



GRAVE PROMISE

HOW TO BE A NECROMANCER BOOK ONE

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MIERS & KNOX

GRAVE PROMISE

HOW TO BE A NECROMANCER: BOOK ONE

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D.D. MIERS
GRACELEY KNOX

CHAOTIC PRESS, LLC

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PRAISE FOR GRACELEY KNOX & D.D. MIERS

“The dawn of a new age of vampire.” - **Crafting Geeky Bibliophile**

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“If you haven’t read any books by Graceley Knox or D. D. Miers well get busy because you are missing out on two very gifted story weavers!" -
Goodreads Reviewer

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CONTENTS

[Praise for Graceley Knox & D.D. Miers](#)

[Dear Reader,](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[The Kresova](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Thank You!](#)

[Also By Graceley Knox & D.D. Miers](#)

[About the Authors](#)

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DEAR READER,

First off, thank you for choosing to read *Grave Promise*! We can't express how much each one of our fans (new and old) mean to us. Without you, there would be no stories to be told or shared. You keep this journey going for us.

We'd like to let you know that unlike some of our other stories, this is a *Slow Burn Reverse Harem Urban Fantasy*. (Boy that's a mouthful!) **What does that mean?** Well, this is the first book in a five-book series with a kickass heroine, a powerful enemy, and series of lovers dedicated to our leading lady.

If you've never tried a reverse harem, this is the perfect book to start with! There's a great story, exciting, mysterious, and sexy heroes, and an enticing adventure awaiting you!

Happy Reading!

D.D. & Graceley

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CHAPTER 1

In a silent basement room, a well-dressed corpse lay, hands folded on his chest, waiting for his final family gathering before the long solitude of the grave.

I looked down into his pale face—familiar and foreign in the way of old family photos—and dabbed more blush onto his cheeks.

It was a good face, heavy with laugh lines. Even with his eyes glued and his jaw wired shut for the open casket funeral, he had the look of a trickster. Like at any moment he'd sit up, announce it was all an elaborate prank, and ask me to pull his finger.

The fact most of his organs had been removed made that unlikely but, considering his family history, not entirely out of the question.

I never met Great-Uncle Ptolemy but, from what I've been told, if I had, he probably would have flattered me into buying him alcohol and then done something to get himself banned from whatever establishment had the misfortune of hosting us. Since he was an old-fashioned eccentric and a lush, I regretted never having met him only for the hell we might have raised together.

Looking down at him lying on the table in the prep room of the Rosenfield Funeral Home as I touched up his makeup for his last public appearance, I felt sorry for him. Aunt Persephona told me once that he had a touch of the gift in him. Not enough to do anything but just enough to make him open to the influence of the other world. According to her, it had driven him a little wacky.

That certainly seemed to be the case. Though he'd been pushing eighty, he hadn't managed to put together a proper will. Yet he had left strict

instructions he was to be buried barefoot, wearing his favorite bow tie. It was rainbow, with a staring plastic eyeball in the center. I straightened it with a grimace. I hadn't seen anything that tacky since my first stumbling attempts into counterculture fashion back in middle school. I'd grown out of my Tripp pants and ironically pop culture accessories. Uncle Ptolemy apparently had not.

But then, discovering you had real, dangerous power over death itself can do a lot to make a person lose their sense of whimsy.

I adjusted the foundation on Ptolemy's forehead with an artist's care, but my mind wandered, reaching out for the senses that lingered outside the edge of normal perception. Death hung in the room, in a way that wasn't so much feeling as it was a parasympathetic response in the vagus nerve to something less tangible. I was aware in a very particular way of not just Uncle Ptolemy on the table in front of me but also the four bodies waiting in the mortuary refrigerators along the wall.

The best way to describe it? A low chime so quick you barely heard it . . . but always present. When my work took me to graveyards, I was surrounded by a constant murmuring wind chime chorus, glittering faintly like the stars on a clear night. And in Ptolemy himself, so close at hand, I noticed something else—an emptiness yawning open, waiting to be filled. I bit my lip, considering. It had been a while since I'd siphoned any power. If I let it continue to build up, it would become an uncomfortable pressure and eventually difficult to control. And who better to use my powers on than Ptolemy, who was in a unique position to understand my predicament?

“Just about done there, Vexa?”

My boss, Mr. Gould, stepped into the prep room with his customary caution. He had a way of moving like an anxious deer, slow and quiet, waiting to be spooked. Or, more accurately, wanting to avoid spooking his customers. One of the first things I learned working here was never to move too fast or make too much noise. Startling the bereaved was likely to lead to emotional outbursts no one wanted to deal with.

“Just about,” I replied, checking Uncle Ptolemy over one last time before shutting my makeup case. So much for my plan. Maybe later. “Are we all ready to go out there?”

“The first of the guests are already in the lobby,” Gould replied, stepping closer to check my work. “He was one of yours, wasn't he? Related to you, I mean?”

“Yeah,” I confirmed, taking off my apron and smoothing my dress, checking to make sure I hadn’t spilled anything. “This is the first time I’ve had to prep a relative.”

There was a mirror over the prep table to help with preparing the body, and I adjusted it to look at myself. The sleek, black cotton dress was both formal and practical, tea-length with long sleeves and a white Peter Pan collar and cuffs. Simple and elegant, it was one of my favorites for working in. I checked my long, blond hair, letting it out of the ponytail I’d put it in while I worked and arranged my bangs properly. The color was natural, but I had to straighten it meticulously every morning to get that waterfall Morticia Addams effect . . . if Morticia had been a blonde.

“Are you all right?” Gould asked with a sympathetic frown he’d probably practiced in a mirror, unless he’d been born with it on his dour, mustachioed face, looking like an undertaker.

“Oh yeah, it’s no big deal,” I assured him, checking my matte-black acrylic nails. “I didn’t know Great-Uncle Ptolemy. He was Great-Aunt Persephona’s brother, but they’d been out of touch for a while. And yes, before you ask, my whole family does have names like that—Tzarnavaras family tradition.”

“Is that how you ended up with . . .?” Gould trailed off, unsure if it was passé to bring up my full name.

“Vexatious?” I finished for him, busy fixing my earrings of simple black crosses. “Yeah. My parents wanted to carry on the tradition but didn’t feel like doing the research I guess, so they just picked something that sounded nice without checking what it meant. You won’t be able to ask them about the logic of that decision because my uncle and my parents rarely acknowledge each other’s presence. They won’t even be here for the ceremony.”

“Well, it does seem to suit you, anyway,” Gould said, trying to be nice.

I cast a sardonic smile in his direction. “Careful,” I warned him. “Some people would take that as an insult.”

He realized his mistake and fumbled to apologize, but I laughed him off.

“Are we ready to wheel Ptolemy out?” I asked.

“Yes, but I’ll take care of that,” Gould said, straightening his suit, relieved to have left the subject behind. “I need you to go up to the office. Apparently, there’s another issue with the estate and the lawyer’s tense

shoulders indicated he could use some backup. I'm fairly certain Georgiana will start tearing throats out soon."

"Why am I not surprised?" I said with a sigh. "I'll keep an eye on the situation."

"Just make sure they're ready for the service to start in a half an hour," he said, checking his watch. "We have two more today and if we let this one run late, we'll be here all night again."

I gave the room and Ptolemy one last check to make sure I hadn't forgotten anything, then headed upstairs into the somber, dark, wood-paneled halls of the funeral home proper. Gould kept the place stately, sedate, old-fashioned in a way that was comforting rather than alienating. But I had little time to appreciate the décor. As soon as I closed the door to the stairs, I heard shouting coming from the office we used for will readings and negotiating payment plans on caskets and memorials.

"You were never even part of his life!"

"And you were?"

"You had every intention of letting him rot in a nursing home if he hadn't killed himself first!"

Great-Uncle Ptolemy, in addition to being a certified eccentric, had apparently been something of a ladies' man when he was younger. He'd never married, but he fathered plenty of children, chief among them Georgiana Claire and Roland Darte. They were both in their fifties, entitled and unbearable, and had been fighting over Ptolemy's estate since the moment his heart had finally given out under the stress of his prolific drinking.

