it wasn't your voice on the phone."

"Aunty Penny, the spell, it's . . . it's really bad. We can't figure out what we did wrong, and now it's completely out of control." Her words came in gasps between gulps of breath. She bent at the waist,

gasping for air, and my first thought was *good act*. Not that there wasn't a problem with the spell, because there could be, but the girl . . . she didn't actually seem out of breath.

Which meant they were still trying to fool us.

Well, wasn't that just ducking great. Robert grabbed my wrist tight enough to hurt, and I turned to him.

He shook his head and mouthed a word I couldn't quite make out. I frowned and shook my head. Leaning in close, he put his mouth to my ear, his very real-feeling lips brushing against my skin and tickling me.

"Ruse."

It *was* a ruse!

I mouthed back at him, *You sure?* He nodded.

I trusted Robert, probably more than anyone else. But how were we supposed to get a message to Penny?

Turned out, we didn't need to. She had a slightly dubious look on her face as she asked, "What spell would that be? I might not be able to help you if it's outside of my scope and abilities."

Penny had told me it was a spell that bound demons to the caller, making them stronger.

Beth looked over her shoulder and then back to Penny. "A spell of transfiguration," she said, apparently not getting the memo of what Penny was told from the first phone call. "Three of our coven members are stuck halfway between human and animal, and they're in great pain! Please hurry!"

Penny had tested her, and Beth had failed. I knew without asking that Penny was going to stick with our plan and stall for time.

She had to.

Damn it, where was Alan? He should be back by . . .

As if my thoughts called him, he sprinted out of the ride and darted across the space between Beth and Penny. Penny startled, but Beth didn't so much as blink. I guess not every witch had the ability to see ghosts.

Good. Seeing him would give Penny confirmation we were here, that we had her back.

Alan slid to a stop in front of us and wiped his face as if he could still sweat. "That big hairy fellow with the bowtie has the little girl

almost clear of this place. He said to tell you that he'll get her far away, but Suzy is going to stay and help. She'll wait on the inside and hit them from behind."

I nodded and gave him a thumbs up.

"Rude, you can't even thank me properly?" he muttered, and I glared at him. Still trying to control my behavior in death, even when the life of a child was at stake.

I grabbed him by the ear and whispered, "Tell Penny the girl is safe." This was good. We'd grab Penny and run for it, grab Skeletor on the outskirts of town, and then we'd be gone. We'd lose nothing more than our breath.

I was a fool to think life would suddenly get that easy.

When I let go of Alan, he bounced backward as if he'd been made of elastic. He stumbled over to Penny, periodically twisting around to glare at me.

"The kid is safe. My bitch of an ex-wife didn't even thank me. Nor did she ask me who else I saw in there. Very important to ask all the questions if you ask me." He was practically shouting, but of course, Beth couldn't hear him. I didn't know if any of the other witches could hear him though, the asshat.

I would have gladly strangled him, given the chance.

Beth held a hand out to Penny. "Please, Aunty. Please help us."

Penny drew herself up, and power crackled the air around her in a warm whoosh. "No, I don't think I will."

From the tunnel came a low thrumming laughter, followed by that crazy damn music that was—this time—cranked up even louder.

The music was bad, but that laughter sounded . . . familiar?

From out of the darkness stepped the black-robed necromancer. He moved in herky-jerky lurches, as if he were some sort of marionette, but the build was familiar. He was a perfect match for the man I'd seen in Jackson Square, and in my dream only a few hours before.

He dragged with him two other figures, both of whom I recognized.

To his left was none other than Louis, sobbing and whimpering.

To his right was Jacob, the necromancer who belonged to the council in Savannah.

I stared at the scene, shaking my head. “Seriously?”

The black-robed powerhouse of a necromancer stood in the open mouth of the *Jocos Mardi Gras* ride in the middle of an abandoned amusement park, and let me tell you, I knew right then we'd been fooled and fooled good.

The rest of the Coven of Darkness, or so I assumed, filtered out of the maw of the ride and spread out to flank either side of him. Yes, I'd suspected they were working together, but for some stupid reason I hadn't thought he'd be here.

Jacob—the necromancer from the Savannah council, keep up now—was gagged, and while Louis wasn't, I didn't see him being much help. Hell, he'd taken the fake fairy cross to this asshole necromancer who was running the show, I was sure of it. Maybe he'd been coerced, but knowing Louis, all the necromancer would have had to do was make him feel needed and important.

"Old woman," the black-robed necromancer's voice rasped out, a little different than before, harder now. "You came alone? That seems foolish. And unlikely. Search the area." This last order was directed at the coven members, and they started forward.

I looked at Robert and he nodded. We stood and stepped out of our hiding place, circling around the debris of seats we'd been hiding behind. No need to get cornered.

"She did not," I said. "Where is my gran? What have you done with her?"

The necromancer let out a laugh, and Louis leaned forward, bobbing as if in pain.

“Celia thinks she’s rather clever. Did you know she had a homing spell woven into her soul so her spirit would be magically transported the moment she entered New Orleans?” The necromancer said.

My guts about jumped out of my mouth. “And? What’s your point? You . . .” That’s when it hit me. He didn’t know where she was. The homing spell he was talking about had whisked her away from him. Oh, time for some epic putdowns.

I lifted both brows as high as I could and pointed a finger at him. “You *lost* her, didn’t you? What kind of necromancer are you that you *lost* my gran’s spirit? Have you been taking lessons from Louis?”

The hooded head whipped from side to side, and Louis writhed on the ground, a low moaning growl escaping him as if he were in great pain, his hands flexing and spreading as he clutched at his clothes. The necromancer fisted his hands. “You dare to challenge me? You dare to insult me? I, who taught these foolish witches how to steal the powers of others?”

The witches gasped and Penny clutched at her skirt. So that was how they’d learned—from a necromancer.

“Louis is a better necromancer than you!” I snapped, anger fueling me. Shit, Louis was about as good at being a necromancer as I was at being quiet once I was riled up. “Are you seriously telling me you lost her? YOU LOST MY GRAN?”

A roar rippled out of him, and Louis and Jacob both fell flat to the ground, shaking. “I will not be spoken to as if—”

“You’re a damn child!” I pointed a finger at him again, and Penny might have giggled. “Taking other people’s things and losing them like a toddler who doesn’t know any better!” Gawd in heaven, all the fear had leaked out of me, leaving behind the kind of righteous indignation that only shows up after you turn forty. Trust me on that one, it’s a powerful blend.

From the corners of my vision, I could see the witches from the Coven of Darkness circling around us. Well, that was just ducking awesome.

The necromancer jerked his hands above his head, and both Louis and Jacob were yanked to their feet as if by marionette strings.

Jacob's eyes were wide, Louis's were shut tight, his lips moving in what was no doubt a whispered prayer.

Tension filled the air as we stood across from each other, the lines drawn in the sand. Me, Robert, and Penny against a monstrous necromancer and an entire coven of witches.

I swallowed hard. "Robert?"

"Yes?" He adjusted his stance.

"We're gonna die, aren't we?"

"Well . . ." He glanced at me, the corner of his mouth lifting. "You might, I'm already dead."

Leave it to Robert to crack a joke right when we are about to go into a fight. I laughed. "Okay, will I at least be a badass skeleton like you? We can hang out in a graveyard together then, right?"

He shrugged, his blue eyes serious. "Only if you get cursed."

I blinked and stared at him. "What?"

Of course, that's when the coven came at us, cutting off the explanation I was now desperate to hear.

The witches lifted their hands, and a boom filled the air—not a thunderous sound, more like the ground itself was letting out a massive belch. The air grew thick, and the humidity suddenly ramped up over an impossible 100 percent, yet somehow it wasn't raining.

"Damn it all. I told you to wait for me!"

We all twisted to see a figure I'd have rather not seen. I think. Missy strutted up the path, her own cane swatting at anything in her way. "Penny, I see the children are acting out again."

Penny sighed. "It's the same with every generation. In a hurry."

They faced the coven together, Missy putting a hand on Penny's shoulder as she drove her cane into the ground. Fissures shot out around her, a spiderweb of cracks, and a glow rolled around the two older women, lighting them up. Those fissures? They shot toward the different coven members. Whatever was in them packed a mighty wallop, because the witches yelped and danced backward, a few even passed out, hitting the ground with heavy thumps. The two old gals had given us a bit of breathing room.

"Won't buy us much time," Penny said as if reading my thoughts.

Missy dusted her hands in the air. "They don't know what they are up against."

I lurched forward and grabbed Penny by the arm, ready to take off, but the sound of leather on cement turned me around.

Well now, this was an unexpected twist.