"At least I spent time with him!" Georgiana had all the dulcet tones of a tornado siren and more sharp angles than a pile of broken glass. I'd never been out to eat with her, but I bet she was the type to send her meal back to the kitchen twice and refuse to leave a tip. "Maybe he would have bothered to leave you something if you hadn't been so preoccupied with that sham of an acting career!"

"Excuse you!" Roland sputtered, red-faced. He was a tall, broad man with an air of Shakespearian theatricality that had, apparently, not done him any favors in the world of actual theater. "I was on Broadway!"

"Oh please." Georgiana rolled her eyes so hard I worried for the safety of her designer sunglasses. "Your unnamed part in the off-off-Broadway revival of *Urinetown* is nothing to brag about, Roland."

“I suppose my time would have been better spent swindling a string of elderly widowers,” Roland replied, and the acid in his voice could have stripped paint. Georgiana clapped a heavily be-ringed hand to her chest as though wounded as he continued. “At least I have a career! You’ve made your living swooping in to steal inheritances, and you’re doing the same thing now!”

“Please, Mr. Darte, Ms. Claire.” Uncle Ptolemy’s lawyer stepped between them, looking excruciatingly bored. He’d been dealing with these two since the dispute began, and I did not envy him the job.

Mr. Greenwood was a man whose age I could never pin down. There were moments he acted like he was too young to be out of law school, with his pale skin and blond hair. And others where a kind of ancient world-weariness echoed from his narrow green eyes, making him seem like the oldest person in the room. He was handsome, whatever his age. He’d been in and out of the funeral home for the last two weeks helping to arrange things for the service, and I’d found myself finding excuses to be in the same room with him. He was almost hypnotic.

“As I have stated multiple times,” Greenwood said with a sigh, “this is not a matter of who was closer to Mr. Tzarnavaras or who deserves it more. As he left no will, his estate can only be divided equally between claimants. Since his other children and grandchildren have not expressed interest in inheriting, you both stand to inherit half of the estate, if you would *just* sit down and decide on a division of the assets—”

“He will not get a penny!” Georgiana shrieked. “Over my dead body!”

“I would rather see the bank claim it all than one single thing fall into her greedy clutches!”

They both screamed at one another again and Mr. Greenwood, looking like he desperately wanted a nap, left them to it.

“Sorry,” I whispered, taking the spot next to him against the wall as he retreated from the fight. “Mr. Gould sent me up to help you, but I’m not sure there’s anything I can do.”

“It will take a miracle to make those two cooperate,” Greenwood said with a shrug. His hair was long, a bit past shoulder-length, and I had thought it was unprofessional at first. But tied back neatly with a black ribbon, it had the same kind of quaintly old-fashioned feeling as the rest of the funeral home. It gave him the aristocratic old-world charm of a Jane Austen character, only emphasized by how stiffly polite and put out he

appeared right now. “That or a blood relative with a more legitimate claim to the inheritance willing to make a bid for it. Mr. Tzarnavaras didn’t have any legal descendants, but he had plenty of extended family.”

“Yeah, Aunt Persephona assumed the estate would go to her until those two showed up,” I replied, watching Georgiana threaten Roland with an umbrella. “But apparently he didn’t actually have that much. Not enough to be worth fighting with those two, anyway.”

“He didn’t have much in savings,” Greenwood agreed. “But he did have some significant wealth tied up in his art collection. Not that I think either of them will know how to manage such a thing. Sorry, did you say Aunt Persephona? As in the deceased’s sister?”

He looked down at me with sudden interest, and I ignored the way my heart skipped a beat, laughing it off.

“Yeah, I’m Mr. Tzarnavaras’s great-niece,” I explained. “I’m close with my great-aunt but I never met her brother.”

“You know,” Greenwood pointed out, raising a dark eyebrow. “That does give you a stronger claim than his illegitimate children.”

“No, thank you,” I said quickly, waving my hands to ward him off. “I wouldn’t know what to do with an art collection any more than they would, and I’d rather avoid the fight. I’m just here to dress the corpse.”

“Indeed.” Greenwood, amused by my candor, folded his hands behind his back and a thoughtful half smile appeared on his lips. He leaned forward a fraction and a slip of fine blond hair escaped the ribbon to fall across his face. For a moment I thought I saw a mischievous spark in his green eyes. From this angle, the white seemed entirely subsumed in deep, verdant green. There was a wilderness there that I could easily lose myself in. I struggled to pull myself back as he kept speaking. “This is an unusual career choice for a young woman. What drew you to the funeral industry?”

“Aunt Percy got me the job,” I said honestly, a bit dazed by the stare. “I’m not sure I’ll do it forever. I’m saving up for post-grad to become a medical examiner. But in the meantime, the pay is nice and I like the excuse to dress up every day.”

Greenwood considered me for a moment, then suddenly pushed away from the wall and straightened his suit jacket.

“Follow me for a moment,” he said, and headed out into the hall, leaving Georgiana and Roland to their fight. I followed him without

thinking twice. It was a relief to get away from the screaming, even without a hot lawyer involved.

“What’s up?” I asked as he led me to one of the spare rooms farther down the hall.

“We’re keeping some of Mr. Tzarnavaras’s more valuable pieces here until the estate can be divided,” he explained, bowing at the waist to wave me into the room. “I thought you might like to see.”

Intrigued, I followed him inside. Several canvases stood by one wall, covered in linen sheets, which he removed one by one. The paintings were lovely—beautiful impressionist landscapes and few old classical portraits—though not really my style. However, one of the portraits caught my eye as Greenwood moved to open a slightly dusty chest in the corner.

“They’re all originals, of course,” Greenwood explained, his back to me as he sorted through the chest. “And some of them quite old. The artists aren’t especially notable, but the age alone is enough to make them valuable. A few are family heirlooms, as I understand it.”

I bent to look at the portrait, which lay on its side, tilting my head to see it properly. The subject was a man in a black velvet tunic and golden jewelry, standing before a bleak background and holding a tall, black candle in a strange silver cage. He was probably not that much older than me and, I realized, surprisingly familiar. His long blond hair could easily be mistaken for mine, though his hadn’t been straightened. His fell in heavy, golden waves. There was something in the face as well, and in those pitch-black eyes . . .

“Your ancestor, I believe.”

I jumped a little, realizing Greenwood stood next to me.

“Prince Aethon Tzarnavaras,” the lawyer went on, “painted, we believe, sometime in the fourteenth century. The artist is unknown, as is whatever country Aethon was a prince of. But, we do have this.”

He held out a long, ebony, wood box. I took it curiously, carefully lifting the lid, which moved soundlessly on fine, silver hinges. Within, nestled in deep black velvet, was the black candle in its silver cage.

“It appears to have been of some great importance,” Greenwood said as I marveled, “to have been featured in the portrait and passed down all this time. Go ahead, touch it. It’s not fragile.”

I almost did what he said immediately, but something in the eagerness of his voice made me pause.

“What’s your game here?” I asked, suspicious.

He smiled at me winningly. “Only hoping to spark your interest,” he confessed. “After all, if I could get you to make a case for inheriting your great-uncle’s estate, I would be spared the indignity of handing anything over to your odious cousins in the other room.”

I laughed, convinced.

“Yeah, I can’t blame you for that.” I closed the lid carefully, telling myself I imagined the ghost of disappointment crossing Greenwood’s face.

“They’ll only sell the collection,” Greenwood tried again. “These have been in your family for centuries. It would be an enormous shame to see them sold off to pay for Georgiana’s tacky designer purses or to fund another of Roland’s one-man plays.”

I looked at the art with a sigh. He was right, but I couldn’t. It’d only end up damaged or lost, crammed in my tiny apartment or, worse, in some storage facility.

“I’ll talk to Aunt Persephona about it,” I promised. “Maybe she’d be willing to fight Georgiana and Roland for them. It really would suck to see them sold.”

Greenwood looked like he might press the issue for a moment, but only smiled.

“That’s all I can ask,” he said genially, then checked his watch with a frown. “The service is going to start soon. I had better make one last attempt to wrangle the Sackville-Bagginses.”

The reference caught me off guard, startling a laugh from me, which pleased him. He offered me a hand and, when I took it, surprised me by pressing a kiss to the back of my fingers, brief and cool.

“I hope I’ll see you again soon, Miss Tzarnavaras,” he said.

“Vexa,” I said quickly. “Please.”

He pursed his lips to hide a smile and looked down, eyes bright through the dark frame of his lashes.

“Vexa,” he repeated. “One such as you should not be so free with her name.”

A strange thrill ran down my spine as he looked at me again, the power behind his gaze suddenly humming in the air. For no reason I could easily identify, both fear and excitement stirred in my blood.

But Greenwood only winked and in the next second was gone, slipping back out into the hall.

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CHAPTER 2

Left alone with the art, I tried and failed to understand what had just happened.

I shook my head to clear it. I needed to get back to the service. Aunt Percy should be there by now and perhaps answer some questions or offer a chance at salvation for the family heirlooms.

I knelt again to look at the portrait of Prince Aethon, turning it right side up. I heard the rumble of wheels as Uncle Ptolemy was rolled past the room to the chapel, but I was absorbed in staring at my distant ancestor. There was an undeniable family resemblance that made me certain Greenwood was right. But I was surprised no one had ever mentioned we were descended from royalty. That was exactly the kind of thing my parents would love to bring up at dinner parties. I could only assume they didn't know.

I recognized his name, not from any family tree, but from my embarrassingly long-lived fascination with Greek mythology. In the myths, there was a king called Aethon—a word which meant burning, consuming. He'd been cursed by the gods with an insatiable hunger that cost him his kingdom, caused him to betray his only family, and finally led him to devour himself like the alchemical Uroboros. Not an auspicious name for royalty. Perhaps that was why I'd never heard of him.

I caught the murmur of people passing the room and realized I'd delayed too long. Guests were walking into the chapel. I cursed under my breath and waited until the hall was empty. Once it was clear, I could make my way discreetly out of the art room and quietly sit in the back of the chapel once everyone else was inside.

I tapped my foot, waiting impatiently for things to quiet down and the few stragglers to finish lingering in the hall. As I leaned against the doorway, I “listened” to the chime of Uncle Ptolemy in the chapel, growing a little louder as the casket was opened. Below his, another quieter chime softly rang. I thought it was the bodies downstairs until I realized those were present as well, farther away.

This was close.

A dead mouse in the walls? I was usually good at tuning out animal death, an omnipresent, constant, water-harmonica hum that sounded like the song of the universe to me. But this was different.

I turned, following the sensation, curious, and realized it was in the room with me. The sound, I realized with a shock, came from the ebony wood box, which Mr. Greenwood had left sitting on top of the chest.

I approached the box without thinking, the chime growing louder in my head, drowning out all other thoughts. By the time I lifted the lid, it was deafening. My thoughts were dim static underneath the musical tone filling my head. The silver was cold as ice as I lifted the candle in its cage from the velvet lining. The candle, blacker than mere wax, pulled in all light, a hole in the space it filled. I reached through the bars, my fingers trembling, to touch the black void, as open and endless as any I had ever perceived within a corpse.

As soon as my bare skin touched the freezing darkness, the wick erupted into bright blue flame, an explosion that ripped through the room, blowing my hair back but touching nothing else.

Power surged within me like electricity under my flesh, burning and painful. I flailed for relief, my power lashing out instinctively. Blue fire filled my eyes and in the dark corners of every room a tall dark figure loomed unseen. Its empty gaze was on me—I realized it always had been. Its cold hand was on my heart and had never left since the first day it started beating. Death stood behind me as a physical presence, and I shook with fear of its unknowable intentions.

The fire dimmed. I stumbled back into myself, shaken and buzzing with more power than I’d ever experienced. I struggled to orient myself, but whatever senses allowed me to hear the dead were on high alert. I heard every mummified rat in the walls, every dried-out husk of every insect and lizard on every windowsill for a quarter mile. I sensed a lost house cat breathing its last under a porch two houses down, blood matted in its long

yellow fur. I perceived the five human corpses in the building with me, and the voids within them, which my power poured into like light into a black hole. I fought to hold it back, but I might as well have tried to stop a river with my hands. Power poured out of me like an overflowing dam. I wasn't enough to contain it.

The hot drip of wax on my thigh brought me back to my surroundings. I had fallen to my knees, but the lit candle remained steady in my grip, its blue flame flickering ominously. I set it down quickly on top of the ebony wood box, almost dropping it in my eagerness to be away from the thing. The intensity of the power flowing out of me ebbed the moment I stopped touching the candle, which was an immense relief, but I continued to sense the power I'd poured into Uncle Ptolemy, glowing like a coal in the dark. I stumbled unsteadily to my feet, numbly registering that I'd torn my tights, and made a beeline for the chapel.

The service was already underway as I lurched in through the back, gaining a few confused stares. The minister was finishing the eulogy, about to leave the pulpit to invite the mourners up to the casket. Bad idea. I'd put so much power into Uncle Ptolemy that he'd become the undead equivalent of a bottle rocket, completely out of control and mindlessly mimicking the physical habits of life. If no one stopped him, he'd climb out of the casket. I tried my best to pull the power out of him but, frankly, I'd never done it before. Usually, when siphoning off power, I put so little in that it burned out on its own after a few minutes. I'd never had to try and pull power out before, and it didn't seem like it wanted to budge.

"Vexa?"

Aunt Persephona caught my arm as I hurried through the pews at the front. She was a broad, matronly woman who looked best in all black, with kind eyes and exceptionally long dark hair. When loose, it hung all the way to her feet. Today it was bound up in braids under a dark veil.

"What happened?" she whispered urgently. "A wave of power washed over me, like Death himself walked among us."

"I'll explain later," I told her quickly. The minister stepped back for the pallbearers to open the casket. "Right now I have to—Oh, *shit*."

The minute the lock on the casket was released, the lid shot open under the force of Uncle Ptolemy sitting up like he'd been spring-loaded.

Terrified screams answered his spontaneous resurrection. Georgiana went pale as a ghost and fainted, falling limply into Roland's arms as he

stared, frozen. Before Ptolemy could turn and try to climb out of the coffin, I sprinted up the aisle straight for him. I planted a hand in the center of his chest, praying the power would go away as I shoved my dead great-uncle back into his casket and slammed the lid.

I held it down for a moment, afraid he'd resist, but no further attempt to escape was made. I turned around slowly to face the silent, staring, assembled mourners.

"I would like to sincerely apologize on behalf of the Rosenfield Funeral Home," I said quickly, buying time while I worked on an excuse. "Is everyone all right?"

A few confused murmurs answered me, assuring me no one was hurt. Aunt Percy stared at me, wide-eyed, knowing what had happened but not what to do about it.

"The process of decomposition releases gases into the body cavity," I explained, bullshitting for my life. "The trapped air can sometimes make the cadaver move or sit up or even make noises. It's startling but completely normal. You get very used to it in this line of work. The bodies downstairs are always jumping around. Some of them are livelier than they were before they died!"

A resounding silence answered my weak attempt at a joke, tinged with faint disapproval.

Too insensitive, Vexa. It was difficult to tell what normal people considered gauche when you spent your days painting corpses. I cleared my throat and leaned closer to the minister.

"May I suggest we continue the service with a closed casket?" I said hopefully. The minister, slightly bewildered, nodded and I breathed a sigh of relief before locking the casket and moving back down the aisle as calmly as possible. I could only hope Uncle Ptolemy didn't get too rowdy in there until the service ended and I could figure out a way to put him back to rest.

In the meantime, I hauled ass to the back of the chapel.

"What in Sam Hill was that?" Mr. Gould stood near the chapel door, ashen and close to fainting alongside Georgiana. "I've been in this business all my life and I have *never* seen a body do that."

"It must have been gasses, right?" I said quickly. "I mean, what else could it be?"

“Damn if I know,” Gould replied, continuing to stare at the casket, mystified, as the service restarted somewhat awkwardly.

I took advantage of his perplexed inattention to make a break for the door. I was barely two steps out into the hall before Aunt Persephona hurried up to walk beside me.