A bevy of alligators (yeah, I don't know if bevy is right, but let's be honest, it's a visual) crept toward us, a barrier of scales and teeth and muscle we couldn't possibly dance across. They completely blocked the pathways, and as such, they pushed us toward the necromancer and the few coven members closest to him who were still standing.

The necromancer laughed. "My pets would like to make your acquaintance. You will take me to your gran, and I'll let you three have an easy death."

If that was his best offer, he had a lot to learn about negotiating tactics.

Penny stiffened under my hand. "Don't you dare, girl."

Missy shot me a look. "I'd get the spell book, at least."

"Not planning on it," I muttered. Only I didn't know just how we were going to get out of this shit. I stared at the *Jocos Mardi Gras* sign and entrance. I knew there had to be a back way out of there, because Eric had gotten Charlotte free.

But that would mean going *through* the necromancer. And he was not going to be easily distracted.

Alligators behind, witches all around, badass necro in front.

I shared a quick look with Robert, and he nodded, as if he knew what I was thinking.

One shot, I'd get one shot at this. Flexing my hand around my knife handle, making sure my grip was perfect, I lurched forward in a lunge before my fear turned my guts to water. Going to one knee as if I were stumbling, cursing a blue streak from the impact of my knee against the pavement, I used the momentum of the movement to throw my turquoise-handled blade. End over end it went, sinking right into the middle of the necromancer's face. A perfect shot.

He stumbled to the side, the handle sticking out of the darkness of the hood but did not go down. Damn it!

“Time to go!” I yelled at Penny, Robert, and Missy, taking the distraction for what it was worth. Alan was floating around, but I wasn’t worried about him. Like Robert, he’d show up when he felt like it. I sprung—okay, scrambled—to my feet and ran toward the necromancer. I shoved his still wobbling frame to the side, the ice cold of his body numbing my fingers, then grabbed the rope holding Jacob and yanked him along with us. “Louis, come on!”

He stumbled after us, less tied up than Jacob was because, of course, no one considered him a threat. Using my second knife, I cut through the bindings on Jacob, freeing him.

“Sweet baby Jesus, your knife barely even slowed him down!” Jacob gasped out as he yanked his gag off.

“Yeah, that can’t be good,” I said as we plunged into the darkness of the tunnel of the *Jocos Mardi Gras*. “Alan, can you find us a way out? Please!”

“Fine.” My ex-husband muttered and shot ahead of us, glowing for a moment and then disappearing.

Missy stomped along like some old school marm who might whack me with a belt if I weren’t careful, but Penny was breathing hard, and her shuffling gait told me we’d have to slow down soon. I sure as sugar on a funnel cake wasn’t leaving her behind. I turned to her as she called up a small series of lights that looked like lightning bugs.

“These will give us just enough to see by,” she said. “Gah, I’m slowing us down!”

Missy sniffed. “We could have taken them.”

“Really, you see that knife in his face?” I shot back at her.

Missy had no response for that, though she cast a glance at the bag on my hip, as if she knew Gran’s spell book was in there.

I held a hand out to Penny and she took it, leaning heavily on both me and the cane. Running wasn’t the best idea in here, but what other choice did we have? I looked back the way we’d come and didn’t like that our feet were the only ones shuffling along. The lack of pursuit meant we were sunk. They thought they had us.

“Penny, you think we just walked into a trap?” I asked quietly.

She paused, and her teeth flashed in a grimace that was only partly visible in the darkness. “Damn it. Most likely. Don’t think they’ll

be letting us just walk away. Do you?"

"Of course, it's a trap!" Missy snapped. "Fools. I told you to wait for me, but no, you always run in without me. Act first and think later and then expect me to get you out of trouble!"

I didn't think she actually meant me and Penny. I suspected she meant Penny and my gran.

Robert kept close to my side. "We have to keep moving, you injured the necromancer, but I don't think that it will do more than slow him down. Not if he didn't take serious damage from getting his face sliced in half."

Jacob limped a few steps behind me and Louis slumped along next to him, breathing hard and swearing in French under his breath, one hand pressed to his chest with his fingers spread wide.

I looked at Jacob. "You got any juice left?" I didn't bother asking Louis—he'd barely had any juice to start with.

Jacob shook his head. "He drained Louis and me of our connection to the dead. It will take days to regenerate it. If it comes back at all."

Of course, it had gone down like that. Our luck had pretty much run out, from what I could tell. I stepped over a rail that would have carried a cart full of park goers through the tunnel, helping Penny over it. A scuffling noise could be heard behind us, and we both turned, Penny holding her little lights high so we could see.

The multitude of glowing eyes near the floor told me all I needed to know. The gators were still on us and they were moving quicker now, pushed along by whatever magic held them. I was beginning to think they were not even alive. Hard to tell with a gator, but their eyes glowed a bright blue in the dark, and that was not normal. The objective was obviously to hurry us along to our deaths, and it was going to work at this rate. I motioned to Penny. "Come on, time for a piggyback."

She didn't argue, and I got her up and onto my back in a swift move. She was light, barely a hundred pounds, but I could feel the extra weight in the ache of my thighs and calves. I didn't know how long I could carry her. What I wouldn't give for a good dose of fairy honey right then.

Alan took that moment to drift back to us. “If you stay to the left, you’ll get out of here.”

“Thanks.” I adjusted my hold on Penny, and she tightened an arm around my neck. The pressure made me grimace, but I said nothing. Jacob and Louis took the lead, Missy right behind them, holding up a series of small magic lights. Robert stayed with me, about ten feet back from the two necromancers, and the gators scooted along about thirty feet behind me. I broke into a slow jog, just enough to keep us ahead of the many, many gator teeth in play.

“Something is off with this whole thing,” Robert whispered.

On my back, I felt Penny bob her head in agreement. “I don’t like it. Why didn’t they kill us out there? They had the fire power to do it.”

I focused on keeping my feet moving and under me as the sweat slid down from my armpits and dripped off the backs of my elbows. The slope of the tunnel was slowly going downward, following a set of tracks that had been part of the ride at one point, and I leaned back to counterbalance Penny’s weight. On the walls were paintings and 3-D caricatures on hinges that had them leering over our heads.

Creepy as hell if you asked me.

“I’m betting the necromancer needs you,” Penny whispered. “If Celia really did have a homing spell on her, then she could have keyed it to you and you alone. He may need your help.”

“Why didn’t he take me in Jackson Square then?” I gasped the words out.

“He tried,” Robert reminded me. “But you literally slid through his fingers. Maybe he didn’t realize yet that he needed you?”

“No, I think he did. I think he was testing my . . .”

Testing my defenses? As if my guts couldn’t be more twisted up, a scary as hell thought hit me.

Crash had been pulled away time and time again by the fae in the city.

Corb and Sarge were gone.

None of the local witches would even answer Penny.

We’d basically had a good chunk of our allies or potential allies stripped away.

Robert grabbed my arm and held me steady as the realization made me wobble. But gators and the witches of darkness were

behind us, and there was nowhere to go but forward.

The tunnel smelled vaguely of smoke and dirty feet, which was a rather gross combination that made the big breaths I had to take even more uncomfortable. I wrinkled my nose, hating that I was breathing harder because I was packing Penny. But the thing was, I didn't trust Jacob or Louis to take her, Missy couldn't, and I wasn't sure when Robert would suddenly turn back into a skeleton.

So me it was.

"Girl, this feels like the wrong way," Penny said. "You sure about that ex of yours? Would he turn on you for any reason?"

The tunnel had leveled out, but it wasn't going back up as if it would take us out of the ground. I swallowed hard. Would Alan turn on me? If the necromancer offered to restore him to life, he might. Crap.

"Alan," I called out softly, trying to keep my tone nice. But there was no answer.

He wasn't there. I frowned. Screw nice. "Alan, get your ass back here!"

Nothing.

Damn it all, I should have murdered him myself.

The realization that Alan had likely turned on me for some cheap trip off the necromancer really made the whole *lost in a tunnel at an old amusement park* bit that much worse. I mean, it hadn't been great to start with, let's be honest.

Jacob held up a hand. Behind us came the thumps of the alligators making the slide down the slope. I yelped as a scaled body thumped into the backs of my ankles. "Nope, not today, Satan!"

I all but sprinted forward, taking me and Penny well past Jacob, even hip checking Missy along the way, not on purpose, of course.

All of which was a terrible idea.

Because there was a cliff edge in front of us that I hadn't seen in the semi-darkness.

And Penny and I went straight over it.

She grabbed me harder around the neck, which caused instant strangulation. I couldn't draw breath, which meant I was already hurting for air by the time we hit the water.