“Vexa, honey,” she said, her voice quiet but even . . . in the way I recognized she was upset but trying hard to be understanding about it. “Did you raise my brother?”

“Not intentionally,” I said quickly, my face turning red.

“Vexa.”

“I swear! It was this thing—”

“Thing?”

“Some old candle of Uncle Ptolemy’s! His lawyer was showing me the art Georgiana and Roland are fighting over, and when I touched it, my powers went haywire!”

“What?” Aunt Percy pulled up short. “Why would Tolly have something that could do that? He didn’t even have the gift!”

“I don’t know!” I said impatiently. “And it doesn’t matter right now.”

“I rather think it does.”

“Correction. It doesn’t matter as much as the *four other bodies running around in the prep room right now.*”

Persephona turned white as a sheet, then hurried to the prep room a step ahead of me.

CHAPTER 3

Only two of the four bodies had managed to get out of their fridge drawers.

Mr. Delacey and Ms. Duffy ambled blindly around the prep room in the way of the mindless undead. Unless directed by someone with the gift, *like me*, resurrected corpses wandered, clumsily trying to imitate instinctual actions and habits from life.

Eating was a popular one.

They'd try to chew on anything they could get their hands on, like toddlers, though they weren't particularly good at swallowing. They'd gesture, move their mouths like they talked, though when they managed to produce sound, it was mostly windy wheezing or moans that had more to do with the gasses of decomposition than speech.

Mr. Delacey had apparently been a fan of golfing when alive. I watched him chew on a makeup brush for a few seconds, drop it, stumble forward two steps, and perform a perfect driving swing. Ms. Duffy was fixated on a pan that normally held surgical tools, currently scattered all over the prep room floor. She'd gnaw on a corner of it, shuffle a bit, and then hold it to her chest while rocking back and forth. The other two, in their drawers, just kicked and clattered in their ungainly attempts to escape.

"Do you know how to put them down?" I asked Aunt Persephona, hurrying to clean up the spilled tools, rescuing a scalpel from Mr. Delacey's weak, dazed grip. The undead weren't dangerous, at least not without direction to be so. They didn't even know anyone else was there. There was nothing in them *capable* of knowing someone else was there. They were just a bundle of unconscious biological reactions, muscles twitching and organs spasming. An occasional neuron fired and hit some ingrained

behavior done so many times it was engraved in the unconscious portion of their brains. But there was no will, no awareness, no actual person. You could make a corpse move again. But you couldn't bring a person back to life.

"Don't you know how to do that?" Aunt Percy replied, staring at Ms. Duffy as she cuddled her tray.

"You never taught me," I pointed out, frustrated. "And I've never needed it before! I never put this much power in!"

I reached for the tray in Ms. Duffy's arms and was surprised when I met resistance. She had both arms around it and held on with unusual strength. I tugged harder, but she clung to it, resilient. Before I attempted to yank on it again, Persephona put a hand on my shoulder to stop me.

"Ms. Duffy lived down the road from me," she explained, looking sadly at the old woman. "Eleven children. More grandkids than I could count."

Ms. Duffy held the tray to her chest, rocking back and forth, and I realized belatedly she was trying to nurse it. Shame twisted my stomach.

"I didn't mean to bring any of them back," I tried to explain. "I couldn't help it. There was so much power, I had to put it somewhere or it would have burned me alive."

Aunt Percy nodded solemnly and patted my arm. "Let's just get these people back to their rest," she said. "Now, you've always been stronger than me. I've never managed to raise a single person, let alone five at once. But I've raised and put down a small animal or two. It can't be much different."

She cleared her throat, stretched out her hands, and I experienced with more clarity than ever before, the reaching tendril of her powers, which grew like green shoots and climbing ivy to twine around the void at the center of Ms. Duffy.

"Try to visualize the power dissolving," she said. "Like sugar into tea. Like rain falling on the garden. You can't take it back into you once it's been a part of them. You just have to wash it away."

That explained why it hadn't been working for me earlier. I watched her work, and I almost saw the power beginning to thin and swirl, dispersing like smoke.

Sweat beaded on Aunt Persephona's forehead and a moment later she dropped her arms, breathing heavily. Ms. Duffy was left standing there. Aunt Percy pursed her lips, looking desperately bitter for a moment, then sighed and let go of her magic.

“Do you think you have the idea of it?” she asked.

“Yeah, I think so,” I said, hoping it wasn’t a lie. “Let me give it a shot.”

I pulled open the drawers they’d both been in and reached out with my power to snag first Ms. Duffy, then Mr. Delacey. Giving the undead direction was fairly easy. You had to get inside their heads and think what you wanted them to do. Maybe that’s less easy than it sounds, but as long as your orders weren’t too vague or complicated, it worked. Walk over here and lay down was pretty straightforward, but I needed to break it down into simpler commands like, “Raise your leg onto the table,” and “Shift your weight onto your hand,” which made controlling more than one at a time a nightmare.

Once they were both settled on their tables and not in danger of falling on the floor and having to be schlepped around once they were dead again, I began to do as Persephona had demonstrated, reaching out to twine my power around the void which continuously hummed with my energy.

I frowned, trying to think dissolving thoughts.

Sugar in tea.

Rain on a garden, washing away the dust.

But I had trouble holding onto the image. I don’t really drink tea. I’m more of a black coffee girl. And I’ve never been as into gardening as my aunt, who spent practically all her time digging in her flower beds and pottering around in her greenhouse. I spent most of my time here, washing and dressing corpses and dealing with the bereaved.

I’d cleaned and prepared these two along with Mr. Gould not that long ago. Now there was something I could visualize. Something I’d done practically every day for so long that if I was ever resurrected, I’d probably just keep doing it like Mr. Delacey with his golf swing.

I washed the energy away from Ms. Duffy like I’d washed the dirt and old makeup and embalming fluid from her skin. With thorough and delicate care, I rinsed away all traces of my energy.

“There,” Aunt Persephona said as Ms. Duffy relaxed, a final breath sighing out of her. “I knew you could do it.”

“One down,” I said, gently prying the metal tray out of Ms. Duffy’s now unresisting arms. “Three to go.”

It went faster now that I knew the trick of it, but by the time I’d put all four down, the memorial upstairs was winding down.

“There you are!” Mr. Gould appeared in the door just as I finished cleaning up the last of the mess the corpses had made stumbling around. “You missed the whole service. Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” I said quickly. “I’m just, uh, taking it harder than I thought, I guess. Seeing him sit up like that shook me a little.”

Gould nodded sagely.

“Losing a family member can be difficult, even if we don’t know them well,” he said. “It’s a potent reminder of our own mortality.”

“Nothing a good cry and some of my blackberry cobbler won’t fix,” Aunt Percy added, patting me on the shoulder.

“If you’d like a last chance to say goodbye,” Gould said, “the chapel has been cleared and we’re ready to wheel him out to the hearse.”

“Thank you,” I told him, straightening up. “I’ll take care of it.”

“I’ll go ahead and get the car ready,” Gould said with his trademark sympathetic smile and left us alone. I sighed and headed to the stairs.

“Come on,” I said, waving to Aunt Percy. “Let’s pay our last respects to Uncle Ptolemy.”

Back in the chapel, we hesitated in front of the coffin.

“I’m sorry you never got to meet him,” Aunt Persephona said with a sigh. “My brother was an interesting man. Difficult sometimes. After your father cut ties with the family, your uncle wouldn’t have anything to do with your parents. And when I insisted on continuing to associate with them, he wouldn’t have anything to do with me, either. To be honest, we’d been on the outs for years. It was just the final straw.”

I struggled with a brief, strange feeling of guilt. My mother had never approved of the Tzarnavaras’s somewhat sinister reputation. You couldn’t have a family as old as ours without some weirdness following them. Add in our talent for necromancy and, despite all efforts to secrecy, someone was bound to notice we weren’t quite normal.

Luckily for my mother, my father had been eager to disavow his family history and fully embrace white, suburban, yuppie mediocrity. His estrangement had become official when I was born and my parents decided they didn’t want my father’s family “influencing” me. Most of the family had grudgingly kept their distance. Aunt Persephona hadn’t. She’d sensed the power in me young and decided it was her responsibility to make sure I knew exactly who and what I was. She’d shown up at my parent’s door

relentlessly for little “surprise visits” until they’d finally caved and agreed to holidays and an exclusive babysitting arrangement.

Some of my earliest memories were of raising dead beetles and anoles in her garden on summer afternoons. In particular, I remembered the look on her face the first time I’d brought back a songbird that had crashed into her back window, something she’d struggled to master for years. I was six at the time. She’d been gray and old before she managed anything as big as a house cat. Meanwhile, I’d realized by sophomore year that I needed a job with regular access to dead bodies, when my built-up and uncontrollable powers resurrected all the frogs we were supposed to dissect in AP biology.

I stayed quiet for a while, letting Persephona have a moment. This was her brother. And I was a little worried about trying to put him back down. The corpses downstairs had been more powered up and active than I’d ever seen, and they’d been much farther away from me. I was a little unsure what to expect from Uncle Ptolemy.

When Persephona gave me a small nod of permission, I stepped forward to unlock the casket again. She turned her back, shoulders shaking, and I decided not to comment, giving her privacy as I tended to Ptolemy.

As soon as I opened the casket, he sat up again, though not as forcefully as he had the first time. His jaw dropped open with a long, pungent sigh, and I jumped a little as several cotton balls tumbled out. He’d managed to break the thread suturing his mouth closed. The undead, without specific direction, usually weren’t very strong. They didn’t have the capacity to focus on things that took effort on their own.

“All right,” I said, shaking off my nerves and reaching for his shoulder. “Let’s just lay back down, first of all.”

I started to push him back and a nervous chill crept up my spine when he resisted. Stiffly, the dead eighty-year-old sat stubbornly where he was, slowly exhaling noxious corpse breaths. I pushed harder, until Ptolemy put a hand over mine to stop me. I yelped in surprise and pulled away, and before I could dismiss it as a reflexive gesture, the corpse of my great uncle turned to face me, eyes darting behind his glued shut eyelids. I was cognizant of the power I’d poured into him, white-hot and boiling over. It swelled so brightly, it was blinding and deafening.

And then, with no more ceremony than that, Ptolemy spoke. “The candle,” he said, his voice little more than a rush of dark wind. “Protect the candle. He must not have it.”

I stared, stunned by the impossibility of what I heard.

“Tolly?” Aunt Persephona said behind me, her voice trembling.

In yet another impossibility, Ptolemy smiled at his sister and spoke slowly and deliberately.

“I had always already forgiven you.”

And just like that, the energy within him burned out like a firework. He fell back into his casket as though he'd never risen to begin with.

For a moment my aunt and I just stood there, silently processing. Then I heard Percy sob, shoulders shaking. She buried her face in her hands, crying hard. I didn't know what Ptolemy had forgiven her for. I was preoccupied with the fact that everything I knew about my powers and how they worked had just abruptly changed. I rushed away, heart racing.

There was one thing I understood about Ptolemy's impossible message. The candle that had caused all this was important. I didn't know who I was protecting it from, but I sure as hell wasn't going to leave it sitting around to end up in the clutches of Georgiana or Roland.

It was exactly where I'd left it on top of its box in the storage room. It had remained lit, blue flame burning steadily. I hesitated to touch it for a moment but finally forced my fingers forward, wincing. The moment my fingers touched the silver my powers spiked, the sudden increase in sensory information like having the lights turned on after standing in the dark for an hour. But there was no rush of wild power, if only because I was prepared to clamp down on it this time. Dazed, I focused enough to figure out what to do. I needed some way to carry this crazy thing. But I couldn't put it back in the box while it was still lit, could I? I looked warily at the strange blue flame and had a deep, instinctive sense that I should not, under any circumstances, try to blow it out. Curious, I ran a finger through the flame. It was warm, like standing in sunlight or holding your hand over the stove, but it didn't burn, no matter how long I kept my hand there. Maybe it wouldn't burn the box either?

Cautiously, I placed the candle in the velvet lining. The flame turned to remain vertical, but otherwise didn't react, not even to sputter. The velvet didn't smoke or catch or even grow warm. Prepared for the worst, I closed the lid, but whatever magic this candle had prevented it from becoming flammable.

I tucked the box under my arm and hurried back to the chapel. Aunt Persephona met me at the door.

“The pallbearers are taking Ptolemy to the hearse,” she said. “Mr. Gould came in to check on us, and I told him you were too overwhelmed. He said you could take the day off, if you needed. He could handle the remaining services himself.”

“Good,” I said, relieved. “I’m going to need it to figure out what the hell just happened.”

I headed for the side door of the building to avoid the funeral procession coming together at the back. My car was parked in the back lot, anyway. But as I stepped into the parking lot, I hesitated, then turned left. My senses continued to be weirdly heightened by my proximity to the candle. The presence of death surrounded me, lingering on a threshold nearby, not quite committed yet.

“Vexa!”

Aunt Persephona followed me, struggling to keep up as I climbed over a low hedge separating the funeral parlor’s lot from the yard next door. I marched past their rusty barbecue grill and half-finished treehouse to the next yard.

“Go on ahead to the graveyard,” I told my aunt. “I’ll be fine.”

“What are you planning to do?” she asked, hesitating as I dropped to my knees beside a raised deck.

“First,” I said, setting the box with the candle beside me as I leaned into the dark crawl space beneath the porch, searching blindly. “I’m going to take this cat to the vet.”

I emerged a second later, holding a limp wet bundle of dark fur. The cat was so weak, it couldn’t even fight back, just yowl in pain and fear as my aunt offered me a shawl to wrap it in. It was close to death, but it stubbornly hung on. I held it close, encouraging it to stay here just a little longer. It was badly hurt. The vet might not be able to do much but put it down. But at least it would die peacefully and not in pain.

“Then,” I said, picking up the box in my other hand and standing up, “I’m going to figure out what the hell is going on.”

“Give the poor thing here,” Persephona said sadly. “The vet isn’t far from here. I’ll drop it off on my way to the graveyard. You should get home. I don’t think that thing should be out in the open.”

“Thank you,” I said, putting the cat into my aunt’s arms. “You’re probably right.”

“I may know something about whatever it is,” she added, looking at the box strangely. “I’ll call you about it later. Just get it home and hide it.”

“Any idea what we’re hiding it from?” I asked, but she just shook her head.

“Nothing good, I can assure you of that much. Ptolemy always took a dim view of the gift. He wouldn’t come back from the dead for nothing.”

I nodded in understanding, said my goodbyes quickly, and headed back to my car, watching Persephona drive off to the vet. I pulled out, driving quickly back to my apartment, my mind racing with questions and fears. Talking undead, magic candles, ancient princes—my life had always been weird but this was a whole new level. Whatever was going on, I thought, looking at the ebony box sitting in the passenger’s seat, I was going to protect this candle. Ptolemy’s words were enough to convince me. But it was more—some kind of connection, like a spider web, hung between me and the flame. Whatever happened to it, I suspected would happen to me also. I’d just have to be extra careful with it.

A half a second later, the world exploded into glass and pain as a car I never even saw ran a red light at an intersection and slammed directly into the passenger side of the car.

CHAPTER 4

For what felt like a small eternity, my whole world spun, shrieking metal.

My car spun across the intersection and was clipped by a second vehicle as it swerved to try and get out of the way, sending me spinning the other way and slamming me into the console, the seat belt cutting into me hard enough to draw blood.

I skidded at last into a ditch, my entire body screaming in pain, particularly my head where it had slammed into my window. The world continued to spin long after I knew the car had stopped. I slipped in and out of darkness, fighting to stay conscious.

I heard the crunch of glass as someone knocked away the shattered glass in the passenger side window. Through the insistent beat of unconsciousness which matched my heart hammering in my ears, I watched someone reach through the window to take the ebony wood box from the seat. Outrage was too much for me. I could only stare, perplexed and in pain, and let the darkness take me.

I woke next, only for a moment and much later, to the sound of someone calling out to me. I heard the shriek of metal as my door was wrenched open, and I blinked blearily as an angel leaned over me.