The cold water rolled over us both and Penny let go. I didn't reach the bottom, but as I turned myself around to swim to the top my feet brushed something solid. I pushed off it, and it instantly gave way.

Not in the way of mud, but like something that was alive and swimming around under me.

I panicked and swam hard for the surface, the briny liquid working its way into my mouth as I tried not to scream underwater.

Breaking through the surface, I turned toward the only visible light in that cold, dark, wet place, and swam hard toward it. I wasn't going to think about what was in the water with us.

Not alligators.

Something large came off the cliff and hit the water, the sound putting a fire under my butt.

"Swim faster!" Jacob yelled unnecessarily from somewhere up above. "Swim faster!"

Panic clawed at my insides and I had a moment of fear that I was going to pee myself. Never mind, it wasn't like anyone would be able to see anyway. I let loose, hoping that maybe alligators didn't like pee. One could hope for a small miracle.

Ahead of me, I could just see Penny drag herself out of the water and up a rocky embankment. She was out at least.

Ten feet from shore, I reached down with my foot and hit solid ground. Another five feet, and I was in waist deep water.

Three feet out, a set of jaws clamped down on my left ankle and calf and yanked me off balance. I hit the water a second time with a much smaller splash, the ground knocking the wind out of me for a split second when I hit.

"Fuck!" I screamed as I got my air again, and the gator dragged me backward. I managed to grab onto an outcropping of rock, but the gator's teeth were still crushing my ankle, driving spikes of pain up my leg that made me forget every other ache and pain I'd been dealt in the last few months. The water thrashed around us, and I was plunged under for several seconds before I managed to pull my head back up for a quick breath.

Over and over, I was dunked. I could hear Penny cursing, and I mentally cursed with her. It wouldn't be long before my foot was just amputated with a mighty tear of the gator's jaws. Fatigue set in, and my hand slipped. Only my fingertips held me back from certain death. A splash sounded beside me, and I went under again. My fingers released their hold, and I twisted around to try and get my remaining knife. Maybe I could stab the critter in the eye.

But then the gator let go and I popped up to the surface. Someone got their hands under my arms and dragged me upward,

and I blinked up, not really sure who I was going to see, but I wasn't expecting a swath of long blonde hair.

"Suzy?" I blinked up at the siren, who had a fierce snarl etched onto her pretty face. "How did you stop it?"

"Hey, I'm a swamp siren," She grinned suddenly. "Gators are my jam. And you looked like you weren't enjoying the whole 'grab you by the feet and drag you under' scene."

Indeed, there was no more movement in the water as if the alligators were suddenly cowering—dead or not, they reacted to her magic. Suzy helped me to my feet, her power rolling out around her in waves. Weirdly enough, my ankle was not as bad as I'd figured it would be.

Thank all that was holy my leather pants and the boots I'd bought from Gerry were indeed the best of the best, because they'd just saved my ass. Or, in this case, my foot and leg. "You rock, Suze."

"Of course, I do. Now let's get us all the hell out of here. Eric has Charlotte out, and they'll be back at the safe house in no time baking us cookies," She dragged me up, and I wobbled forward. Okay, so maybe my ankle wasn't in tip-top shape.

Hobbling as much as Penny now, I followed Suzy. Penny was waiting about twenty feet out of the water. Jacob, Missy, and Louis came up behind us, and I shot them a look. Jacob shrugged. "There were steps leading down here."

Missy shook her head at me. "You could have killed Penny, you fool of a girl!"

"And you didn't think to come help us?" I asked.

"Happened too fast," Louis said, his voice nothing like that of the snotty, overconfident Frenchman I'd first met. "It all happened too fast."

Fair enough, I'd give him that. "Yeah, I know. Let's go."

Suzy led us away from the water, and I found myself twisting around looking for Robert, who'd disappeared after my fall. I wanted to stop and check for him, but ultimately he was right. He was already dead, so what harm could come to him?

Oh, that was not the question to ask.

"Why did you come this way?" Suzy asked as she led us into a tunnel to the right. "I told that ex of yours to watch out for the cliff and

stay to the right.”

I stiffened. “He’s my ex for a reason, and I’d kill him myself if I could.”

We were headed up a slope now, which meant we were nearing the surface at least. Missy walked with her back ramrod straight and stared straight ahead as if this was nothing to her. Penny was breathing hard, and I shot Jacob a look. He reached out and let her lean on him, and I leaned on Louis. Not because I was weak, but because I was pissed.

“You figured you’d butter that asshole up with the fairy cross, didn’t you?” I asked him.

Louis stiffened. He tried to shake me off, but I clamped my fingers around his skinny arms. “I don’t know what you are talking about.” Ah, there was the stiff, overconfident Frenchman.

I snorted. “Please. Eammon said you were gone, and I saw what you had hidden under your shirt. Did he not like it? Is that why you ended up on his bad side?”

Louis stared straight ahead toward the exit of the ride, where the first hints of daylight shined in. Maybe he was considering the wisdom of making a run for it.

Jacob snapped his fingers and pointed back at him. “You thought to ingratiate yourself with someone more powerful? You told me you’d found a new necromancer here to join our league!”

Oh, Louis was in trouble now. I just grinned at him, and he glared at me. “Je te deteste.”

“Yeah, back at you.” I smiled. “You were always slimy and useless.”

Jacob let go of Penny, his face red, and came at Louis. “You drew me into a trap that this sentinel has saved me from! A sentinel!”

Wait, what was this? Was I hearing what I thought I was hearing?

“Is that what I am? What the hell does that mean?” I spluttered out as we reached the end of the tunnel.

Sentinel, like a guardian of some sort? I’d never heard the term or read about it in Gran’s book. It seemed strange that Jacob had just spilled the information to me, after everyone in my life had been so careful not to tell me anything . . . almost like they couldn’t.

I bumped into Suzy, who’d stopped in her tracks.

I looked past her and swallowed hard, all the questions I'd had on the tip of my tongue gone.

You'd think it would be the necromancer, the witches, or even more alligators. But you'd be wrong.

Marge and her weirdo husband, Homer, stood across from us, shadowed in the light growing in the east. Alan stood next to him on one side, and Robert was on his knees on the other. He was back in his skeletal form, icy blue eyes gone.

"You did good," Marge said to Alan. "You even managed to bring me this one." She patted Robert on the head as though he were a dog. "For that I'll free you from your ex, as promised, and give you a new body." As bad as it was to see Robert on his knees, swaying from side to side, it was worse to realize that Alan had betrayed me.

Again.

And I'd walked right into it.

She snapped her fingers, and Alan jerked hard, disappearing. Another snap of her fingers, and a tall male body stepped forward, touching itself, running fingers over the partially stitched mouth. "I'm . . . alive?" he muffled.

Holy shit, she'd stuffed Alan into a new body, for real.

That wasn't what truly held my attention though. The sound of shuffling feet, clunking bones, and creaking metal could be heard all around the exit. Bodies emerged from the shadows, bodies that had their mouths sewn shut and their eyes stitched open wide. Staring, flicking in every direction as if they couldn't believe what had been done to them even while they obeyed the commands of a voodoo priestess.

Hell, I couldn't believe it. I knew in my gut what we were looking at as they shuffled toward us.

If I were a betting woman, I'd say these were the tonton macoutes. These were what had killed my Gran, my parents, and Alan.

Jacob whispered a prayer. "Mother of God, save us from this madness."

"I'd guess she's busy right now," I muttered. "Any ideas?"

He shook his head. "None. This is the darkest of the arts, to trap souls inside the dead."

I stared at Marge. "You killed my gran?"

She shook her head. "No. And I didn't kill your ex, or your parents." She smiled and spread her hands wide. I was going to guess that she was working on semantics. She raised the tonton macoutes, but she herself hadn't killed Gran or Alan or my parents.

"So you're just going to kill us now?" I pushed past Suzy so I was in front of the gang, limping to take the lead. "I mean, you seemed to like me just fine when I met you earlier. I thought we were getting along."

"Money talks. You know how that is, being a bounty hunter and all." She smiled as she put her hands on her enormous hips. "You see, me and Homer, we follow the money. It isn't personal. The job ain't to kill you, but I will if you make me."

I nodded. "Fair enough, but what exactly *were* you hired to do?"

She tipped her chin toward our group, still smiling. Easy to smile when you had the upper hand. "Why don't you ask your little french fry there? He be the one to hire us on behalf of his boss."

Louis tried to shrink away from me, but I grabbed him and pulled him around to face me. "What are all the goals here, Louis? Death? Dismemberment?"

His throat bobbed. "He wants . . .he wants you to take him to your gran's spirit. After that, he'll kill you himself. If he can."