I'd never believed in angels or the Christian afterlife in general. My existence ran counter to all that. But the person leaning over me right now certainly looked like an angel. He had a broad jaw and brown hair, curly as a cherub by Raphael. His eyes were honey in the light, warm and reassuring. His dark brows were set with concern and his hands were infinitely gentle. He asked me something but I was having a lot of difficulty focusing. I wondered what happened to necromancers when they died.

He kept talking to me, the murmur of his voice a low, soothing tone that left echoes of a cello suite by Bach playing in my dazed head. Comparing him endlessly to all the loveliest things I'd ever seen was all I was capable of doing. I filled an imaginary museum with things inspired by him. Classical sculptures, celestial arias, sweeping vistas, and the works of the great masters. I may have had a head injury, but damn if I didn't want to stay right there in the car, listening to him forever.

He decided it was safe to move me and put his arms around me, removing my seat belt and lifting me free of the wreckage of my car. I might have been more excited about being held, considering how awed I was by his face, but being moved was agonizing and I swiftly lost my ability to think about anything except wanting the pain to stop.

It ebbed when he lay me in the back of an ambulance and lessened further when his partner fitted me with an IV drip of painkillers. I slipped away into darkness again, then back to him holding my hand and saying my name. He had my driver's license in his hand.

“Vex, uh, Vexatious? That can't be right, can it? Um, Miss Tzarnavaras? Can you hear me?”

I nodded and regretted it as my neck threatened mutiny.

“Try not to move,” he said gently. “You were in a car accident.”

“Not an accident,” I croaked. Even through my confusion, I knew that much. The angel blinked, surprised, and I fought past my heavy tongue and dry throat to elaborate. “Hit me. On purpose. Took my thing.”

“Thing?”

I couldn't find the words. I tried to gesture the shape of the box and the candle but it hurt.

“We'll find your thing,” the angel promised. “Just try not to move.”

“Berni Dee.”

“What's that?”

“Berni David?” This may be the head injury talking, but he looked like Bernini's David. It was very important to me that he knew this. More important, even, than my missing thing.

He laughed, smiling at me. The son of a bitch had dimples.

“Uh, no, I usually get Michelangelo's David actually.” The humor in his voice was infectious.

I waved a dismissive hand. Did I say that part about Bernini out loud? I can't remember or care.

“Michelangelo’s David is a twink,” I said, my voice slightly slurred but the words came easier. “You’ve got the raw heroic magnetism of Bernini. And the hair.”

“Raw heroic magnetism,” he repeated raising an eyebrow. “Yeah, you’re definitely concussed. Can you answer a few questions for me?”

“Are they about art history?” I asked. “Because I’m reliving everything I ever learned in my junior AP art course every time I look at your face.”

“How about we start with what year it is?”

I answered his string of easy questions for determining cognitive function, bewildered but getting more lucid by the moment and angrier as I realized what had happened. Someone had tried to kill me! Someone had straight up tried to murder me in order to steal the candle! Was it Georgiana? I wouldn't put it past the bitch. But no, she would definitely be at the graveyard, trying to prove she was the only one who deserved an inheritance. She didn't know I'd taken the candle or that it was even important. No one did except me and Aunt Persephona. Was it the mysterious “him” Ptolemy had warned me about? Had I failed already?

I pulled my focus back to the angel—the EMT—who asked me who the president was, trying to figure out if I had a concussion. I gave him the correct answers with growing impatience, as well as the ones that followed regarding if I was having any pain breathing and if I had feeling in my toes.

“I think I'm fine,” I told him, more alert now and beginning to be deeply embarrassed about what I'd said while dazed. “Sore as hell, but I'm pretty sure I'm okay.”

“Well I'm pretty sure you got your shit kicked in there,” he replied with a charmingly crooked smile. “Judging by what was left of your car, you got T-boned by a truck. Hit and run. That can do a lot of damage you can't feel right away.”

“Seriously,” I said, sitting up despite both he and his partner urging me not to. My neck sent bolts of pain down my back and every part of me ached, but other than that I was okay. “I'm all right, and I really don't have time or money for a hospital visit right now. Is there any chance you could just drop me off at home?”

“You really need to get checked out at the emergency room,” the angel solemnly insisted. “If you fractured a vertebrae and end up moving wrong and damaging it further, you could end up paralyzed.”

“I’m fine,” I insisted again, though I was less confident now. “And I definitely can’t afford a taxi home from the hospital. You can just let me off here if that’s easier for you. Tell ‘em I hit you and escaped.”

He chuckled and I tried to ignore the way my heart melted.

“How about this?” he suggested. “Let us take you to the emergency room, and I’ll give you a ride home as soon as you’re released. Sound good? The alternative is I handcuff you to the bed because the concussion has made you loopy.”

I frowned, knowing he had me pinned, and gave up. I wasn’t going to convince anyone of my sobriety after I’d just spent several minutes waxing poetic about their resemblance to classical sculpture.

“Fine,” I said. “But only because you probably saved my life or something.”

He smiled at me again.

“Ethan Hewitt,” he introduced himself.

“Vexa Tzarnavaras.”

“That’s really your name?”

“Yeah, my family is weird. Don’t ask.”

Several hours later, well past dinner time, I was finally free of the emergency room. As I’d hoped, I was mostly fine. My head needed staples from where I’d hit the window. I had some painful whiplash and a lot of ugly bruises and a few lacerations from the broken glass. But no broken bones or major injuries, which was a relief because I was already going to have a hard-enough time paying for this. Not to mention car repairs . . . I rubbed my aching head, crowded with worries about the missing candle and my vanishing finances. I’d had a headache since I woke up that no amount of painkillers had managed to erase, though the Tylenol with hydrocodone they’d given me took the edge off, if not knock my ass out.

Lost in my own head, I almost didn’t notice Ethan standing up to greet me as I entered the waiting room.

“You waited for me?” I asked, surprised.

“Of course,” Ethan replied with a friendly smile. “I promised you a ride home, remember?”

“I figured you were just trying to placate a crazy person,” I confessed. “I was just going to call my parents and deal with their flip out.”

“You’ve got a head injury,” Ethan said, pushing the glass doors of the emergency room. “If there’s ever been a good excuse for avoiding parental

flip outs, that's one. Come on, my car is parked right out here.”

I followed him because I couldn't think of a good reason not to. He was gorgeous, and a paramedic, which probably meant he was at least a half-decent guy. Even if he wasn't, I was fairly confident in my ability to take care of myself against normal, non-necromantic dudes.

He had a Jeep, the kind with the heavy-duty tires and the rack for bikes or camping equipment. It was older and battered but in good shape. He helped me up into the passenger seat before he climbed into his own. I buckled myself in, grimacing as the belt dragged over the bandages where my seat belt had earlier tried to fuse with my collarbone. As soon as the car started, I tensed up, which my bruised muscles didn't appreciate. Ethan noticed and smiled sympathetically as he pulled out of the hospital parking lot.

“It's normal to be stressed out by cars for a while,” he said. “Don't worry about it. Just give it a few days.”

“I'm fine,” I lied. “It's just been a long day.”

“Hey, it could have been a lot shorter,” Ethan reminded me, and I laughed.

“Yeah, true,” I agreed. “Nonetheless, I'm looking forward to just going to bed.”

“That's a good idea,” he confirmed. “Those painkillers should knock you out. I'd call into work and let your parents know what's up before you take it because you won't be waking up before noon tomorrow, I promise.”

“Good to know,” I told him. Silence fell for a moment. I leaned against the cold glass of the passenger window, closed my eyes, and tried to stop my stomach clenching every time he tapped the breaks. “Thanks for the ride, by the way. You really didn't need to. I hope you're not missing work for me.”

“It's not a big deal,” Ethan assured me. “My partner doesn't mind covering for me for an hour, and the address you gave me isn't that far from the hospital. Besides, I was worried about you.”

That set off a storm of butterflies in my stomach.

“Which reminds me,” he said, as I smothered my nerves. “Did you find your thing?”

“My thing?” I repeated, confused.