I pursed my lips and then looked at Penny. Her eyes were inscrutable in the semi-darkness, but I wanted to believe she was telling me to go with my gut. She leaned heavily on the cane, which she remarkably still had in her hands.

Missy shook her head. "This is a game to them, and we are losing, Breena."

From behind us in the tunnel of the ride came the low laugh of a woman and the Coven of Darkness pushed us farther out into the light. Trapped between tonton macoutes on one side and witches on the other, I did the only thing I could.

I made a deal with the devil himself.

Who took that moment to step out from behind Marge and Homer.

“Okay, here’s the deal.” I still had Louis in my grip as I stared down the necromancer who’d caused this hot mess. I noticed he’d pulled my knife out of his face, because nothing was jutting out of the dark hood, but it obviously hadn’t done any lasting harm. “First, Jacob, I saved your bacon, right?”

Jacob startled. “Not yet—”

I waved a hand at him. “I’m about to. You clear my name back in Savannah. Make sure it’s safe for me to go home after this—I mean, assuming I make it out alive.” Yeah, that little caveat was sitting on my shoulders. I went on. “Officer Burke will help if you need a human on the inside.” Guessing, I was guessing, but I suspected her suspension had been lifted as soon as I left town. “But I’d think the council has enough firepower to take care of it, right? Seeing as they were behind my death sentence?” Another guess.

He locked eyes with me and then slowly nodded. “You have my word, Sentinel, that I will do all I can. I . . . was one of those who was on the fence. I believe the numbers will be in your favor now.”

Sentinel, there was that word again. I would circle back to it, see if I could find it in Gran’s spell book after this was all over, assuming again that it ended in our favor. And yeah, I wanted to think it would. I had to. Still, I was grateful that Charlotte was out of this mess.

I could almost feel Suzy itching to fight, and I found myself laying a hand on her shoulder. What if the orgy she unleashed on them

involved us too? I didn't want to tell her I didn't trust her abilities yet. Look at what Corb had done, or almost done, and he was way more experienced than her.

"Easy, Suze, easy."

She gave a tight nod, which bobbed her high ponytail.

"Okay, so Jacob, you have your marching orders." I said and faced the black-robed necro. "The rest of my friends will go free, and you won't follow them." I paused and let the rest of my words rush out of my mouth. "I will take you to my gran. Seeing as you can't do it on your own." No doubt this was why Marge and Homer had been hired. Extra muscle to force me to do what the necro wanted.

The tonton macoutes to set the fear of God into us.

The necromancer nodded, and his voice growled, "Let it be done. They may go."

"What?" Beth's voice cut through the air as she strode up to grab Penny by the arm. "That wasn't the deal. We get my great-aunt."

Penny spun around and whacked her niece on top of the head with her cane, dropping her to the ground in a crumpled pile of limbs. "Child, you do not know who you are messing with. Shut your fool mouth!"

Missy laughed, her glee a little inappropriate for the moment in my opinion. "Oh, I would watch that over and over again if I could."

Of course, she would. She was just that sadistic.

My brows shot up, but I didn't move because I sensed the wrong move would set everyone scrambling for weapons and magic, and with this much firepower around me, I knew we were outmatched and outgunned.

Marge and Homer watched me closely. I locked eyes with the big woman, and she smiled, not unkindly, and gave a shrug as if to say this was just life. It truly wasn't personal.

"We still get paid," Homer whined. "Right? Same as last time?" Marge grabbed his shoulder, almost pushing him into the ground.

So this wasn't the first time he'd *borrowed* the tonton macoutes. Motherducker.

"Of course, take your final payment and begone," the necromancer growled. He flicked his hands, and the tonton macoutes turned away from us and advanced on Marge and Homer.

Apparently they weren't getting the payment they thought.

"Don't you cross me! This was a deal!" Marge yelled and the necro just laughed.

"I will do as I wish," He growled and the tonton macoutes moved faster toward their maker.

Marge shouted a few words that felt like they held power, but it wasn't enough to stop the sudden horde being pushed by the necro. She and Homer spun and ran as the voodoo dead followed, picking up speed.

The necromancer was strong enough to turn a voodoo witch's creations on her?

So *that* was why she'd denied responsibility for killing my loved ones. The necro had taken the tonton macoutes and used them as his own personal army. She'd damn well rented them out to him!

I swallowed hard.

Marge was dragging Alan along by the arm of his new body, and he held his free hand out to me and screaming, "Bree, help me!"

"Not this time, Alan. You made your bed, you can sleep in it," I said. I didn't know what would become of him, but in that moment, it was hard to care. The last of the bonds binding us had been broken.

Robert stayed where he had been kneeling across from me, rocking side to side. Waiting.

One of the other coven members shot forward and scooped up Beth, dragging her back into the darkness of the tunnel behind us. They were clearly beating a retreat now that we'd been cornered. Penny watched them go, sorrow written clearly on her face. "Another time," she said. "I will save her another time."

Missy sniffed and I turned to her, only then noticing what she held in her arms.

Gran's spell book. Mother-ducking-witch! I glared at her, and she smiled at me, a big, wide smile, as she tapped the cover of the book. And then she turned and walked away. "Nice seeing you all."

Penny gasped, but I was not surprised in the least. Missy put the bitch in witch.

She hadn't come to help us, but to follow Gran's spell book and get it for herself. And when I'd hip-checked her in the dark, she'd taken her chance and snagged it from me.

I just couldn't be surprised anymore.

The necromancer stood in front of me, waiting. Time to relent to the inevitable: there would be some sort of showdown between the two of us.

I pushed Suzy gently away from me. "Get the others out of here." I looked her in the eye, trying to will her to understand that I wanted her to follow at a distance. I knew I was outmatched with the necro. I couldn't do this on my own.

But would my eye charades communicate that?

"We'll be right behind," she whispered as she helped Penny step to the side, Jacob following them. He paused next to me and put a hand to my shoulder.

"I do not know what he searches for, but it will not come to any good if he gets it. Fight him with all you have, Bree."

As if I didn't know that.

"You." The necromancer pointed at Louis before he could so much as take a step away from me. "You will also come with us."

We both groaned at the same time, most likely for different reasons. I, because of all the people who could have come with us, Louis was the least likely to be of any help to me. I'm sure Louis just didn't want to get killed. "Seriously? Him?"

"As you say, he is less than useless to anyone." The necromancer laughed. "So he will come and bear witness to this historic moment."

He snapped his fingers, and Louis lurched to his feet as if pulled from a string at the top of his head. Then his legs, stiff and stick-like, bobbed into action.

"Je peux encore vous aider!" Louis said. I didn't have enough French in my repertoire to know what he said, but I could guess he was doing some sort of begging. Something about aiding or helping the necro, no doubt.

When he got close enough to the necromancer, the black-robed figure put a very pale, almost gray-skinned hand on him, clamping down hard on his upper arm. They looked more like claws than fingers, and Louis groaned and spoke softly, this time without his accent.

"Come, we will go now," Louis whispered.

Robert swayed to his feet, and the necromancer threw out a hand, stopping him with just that one move. Robert swayed harder. "Friend. Friend!"

My throat tightened. "It'll be okay, Robert."

He let out a low groan as if he knew that was not the case, same as me. But I refused to give up on the small spark of hope inside me that said it would somehow work out, even though dread filled me up to my damn eyeballs.

And just like that, it was the three of us, me with one powerhouse and one useless necromancer.

"You will lead," the necromancer said.

I sighed and limped out in front of him. "You got a name? Because 'robed-up dummy' seems like a lot of words to my tired brain right now." Mostly I was hoping to figure him out a bit, see if he had some weakness I could exploit.

The pause was long, as if he were weighing what he wanted to say. "You may call me Clovis."

I stopped and looked at him, finally getting a good glance at what was inside his hood. The light was dim, but there was enough for me to see his gaunt face with its tight, sallow skin and strange eyes. I could see they were black, like a raven's wing, but they glittered with many colors.

His face was not truly . . . human.

I made my mouth move even as fear filled me. "If I were going to pick a name, I'd pick one a duck ton better than Clovis. If you were a kid, you'd get picked on for that name. Bogus Clovis. Something like that."

Louis groaned. "Stop trying to piss him off, and move, you twat!"

Twat, did Louis just call me a twat?

Before I thought better of it, I took a swing at him and cuffed him upside the head, which threw both him and his buddy, Clovis, back a few steps. Did I dare make a break for it?

Yup, time to run. I might not get another chance.

Okay, so hobble run. My ankle screamed bloody murder at me as I forced myself to take off from Clovis and Louis.

Louis screamed, "Don't leave me with him!"