“When I first pulled you out of the wreck,” he said, “you were talking about someone taking your thing. You think you were hit intentionally?”

Why? Judging by the fact that you didn't make a statement to the police while you were at the hospital, I figured you must have changed your mind."

"Oh." I barely remembered the first half of the ambulance ride. And considering I couldn't really explain why I'd had the candle in the first place without explaining why I'd taken it from the funeral home, talking to the police probably wasn't a good idea. "Yeah, yeah I found it. I was, uh, pretty out of it when you picked me up."

"Does that mean you weren't serious when you said I had raw heroic magnetism?" he asked, pouting as though I'd wounded him. My face burned as I tried to think of a way to salvage my pride. Which would be a lot easier if he wasn't staring at me with those big, brown, puppy-dog eyes.

"Eyes on the road, hot stuff," I told him, half to stop my heart from racing, half because it genuinely made me nervous. He'd been making an obvious effort to drive slowly and carefully for me, but I was still on edge. "If you get me into a second car accident today, I'll downgrade you from Bernini to Donatello."

"I'm going to be honest," Ethan said with a sheepish grin, "the only Donatello I know is the turtle. Not sure who Bernini is, either."

"Disappointing," I said with a small laugh. "But not unusual. Of the four best David statues, Bernini is my favorite. Donatello's I don't care for as much. Verrocchio's gets extra points because the model was supposedly a young Da Vinci."

"Da Vinci!" he said excitedly. "I know that one!"

I laughed, some of the tension of the day easing off.

"You know," I said after a moment, deciding to go for it, "there's a copy of Donatello's David at the Slater Museum in Norwich. I've never been to see it, but I hear it's pretty great."

"I'll have to check it out sometime," he said with a knowing smile. "Apparently my art history knowledge could use some improvement."

"Maybe I could show you around?" I suggested, my heart beating a little too fast. "Tell you all the cool info too scandalous to put on the museum tour."

He bit his lip and my heart sank at the conflicted look on his face.

"Listen," he said, "you're gorgeous and also smarter than me, which is exciting as hell. But you've also just been through a major trauma and

you're probably not in the best state of mind to be getting into a . . . thing with anyone."

"It's not a thing," I said, stung. "One date is not a thing."

"I know, I know," he said taking one hand off the wheel to make placating gestures. "But this isn't the first time I've pulled a girl out of a wreck and had her decide it's meant to be. It doesn't end well for either of us. And I don't want to be the kind of guy who takes advantage of someone while they're emotionally compromised."

"This isn't that," I said a little more sharply, shame burning under my skin, worried he was right.

"Maybe it isn't," he said quickly. "I'd sure as hell love it if it isn't. I'm just saying you're not in a position to be making an informed decision right now."

I looked away, a bitter taste in my mouth. I'd recognize how reasonable he was being later, but at the moment, I felt like an undesirable idiot. I wanted to dig a hole, bury myself, and never emerge.

It wasn't much farther and we drove the last few minutes in relative silence. I pointed out the turn to my apartment, and he pulled into my driveway, turning off the Jeep.

"Thanks for the ride," I said, terse with embarrassment, opening the door and sliding carefully out, trying to hide my wince at the pain it caused my battered muscles. "And, you know, everything else."

"Don't mention it," Ethan said with a smile. "And hey, give it a week or so, and if you still want to check out that museum, maybe give me a call."

I swallowed my heart as it jumped into my throat.

"I'll think about it," I said with a shrug, deciding to play it off. "But don't get your hopes up. I don't know if I can be seen with a guy who doesn't know his Renaissance masters from his Ninja turtles."

He laughed, shaking his head.

"I suppose I deserved that," he said, his crooked smile making my heart skip a beat again despite everything. "Get some rest. Maybe I'll hear from you in a week."

"Maybe," I agreed, waved, and shut the car door. He waited until I was inside to drive away, a small gesture but one I appreciated, considering how late it was and that my neighborhood was not great. He really did seem like a nice guy. Which made it all the more disappointing that I'd so thoroughly fucked things up.

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CHAPTER 5

I lived in half of what was once a pretty nice colonial, which had been turned into a duplex and not been well maintained over the years. However, it was better than an apartment building. Apartments around here tended to be permanently overstuffed with college students attending UCONN. And I didn't have to share it with a roommate.

This made up for the slightly rundown neighborhood, the numerous structural issues, and the occasionally unbearable neighbors. The current neighbors, a struggling young couple with four retail jobs between them and a three-year-old who spent most of his time at daycare, were vastly preferable to the noisy meth heads who'd been evicted about a year ago.

When they'd moved in, the young couple had a dog, a huge shaggy black mutt that I'd pegged for part wolfhound or overgrown Airedale. As I shuffled into my house, locking the door behind me, I realized why I hadn't seen the dog around in a while. My newly heightened powers heard the poor dog's bones, buried under the big tree in their half of the backyard. My powers couldn't tell me cause of death, but I'd take a guess it was probably a car. It had been notorious for escaping the yard and wandering the neighborhood while its owners were at work, and our road was a busy one.

Mildly unsettled by how I suffered the animal's death despite it being on the edge of my usual range for sensing human death, I headed for the bathroom, focusing on something else. I needed a shower. I smelled like burning car and hospital. I mentally downgraded to a bath, remembering I wasn't allowed to get my staples wet for twenty-four hours. Grumbling, I shouldered my way into the bathroom and immediately froze as I saw myself in the mirror.

Jesus Christ, I thought, grimacing at my frazzled hair, melted makeup, and ruined dress. No wonder Ethan had turned me down. I looked like—well, like I'd just been in a car accident. I was now even more embarrassed about the whole encounter than before. Great. What a fucking day.

I soaked in the tub, letting the hot water soothe my abused muscles, turning over my worries about the candle. It was upsetting to have lost the candle and not just because Uncle Ptolemy had come back from the dead specifically to tell me to keep it safe. There was a weird, phantom limb sensation to not having it in reach, throbbing in time with my persistent dull headache. It was *supposed* to be with me. Its absence was like a missing tooth, a strangely aching gap.

I turned, reaching for the body wash and the tingling sensation grew stronger. I realized for the first time this was a genuine physical sensation, not just a psychosomatic reaction to my guilt at losing the candle. I frowned, sitting up a little higher in the bath and did a slow radar sweep, flinching as the tingle grew perceptibly stronger when my head was turned roughly west. I pressed my lips together, wondering if it might be some kind of damage to my neck the ER had missed, made worse when I turned my head a certain way.

Before I could probe any further, my cell phone buzzed loudly. I'd left it sitting on the sink and I winced as it vibrated off the edge and crashed to the vinyl tile floor.

I stretched over the side of the tub to retrieve it, eyes widening as I recognized Aunt Persephona's number.

"Thank God!" she said as I picked up. "Or whoever necromancers pray to. I've been trying to call you since this afternoon!"

"Sorry," I said immediately. "I haven't even seen the missed calls yet. Some . . . stuff happened."

"What kind of stuff?" Percy asked, sounding worried.

"In a minute," I assured her, not ready to have that conversation yet. "How's the cat?"

"The vet said she'll live," she said, still sounding worried but relenting for now. "She was definitely clipped by a car and might lose a leg, but if she makes it through the night, they think she'll be okay. No sign of the owners unfortunately. No collar and she wasn't chipped. This is why I'm always saying cats should be indoor pets only! Between dogs, cars,

malicious humans, FIV, ticks, hawks, coyotes, and bobcats, they don't stand a chance! Not to mention they're—"

"They're terrible for the environment, I know," I said, smiling a little. "I've heard this lecture before."

"It just drives me up a tree, Vexa. They're such sweet creatures. They deserve better."

"I know. Was the funeral okay?"

"Oh, yes, the graveside service was beautiful," she said, her voice softening. "Ptolemy would have hated it. If he'd had his way there would have been whiskey and professional clowns. He would have hated to go to his grave without a scandal."

"Well, hopefully sitting up in his coffin during his own viewing was enough of an incident to appease him," I said with a small laugh.