“He’s your friend, you make nice. I don’t have to!” I yelled back. I doubted I’d get away this easily, but I was sure as hell going to try. What I wouldn’t be doing was going back for Louis. He’d tried to steal the fairy cross for his boss. We weren’t on the same side anymore. My ankle throbbed, and each step felt like the gator had its teeth on me again, but I kept moving.

Because there were two issues with me finding Gran. One, I didn’t think it was a good idea to give Clovis what he wanted. (He needed her for the full spell, I was sure of it. And if it was as bad as Penny thought, we could not let him have it.) And two, which was a rather important point, I had no idea *how* to find her. I mean, if I followed my gut, it would take me home to Savannah, all the way back to the Hollows and the angel statue. Because right then, I wanted to bury my head in some familiar sand and pretend everything was okay.

A roar built up behind me that was a mixture of a human voice and something unearthly, the word *prohibere* riding the sound, and I redoubled my efforts despite my legs suddenly feeling even more sluggish. I might not have known exactly what that word meant, but I knew it didn’t bode well for me. The ground rumbled like it had with the statue in Jackson Square.

I ran for several minutes, sweating and cursing under my breath. This was not going well. I was running for all I was worth, and I knew it wasn’t fast enough. It would not take much for Clovis and Louis to catch up to me at this rate.

A whimper on my lips, I whispered a plea for Kinkly or Crash to find me. Of course, I knew in my heart that Clovis had helped set them up too, keeping them busy so they wouldn’t be around to help me. Maybe he’d given Karissa the idea to look for the wings? Maybe he’d been hedging his bets, thinking she’d keep Crash busy and might, as a bonus, find them. Easier to steal from her than to find them in thin air. And then . . . nope, I had to focus on this moment. I’d think about what was going on elsewhere later.

I took corner after corner, weaving my way through the area, looking for something, anything I could use to stave off the necromancer, and coming up empty-handed.

“Sweet baby jaysus,” I hissed under my breath as I took a corner and ran smack into one of the tonton macoutes. Yelping, I bounced off the weirdly stiff body, like it was made of leather. I guess it was, only the leather was made of human skin.

Gah.

I ducked under the reaching arms and grasping hands, getting a good whiff of something sharp and acidic leaking in drips from the body. I grabbed the edge of the building I was next to and used it to slingshot myself around the corner and out of reach.

Or so I had thought.

Ahead of me was a milling crowd of early tourists. Only they weren't tourists. Clovis had kept hold of Marge and Homer's peeps for himself. That's why he'd chased the two of them away. And now the army was waiting for me. The tonton macoutes were everywhere, and I knew how deadly they were.

I leaned against the wall of the building, taking stock of the competition. There were easily a hundred of them, and I couldn't outfight or outrun them all.

I fumbled with my bag, flipping it open and hoping for some sort of miracle to appear out of it.

What I got was Jinx.

“Hey, are we rescuing that kid or what?” She tumbled out of the bag, still a very small spider.

“Can you get me out of here?” I asked.

It took Skeletor several minutes to get out of the ground—I didn't have that kind of time. I yelped as I swung my remaining knife at the tonton macoutes next to me. He screamed and fell backward, and I swallowed hard.

Hadn't Penny told me they couldn't feel pain? Not alive, not dead, she'd said. I wasn't sure what that meant, but I'd seen the necro use Louis as a marionette. Maybe this was the same thing on a much bigger scale. No matter how I sliced it, dealing with them was dangerous to both them and me.

Jinx grunted. “I'm not a damn horse!”

“I'll get you whatever books on editing you want for the rest of my life!” I yelled as I pushed another voodoo person back, not wanting to use my knife again. “Books on craft, books on passive writing, books

on shitty dialogue and how to fix it, anything you want! Just get me out of here!”

“Oh, now you’re talking,” Jinx said.

I turned and groaned at the sight of what she’d shifted into. It just had to be *that* animal, didn’t it?

I stared for half a second at Jinx, who was now the size of a small elephant because *that* was what she'd turned into. A freaking elephant, though her skin was dark as night and she seemed to have retained her spider hairs on her legs, which all but quivered as if they'd shoot out and stick me.

Before I could contemplate this turn of events, she grabbed me around the waist with her trunk and all but threw me up onto her back. I belly flopped but managed to grab the top of her left ear to keep from sliding off to the side.

"Why not a horse?" I hollered as she lumbered forward, slowly picking up speed. I finally got upright so I could see where we were going.

Jinx let out a bellowing trumpet before she answered. "How boring is a horse? Anyone can say they rode a horse into battle, but how many people can say they rode an elephant? And a black elephant, no less!" She flung her trunk from side to side, clearing the voodoo people out of her path, and those she missed with her trunk, she flattened with her big-as-serving-tureens feet.

They screamed and wailed as she blew through them, not caring about the damage she did.

I swallowed hard. "Be careful, I don't think those are dead people!"

"They *are* dead, I can smell them and they can't feel shit!" Jinx tossed a few more bodies out of her way. Since I didn't want to think

about the ramifications, I decided to go with it. “We need to find Crash. He’s one of the only ones who can stand up to a power like this!”

I didn’t disagree with her. “I don’t know where he is, do you?”

“I can find him. He’s my boss after all. As the crow flies, he’s this way.”

She changed direction and headed toward St. Louis Cemetery Number 1.

My stomach dropped.

The thing was...

“Whatever spell is around that cemetery makes me super weak! And there is something in there that doesn’t like me! Like a whole lot of somethings!”

“Well, that’s a problem,” Jinx grumbled as she boomed her way down the streets. I was surprised I didn’t see the houses bouncing as if we were in some cartoon. “You’d better figure it out, because we’re almost there.”

As we thundered across lanes, I could see the cemetery up ahead, and the buzzing started in the soles of my feet. Nausea twisted up my guts because the last time I’d tried to enter the cemetery, I hadn’t made it twenty feet before I had to crawl away, unable to stand the sensations. And I’d only made it out because of Robert.

We were on Treme Street, and Jinx headed straight for one of the rusted gates. It was closed, the two sides linked by several chains, but she put her head down and plowed threw them as if they were wet tissue paper.

“I love being an elephant. I need to do it more often,” she said and promptly reached up with her trunk and grabbed me around the waist. She set me on the ground, and the second my feet hit the surface, I crumpled.

Jinx pushed at me with her trunk. “Seriously? Are you just being a weak old lady, or is it really that bad?”

I dug my fingers into her trunk as if I could pull her closer. “Keep going, find Crash. Go!”

I put as much emphasis as possible into that last word, and with it I felt a pull on my magic. She let out a belching grunt and then

trundled off, dragging me with her. Sure, she could have put me on her back, but that would have been the nice thing to do.

“I’m going to ask for a lot of books for this,” she hollered at me.

I rolled onto my hands and knees, unable to keep what little food I had left in me where it was supposed to stay.

Only suddenly Jinx squealed, trumpeting, and then she was back to a tiny spider, scuttling away.

A hand gripped the back of my hair as I continued to heave, and dragged me to my feet, which meant puke ran down my chin and onto my shirt. I slapped weakly at the hands, feeling the death around him. “Damn you, Bogus Clovis. Leave me alone!”

“Stop fighting him!” Louis snapped. “You cannot fight his power. You aren’t strong enough.”

“That’s the pot calling the kettle black!” I spat back at him, hoping my anger would help me get and keep my legs under me.

Clovis tightened his hold on my hair and shoved me forward. “You broke through the remaining pieces of your gran’s spell on the cemetery for me, thank you. I can feel your gran through you. This way.” He turned to the left, holding me out in front of him like some sort of human dowsing rod.

Vile creature!

You are not welcome!

Kill her.

You let him in!

The voices were back, pounding into my skull worse than ever. Yet, I couldn’t stop. I wasn’t being allowed to. This was why they didn’t want me here? Because something in me opened the cemetery for Clovis?

Every time my legs went weak, he shoved me, pushing me ahead of him. We wove between the aboveground tombs, the pathways made of concrete without a stitch of grass. That is, if I didn’t count the few overly tough weeds that had broken through the manmade paths in order to reach for the sun. The smell of rain hung in the air, along with a hint of smoke. I tried slapping away his hands but found myself struggling as though he were an adult and I a naughty child in his grip.

With each step we took, the sun brightened the sky a little farther until it was full daylight. It was a dark day, granted, presided over by rainclouds, but dawn had come, and it gave me a little hope.

“Louis, you can’t possibly see this as a good idea!” I said as I was pushed around another tomb. “Come on, dude, help me!”

Louis said nothing, so I pressed on. “They’re trying to find the ingredients for a spell, and it isn’t a good one! This is only going to help them.”

“And who are ‘they’?” Louis asked. “Who are we to be afraid of if you know so much?”

“Well, obviously, Bogus Clovis here!” I yelped as the hand in my hair tightened. Weirdly enough, although the metaphysical attack I’d been undergoing wasn’t under my control, the buzzing under my skin had lessened, the needles that had wanted to drive into me before had eased their attack. “And whoever he is working for or with!”

Perhaps she is not the enemy.

She doesn’t like the death bringer.

The voices began to confer with one another, their hold on my mind easing.

Louis grunted and slid between French and English. “Je ne suis pas surpris. Vous ne savez rien. Of course, you know nothing. Perhaps you should have listened when we told you that you should not be in the Hollows!”

Indignation roared through me. “You were one of the ones who supported me! Don’t you try to gaslight me! I have damn well lived with enough of that.” I twisted around to take a swing at Louis, just because.

He jerked away from me and *hid* behind Clovis. Clovis threw me ahead of him. “We are here.”

On my hands and knees, I looked up to see a tomb in front of me. Big, square, ugly, and made of a dull gray stone.

“Touch it,” Clovis said.

When I didn’t move, he picked me up and threw me at the tomb. I hit the stone hard and rolled. A flash of light and the air heated for a split second as a spell ripped open.

I blinked up at the tomb, which was no longer big, square, and ugly.

What I saw made me reel backward. It was as if I had been transported back to Savannah—impossible, I know, yet that’s how it looked.

Even Louis sucked in a breath. “It cannot be.”

The tomb was the mirror image of the one that presided over the Hollows’ training area. Right down to the broken wing, albeit it was on the right side instead of the left.

Clovis let me go. “This is the place. This is the tomb where the witch hid the angel wings.”

He stepped forward and Louis was forced to go with him. I should have been worried, except I wasn’t, not for an instant.

You see, I’d realized something they couldn’t possibly know.

Gran wasn’t here.

Which meant this was not where Gran’s spirit had gone to protect the remaining angel wing or wings. It was a ruse of Gran’s. A diversion, just like I’d done with the fairy cross to keep it safe. I stared up at the angel statue, daring to put a hand on the marble base. There was no warmth.

The warmth had been in the matching statue in the Hollows.

Damn it, Gran, why did you stay quiet then?

The buzzing in my body had slowed even more, and then it stopped all together.

We were wrong.

You must flee.

Danger comes.

Only I just sat there, my butt in the grass, watching as Clovis raised his hands above his head and begin to intone words that sounded Latin, but were deeper, darker and, if I were to guess, far older than simple Latin.

“*Aperta. Revelare. Potestas mea.*” Clovis boomed the words and Louis repeated them in a whisper, his head bowed and shoulders shaking.

“Louis! Don’t help him!” I pushed to my feet, my legs and body my own again.

I would have taken a step farther, but someone grabbed me from behind. I spun and found myself looking up into the eyes of a wraith.

“Ah, duck me,” I whispered.

The wraith dragged me away from the tomb as Clovis worked to get it open. Stone on stone shrieked through the air as the tomb was slowly pulled apart one piece at a time.

If the wings had been there, they weren't anymore, I was sure of it. But Clovis didn't know that. I could keep him believing that for a while longer.

The wraith's hands dug into me, and that awful sucking sensation overcame me, as if all the energy was being siphoned from me, ice and fire at the same time. The ground beneath me softened, and my legs slid impossibly down through the solid path.

Fight, I had to fight. I didn't know if Suzy and the others had managed to keep up, if they'd followed. Or where Crash was if he was indeed in this cemetery. Even Robert was gone.

I was alone in that moment.

"Let me go!" I growled the words, struggling to find the magic I possessed. The wraith tipped its head to the side as if considering my request.

"Not the right words," the creature said in its whispery voice. "Must be the right words."

I struggled against the wraith even as my energy drained out of me, my magic being stripped away.

The right words?

I twisted around to see Louis staring at me. Was he doing this? The ring he'd given Eammon was cool against my skin, and I scrambled to get it off.

I was up to my waist now in the ground, and there were bones under my feet, which wasn't great for my nerves, even if they were harder than the soil and cement around me. I managed to get my fingers around the ring and rip it free from the chain, which sent my Gran's amulet onto the ground too.

The ground stopped trying to suck me down. That was good, wasn't it? Nope, the wraith kept coming.

"What the damn hell of a hot, messy shart are the right words? Please?" I yelled, fear and anger about the only things keeping me upright as my energy level sunk with my body. What little magic I had left seemed to curl around me and the wraith, and it was as if I could see my words forced into the critter.

The wraith blinked down at me, its mouth moving even though it didn't seem to want to speak. "Go and harm no more," it finally said, writhing like a fish on a hook. "Damn youuuuu."

I couldn't find my knife. But my fingers brushed against the piece of leather I'd taken from the mansion. I pulled it out and the whip appeared in my hands, ethereal and shimmering. I snapped it forward and it wrapped around the wraith far tighter than it should have by my swing. The wraith screamed, body flailing against the hold of the whip. I yelled the words he'd given me. "Go and harm no more."

He shrieked and fell away from me, and I was left there, puffing for air as the ground began to harden. The whip shrunk once more to a single piece of leather.

Shit, shit, shit! What was left of my strength was used to pull myself out of the hole I'd been stuffed into by the wraith. Covered in bits of dirt and tiny granules of rock, I lay on the pathway breathing hard. I could still hear Clovis and Louis chanting away, working on the tomb. I scooped up my gran's amulet and tucked it into my pocket, but left Louis's ring. Just in case.

I sat up with a groan in time to see a bolt of lightning arc out of the sky and strike the statue. The marble angel cracked right down the middle, falling as if in slow motion to either side.

Clovis laughed, his hands above his head as Louis crouched at his feet.

The necro wouldn't find what he was looking for, and once he realized that, he would turn on me again. This was my chance to stop him. I just didn't know how.

Breathing hard, sweating enough to make my own little ocean, I wobbled up to my feet. It had worked with the wraith, why not with the necromancer?

Flipping the knife into a throwing position, I snapped it toward Clovis with all I had as I spoke the same simple words. "Go and harm no more."

The only problem?

Someone else stepped into the path of the spinning blade.

I yelped out a warning—too late—as Louis, who’d apparently seen this as his opportunity to run away, took my spinning blade in his right shoulder. He screamed and flung himself at Clovis, hugging the robed necromancer to him. The two of them tumbled into the gaping pit the lightning bolt had created when it split the angel statue in half. If this tomb was anything like its sister in Savannah, that hole went down a long, long way.

I didn’t know if I dared to go forward and check on them. I was out of weapons, out of strength, and limping worse with each step. I swallowed hard. “Jinx, you around?”

She did not answer me.

A ghost did.

Three of them to be exact.

They floated toward me, dressed in clothing that suggested they’d died in the mid-eighteen hundreds if I were to guess.

“You drove the necromancer away. Protected us.” The first, an elderly bald man, stopped right in front of me.

The middle ghost, a woman in a big hoop skirt, bobbed her head as she curtsied. *“You stopped him for now. Well done, and with our apologies, you are welcome here.”*

I clutched a hand around my middle. “Yeah, I just need to make sure he’s—” Dead? Gone? I wasn’t sure which would be better.

The third ghost, smaller than the other two, looked as if he’d died in his early teens. He had on short pants and shoes with giant

buckles on them. *"The necromancer is gone, but he is not dead. He will come for you again. You surprised him. Do not think to have that opportunity a second time."*

And without another word the three ghosts faded.

"Great," I muttered, then drew a slow breath and tried again. "Jinx?"

There was a scuttling behind one of the tombstones, and she peeked up over the top of it. Once more a giant spider, she shook an appendage at me.

"You better run. They aren't done with you."

I twisted around and glanced toward the hole that Clovis and Louis had fallen into. I forced myself to limp over to it.

My adrenaline spiked as I peered over the edge, but it was a waste. No one in there.

"They're gone," I said, a sigh of relief escaping me. Charlotte had been found, I was pretty sure I knew exactly where Gran was hiding out, and Jacob had promised to clear my name.

The day was turning out better than I could have hoped. Sure, Missy had my gran's spell book, sure I was beat to hell and back, but . . . I paused in my musings. Something tugged at my ears, a sound I couldn't identify.

"Jinx," I said. "What is that noise?"

"I told you to run!" she yelled and then she scuttled away.

I turned slowly, the noise sinking into my head. Feet, lots and lots of feet on the pavement?

Only it wasn't just feet.

It was the tonton macoutes' dragging, shuffling feet.

"Duck me." And no, I didn't say duck, most definitely not.

All around me bodies shuffled my way, and maybe on a good day I could have dodged them. I could have used those muscles I'd been slowly building back and beat a fast retreat.

But not with my ankle mauled by a damn alligator. Not with both of my knives gone.

I hobbled deeper into the cemetery, using the above ground tombstones and mini-mausoleums as hand holds to keep moving.

"Jinx, find Crash, at least! I thought you said he was here!"

"I said we were going *through* here to get to him!"

If there ever was a time I needed rescuing, this was it.

I took a sharp left and my ankle gave out, sending me to my hands and knees. “Seriously?” I yelled at no one in particular. The smell of the voodoo shitheads was all around me, that dirty socks and smoke scent jamming its way up my nose.

I pushed to my feet as a series of hands clamped onto me, lifting me overhead. “Let me go!” I yelled as I struggled against their hold. I was going to die. Just like Gran, just like my mom and dad.

The hand on my busted up ankle twisted, and I screamed as a bolt of pain tore through me.

Suzy had said she’d follow me. Where was she?

For the first time, I was truly afraid. I was alone in this. No one was coming to save me. I would have to get myself out of this on my own, or I was going to die.

The hands were pulling me in four directions, as if testing the limits of my joints. I pulled back, knowing they’d straight up tear my limbs off if I didn’t put up any resistance.

Tears trickled down my cheeks. This was not how I wanted to go out.

Holding myself together as best as I could, I tried to find that spark of magic in me. These things were dead . . . could I maybe control them?

“Let me go! Go and do no harm!” I snapped, pouring my last energy into the words. A laugh answered me.

“Oh, girl, it don’t work like that. Sentinel you might be, but I’m a voodoo queen, and even I couldn’t stop him from taking my pets,” Marge’s voice floated out of the mouth of the undead person next to me. She might not have been there in physical form, but she was watching.

“Marge, let me go!” I yelled.

“Oh, this isn’t my doing. The necro took over my army—paid me to borrow them. Looks like he did the same to my gran too, all those years ago. I can’t stop them now, not until the time limit is up,” she said, and I thought perhaps I detected sorrow in her voice. “Best bet is that they’ll take you to him, and kill you later. But I’d bet you pissed him off enough that he’s just going to kill you. Sorry, kid. This is how the cookie crumbles sometimes. It was nice knowing you.”

Another pull on my limbs, and I was sure there were tendons and ligaments popping.

I pulled hard against the hands with what little strength I had left, yanking all the critters toward me. “GAH! Damn you!”

A sudden howl cut through the air as if in response to my scream. It couldn't be. He'd left with Corb.

“SARGE! I'm over here!” I screamed for the werewolf, praying I wasn't hearing things.

“We're coming!” Suzy yelled. “Hang on!”

A buzzing filled the air, and suddenly Kinkly swooped in, a tiny sword in her hand that she plunged into the eye of the voodoo critter that held my left arm in a vise grip. “We got you, Bree!”

Tears slid down my face. I shouldn't have been crying, I should have been fighting. I should have been helping my friends as they swept in and drove the tonton macoutes army off.

I crumpled where I was, my body broken and done. But my heart . . . my heart was overflowing. Never in my life had anyone truly looked out for me besides Gran. I'd always been the one my friends looked to for help and rescue. The one who took care of Alan.

No one had rescued me.

Not ever.

And yet here I was, lying useless on the ground while my friends—my family—came to my rescue. For once, I didn't have to be the strong one.

I stared as they cleared the area around me. But one man held my eyes as he made his way through the tonton macoutes. Crash held two swords and wielded them with a deadly accuracy that had the undead stumbling away from him. Face grim, his magic flared around him and shoved the critters back farther.

The fight was over in a matter of minutes, the undead either gone or laid out as flat as me. Crash ran to my side, his swords disappearing into thin air. I'd have to ask him about that trick later.

“Bree,” his hands hovered over me as if he wasn't sure where to touch me. I reached a hand up and snaked it around his neck.

He scooped me up into his arms, which put me on eye level with my friends. I looked for Sarge first. “You came back.”

The werewolf gave a sheepish grin. “Well . . .the thing is, I realized about halfway back to Savannah that Corb was wrong. You were right. And—”

“Don’t tell me you owed me,” I said.

He gave me a wolfy grin. “I realized you needed me a lot more than he did.”

My lips trembled, and I saw tears welling in his eyes before he looked away. “Don’t make me cry.”

I dashed a few tears away. “You all came back for me.”

Crash gently tightened his hold on me. “Bree, you aren’t in this fight alone. You aren’t.”

And just like that, the world was a little better. At least for that moment

BACK AT PENNY’S HOUSE, CHARLOTTE’S LAUGHTER RANG IN THE air as Eric entertained her. They’d called her mother right away, and she was on her way to meet us here to get her daughter. I took the hottest bath I could stand. I had my ankle propped out of the hot tub, an ice pack tied around it. The bruising was nothing short of spectacular, and it was spreading from every point where the gator’s teeth had tried to tear into me. “I need to give Gerry a bottle of whiskey.” I’d been enjoying some whiskey of my own, so the words came out a little slurred.

Penny sat on a stool next to the tub, watching over me. “Her clothing is the best, but I think whiskey isn’t her flavor. She’s more of a rum girl. Pirate blood, you know.”

That Penny knew Gerry shouldn’t have surprised me, but the whiskey I’d been sipping had been dosed with what I suspected was a very small dose of something loaded, and I was kind of out of it.

The next thing I knew, I was wrapped in a warm blanket and being tucked into bed, a pair of rather well-muscled arms wrapped around me and a hard chest against my cheek.

“Thank you,” Crash said with a chuckle, and I realized I might be saying everything I was thinking, which would be dangerous.

“I lost both knives,” I whispered.

“I’ll make you more.” He kissed me on the forehead and the light flicked off. “You need to sleep, let the potion Penny gave you do its work, and tomorrow we’ll find Celia.”

I yawned and snuggled deeper against his body. “I know where she is, and I think I know where the wings are.”

He startled against me. “You do?”

“Hmmm.” If I wasn’t so tired I’d lick him, but as it was, I let whatever they’d given me do its work and drifted off to sleep.

My eyes were closed, my body relaxed, but I was having another vivid dream.

I blinked and found myself standing at the front door of Marge and Homer’s house. I walked forward, opened the door, and looked around the room. All the voodoo dolls were strewn about, scattered, bits and pieces missing, heads with no bodies.

The wounds on the voodoo dolls reflected what my friends had done to the undead army. I put a fist to my belly, nausea threatening to make me spew. I still didn’t quite get their status. Alive. Dead. Undead.

“You won,” Marge said softly as she stepped out of the narrow hallway. “Not that I was really fighting with you.”

I stared at her, knowing there was only one reason I was here. “Where is Robert?”

“Your skeleton friend? You don’t want to know where your ex-husband is?” Marge looked at me, her skin that faint blue tone that made her look less than alive.

“I want Robert back,” I said. “Now.”

She grinned. “You can’t have them both.”

Was she serious? “So you’re going to keep Alan? And do what to him?”

“Well, now that he’s stuffed into one of those dead bodies, he can work for me. Fresh dead works best. Must replenish the army, you know.” She grinned, and I think she meant to make me feel bad.

I turned away so she couldn’t see my face. Because I didn’t think grinning at her would give me the upper hand. I cleared my throat and nodded, turning back. “Okay, you keep Alan and I’ll take Robert.”

She threw me a finger bone, and I caught it midair. Robert morphed from bone into a full-bodied, very alive looking human.

He caught me around the waist and put himself between me and Marge. "We have to go," he said.

I didn't argue. "Give Alan my love!" I yelled back at Marge. A flicker of humor crossed her face, as if she understood that I wasn't all that fussed about leaving my ex behind, and found it funny.

Robert hurried me out of the door, took my hand, and then we were running through the streets. My leg didn't hurt, my body wasn't aching, and I was feeling pretty good. Best I'd felt in days, weeks maybe.

"Robert, stop, stop!" I said. "Why are we running?"

He slowed and turned to face me. We were in one of the squares of the city, the night air soothing, the smell of flowers filling the space between us as if we were actually there.

"Bree, I'm sorry," he whispered, a look of horror on his face. "I couldn't stop them from taking me."

"Not your fault," I said. "Robert, none of us realized how strong that necro was."

He took both of my hands and lifted them to his mouth, kissing the backs of them in what was decidedly not a friend move.

Uh-oh.

"Robert, we are good. Honest. And I know where Gran is," I said. "I'm going to get her as soon as I wake up."

He nodded and dragged me to him, icy blue eyes locked on mine. "Good."

Then he cupped my face with his hands and kissed me.

I didn't say a word to anyone about the dream. Nor did I say anything about the kiss to Robert, who was back in his skeleton form at my side, swaying and whispering "friend." Nor did I let myself think about how the kiss had made me feel.

How freaking amazing it had been.

Nope, I was not going there. I'd just said goodbye to Corb, and I did not need to replace him for another damn love triangle. With a dead man no less, talk about complicated.

No.

No.

But gawd damn, that kiss . . .

I swallowed hard, and even though it had been a dream kiss, I'd woken up hot and flushed, my body tingling all over. More than that, my magic was screaming loudly enough that I'd woken Crash.

Now here we were, back in Savannah. Suzy and Eric had gone with Charlotte and her mom to their home, Penny in tow. Penny would be the one to train her now, and whether the silver coven liked it or not, they were about to get their first new member in about thirty years.

Penny seemed to think she would be staying with Missy, but I had my doubts about how that would go down.

Corb was gone, no one knew where, and Sarge had taken over his loft to keep an eye on things until the siren got back. It looked like Jinx was still hanging around trying to get lucky with the werewolf.

And me? I was headed to the Hollows, limping still but not as badly.

I'd called ahead and Eammon was waiting for me. Tom was still staying with Missy, recuperating from the wraith attack.

Crash had come with me, much to the displeasure of Eammon, or so I gathered from the look on his face when we stepped onto the Hollows' grounds.

"You had to bring him?"

"Him saved my sweet cheeks," I said.

Eammon grumped and shook his head. "Fine. But I still don't like it, or him."

I walked past him to the angel statue tomb and put my hand on it. That same flowing warmth that I'd felt before pulsed beneath my touch. "Gran?" I pushed a little of my magic into it, calling her forward, and she slowly materialized to the side of the statue.

"Honey girl, I knew you'd figure it out. Your magic had to touch me in order for me to appear." She smiled, and I noted that she was far more immaterial than she'd been at her house.

"You aren't disappearing on me, are you?" I asked through a tight throat.

She shook her head. "When Missy released me from my bonds to the house—"

I jabbed a finger into the air. "I knew it! I knew that witch had done something. I—"

"I asked her to," Gran said. "I knew that something was coming."

My jaw flapped open. "YOU WHAT?"

"I asked her to. I realize I should have told you, but my memories were so fuzzed over."

Eammon and Crash were staring back, and I remembered that at least Eammon couldn't see her. I filled them in quickly.

"Why would she do that?" Eammon barked. "Makes no sense to be untethered!"

"Because I knew my granddaughter would follow wherever I went, you old fool, and I thought she would come here!" Gran snapped and I conveyed the message word for word. Eammon grimaced. I grinned.

"This is where you hid them?" I asked as I touched the statue.

Gran slid an insubstantial hand over the angel. Two stone feathers fell as if they had never truly been attached. When they clunked to the ground, the stone fell away from them, leaving a pair of glittering white feathers.

“You need to get rid of them,” Gran said. “Once and for all.”

I scooped them up and tucked them into my hip bag. “Gran, what about you?”

She smiled. “You think I’d disappear after all that work you put in to find me? I think not. Besides, I heard Eammon grumbling about a new witch to be trained. If we have a new trainee, then I can’t wait to meet her.”

BACK AT GRAN’S HOUSE, I LOOKED AROUND THE KITCHEN. Everyone was here. Gran, Feish, Crash, Kinkly, Eric, Suzy, Sarge, Jinx, Penny, and even Robert, swaying as he watched us from the corner of the room. And we had our new crew too—Charlotte and her mom, Ryu, from next door, along with Bridgette, their house goblin.

They were all here, my friends who’d become family. My family who’d saved me when I’d thought I was alone. They’d come to my rescue, and I would never forget that moment for as long as I lived.

Feish was still peeved that she’d been left out of the final fight. “I could have helped,” she’d muttered. “I have fighting skills.”

Crash had whispered to me quietly, “She was so upset that you’d been taken, I left her at the safe house.”

My throat tightened and I looked away from the group.

“Crash, could I get your help in the forge?” I asked softly as the others bustled about.

Sarge let out a wolf whistle and a wink, then grabbed Penny and made a rather rude humping motion.

Penny swatted him with her cane, and I rolled my eyes as he yelped. “Of all the places to get busy, a forge is not the one I’d choose, thanks.”

Crash followed me out the back door and down the steps to the basement, where he’d set up his shop. “I don’t know. I could sit you on the anvil, the height would be about right.”

A flush of desire whipped through me, and I cleared my throat. "We need to burn something." I didn't want to say what it was out loud, in case someone was listening.

"Yeah, my thoughts too," he growled, and I looked up at him to see that his gaze was on my lips, not what I'd pulled out of my bag.

"First these," I managed to squeak out and held up the feathers in my hand. "It'll keep them safe from Karissa and Clovis."

I didn't want to lose Crash to some stupid spell any more than I wanted these feathers to end up in a terrible spell that would apparently be end-of-the-world bad.

His jaw ticked and he nodded. Turning his back to me, he stoked his coal forge and got the flames going high in a matter of minutes. Minutes that felt like hours as I stared at his broad back, tapering down to his fit waist and muscled thighs that I wanted nothing more than to hang onto. I crossed my legs as if that would help the throbbing in my lower regions.

Crash turned, eyes still far too dilated for anything but lust to be rushing through him. I gave him the feathers, and he took them in a set of tongs and put them into the flames. They caught the red and orange licks of fire and then began to sparkle, not going straight into a pile of ash like you would have expected. No, all the colors of the rainbow burst out of them and then the feathers turned black, solidifying into hunks of coal that crumbled in the forge.

"Just like that," I said softly. "Why didn't they do it sooner?"

Crash frowned. "Maybe we can talk about that later, because with a house full of people, alone time has suddenly become harder to find."

He strode to me, coal dust on his hands as he scooped me up and set my butt on the anvil, sliding himself between my legs. I draped my arms over his shoulders.

"What are you suggesting exactly?" I smiled, giddy warmth stealing through me.

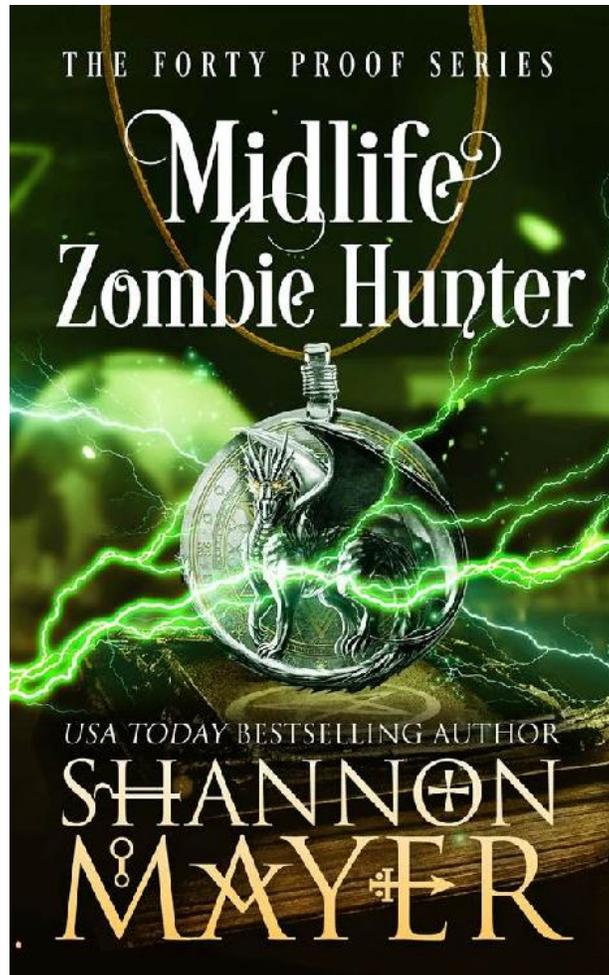
He leaned in close and pressed his lips to mine in a kiss that was more chaste than I'd expected. "That maybe the forge is exactly the place to heat things up."

UP NEXT!

Don't you worry, you'll see the conclusion of this scene in "Midlife Zombie Hunter" available for pre-order.

[Midlife Zombie Hunter Pre-Order](#)

Cover on next page!



And while you wait on the next Bree adventure, here are suggestions to keep you busy!

[Witch's Reign](#) (Epic fantasy/star crossed lovers, Shakespeare spewing tiny dragon)

[Priceless](#) (Mystery, magic, missing kids and a hot FBI hunting our heroine)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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