"Oh, true. He would have loved that. Maybe that's why he came back enough to speak. I've never seen anything like it in all my life. I've read about people with the gift centuries ago managing partial true resurrections, but only with incredible sacrifice. Whatever it was you touched, that candle thing of Tolly's, it must be immensely powerful."

"About that," I said with a deep breath, realizing I was out of excuses not to talk about it. "Ptolemy's candle? I . . . lost it."

"What?"

I winced at the near shriek on the other end of the phone.

"When? How?"

"Practically right after we split up," I admitted. "Someone hit my car. Intentionally, I think."

"Are you all right?!"

"Yeah, yeah, I went to the emergency room. I'm banged up but nothing serious. But while I was dazed, someone reached into the car and took the candle."

"Why didn't you call me earlier?" Percy sounded like she was close to hyperventilating. "Do your parents know? How did you get home from the hospital? Vexa!"

"I know, I know," I said, trying to calm her down. "I'm sorry. I was kind of overwhelmed. I should have called."

Aunt Persephona was silent for a long moment, working to get her feelings under control.

“We will talk more about this later,” she said with a sigh. “For now, I did some research into the candle. I didn’t have much to go off of, but I did my best.”

“Where do you even start to look something like that up?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I started with the books my father left me,” Persephona explained, and I heard the shuffle of pages as she spoke. “He didn’t have the gift, but his mother did. She passed down the books her father gave to her, which were given to him by some other gifted ancestor. Traditionally, they go to the person in the family with the strongest gift when the previous owner passes on.”

“What are they?” I asked, curious.

“Records, histories, rules, and rituals. You’ve seen them before, you know. I had you read from one of them when you were smaller. A handwritten primer with exercises to help young children control their gifts. My great-great-grandmother wrote it herself.”

“I do kind of remember,” I said, squinting as I recalled vague images of sitting at her kitchen table with a thin and worn black journal, struggling to understand archaically worded meditations on directing your energy.

“It’s a good stack of books on the family history and practice,” she said. “I’ve read all of them a dozen times probably. But most of the family stuff appeared to be more tedious than you’d be interested in, and the rituals and practices were a bit . . . Well, considering you’re the first of us in a few generations who could probably put those rituals to genuine use, I thought I’d wait till you were older and more stable before I introduced you to those.”

“Aunt Percy,” I said, a bit offended. “I’m twenty-seven. I make my own car payments and everything.”

“You’re still so young,” Persephona said fondly. “You haven’t faced any real hardship yet. If you lost your job or got evicted or found out your boyfriend had cheated on you tomorrow, I didn’t want you to have the ability to throw a zombie army at your problems.”

“A zombie army?” I asked pointedly. “That’s a possibility?”

“Vexa.”

“I’m just saying it would have been a lot harder for someone to hit me with a car earlier if I’d had a zombie army!”

Persephona sighed impatiently.

“As I was saying. I didn't have very much to go on, but I assumed an artifact capable of magnifying power that way must have been mentioned in the histories. Unfortunately, I haven't found much more than mentions . . . references to the Candle of the Covenant. Apparently it's been in the family since time immemorial, passed down to the descendant with the strongest gift alongside the books. But it appears to have been lost several generations ago. I'd never even heard of it. I can't for the life of me fathom how Tolly got a hold of it.”

“He had some other things, too,” I told her. “A chest full of stuff and a bunch of art. A portrait of this guy, Prince Aethon Tzarnavaras, holding the candle.”

“Really?” I heard the sudden excitement in Percy's voice. “A portrait of Prince Aethon? He's supposed to be the source of the gift in our family! A fascinating and incredibly powerful man.”

“Then why haven't I ever heard of him?” I asked with a frown.

“Oh, well, supposedly he misused his gift,” Aunt Persephona said dismissively. “Touched the forbidden, meddled in the affairs of the gods, you know how they were back then. Whatever he did was so scandalous the family disavowed him entirely. Struck all mention of him from the histories. I had to find out about him from contemporary historical sources.”

Remembering the intense dark eyes of the man in the portrait, I imagined him meddling in the affairs of the gods.

“Uncle Ptolemy's lawyer wanted me to encourage you to make a bid for the inheritance,” I told her. “He says you have a better claim than Georgiana and Roland. And if he was hiding anything else like the candle, it's probably better if it stays in the family.”

“Yes, you're probably right,” she agreed. “It didn't seem worth the fight before, not when I was busy mourning my brother. But that sort of thing falling into the wrong hands could be a serious issue.”

“Definitely,” I agreed, and yawned.

“I'll let you get some rest,” Aunt Persephona said instantly. “I'll keep looking for more about the candle and any way we may be able to track it down.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I'm going to take some painkillers and pass out. Do me a favor and don't tell my parents about the accident. I don't want them to worry about it for no reason.”

“Their daughter being nearly murdered seems like a reason to be worried,” Persephona said with a sniff. “But I won't say anything if you don't want me to.”

“Thank you,” I said sincerely, and with our goodbyes said, I hung up and climbed out of the bath, dragging myself up to bed. By the time I fell face first into the mattress, I remembered the painkillers, downstairs on the kitchen counter. I groaned and decided I could sleep without them. I'd probably regret it later, but right now I was too tired to care and the thought of walking downstairs sounded painful.

I dragged the blankets over myself and closed my eyes, the traumas of the day replaying at a numb distance. The rush of power and the heat of the blue flame from the candle. Uncle Ptolemy, cotton balls and posthumous prophecies spilling from his lips. The tooth-shaking sudden impact of the car accident and the strange arm reaching through the wreckage to take the box. Images that haunted my dreams as I slipped into a troubled, restless sleep.

CHAPTER 6

I woke to the sound of a thump downstairs.

At first, fuzzy-headed and aching, I assumed I'd just been woken up by the pain again. I'm pretty sure I'd been waking up every few minutes, trying to find a position that caused less pressure on my bruised limbs. The one across my chest and shoulder from the seat belt was especially bad and impossible to find a comfortable position with. But the numerous bruises on my arms and legs weren't proving easy to deal with, either.

But as I lay there trying to find a way to rest on the least bruised parts of my body, I heard a second noise from downstairs.

I sat up too quickly, my neck searing with pain and my head spinning. For a moment, I regretted not taking those painkillers. On the other hand, if I had I would definitely be too out of it to hear the person currently breaking into my apartment. This day just kept getting better.

I reached for the metal baseball bat I kept near my bed. I'd never had a break-in before, but it wasn't a great neighborhood. Keenly aware I wore only a long T-shirt and my underwear, I edged toward the stairs, gripping the bat tightly.

Something was definitely moving around downstairs, but it didn't really sound like a person, which confused me rather than reassured me as I tried to determine what it did sound like.

I moved down the stairs as quietly as possible, sticking to the edges to avoid the creaking steps. As the cramped kitchen and living area came into view, I saw something huge moving between the fridge and the island counter. Its dark fur was highlighted in silver by the moonlight spilling

through the open French doors to the backyard. It's huge, curved back rose higher than the countertops.

Holy shit, I thought, knees weak. There is a goddamn bear in my kitchen. How in the hell had it ended up here? None lived in the area. The only bears in this part of town were in the leather bar up the road.

I leaned forward, trying to get a better look at what the bear was doing. It ambled through my kitchen to my living room, and I heard its snuffling breaths as it sniffed for something. Not food apparently, considering it hadn't dug into anything in my kitchen. Instead, it pawed at my couch cushions and prodded my purse off of the end table.

I wrinkled my nose in confusion and moved down another step, forgetting to stick near the edge. The stair creaked, loudly, and the animal's head shot up and turned in my direction at once. The moonlight caught the shape of its high, triangular ears and long snout and I realized it wasn't a bear after all.

It was the largest wolf I'd ever seen.

I lashed out with my powers without thinking twice, reaching for the nearest source of death. The wolf, as though sensing what I was doing, lunged forward with a snarl to the bottom of the stairs. I swung wildly with the bat, nearly catching it in the head and it fell back, no longer advancing but barking urgently. Whatever it was trying to communicate, I didn't understand. A moment later, a dead dog slammed into its side.

The neighbor's wolfhound had been dead, at an educated guess, around a month. Most of the soft tissue was gone, leaving a loose and ragged pelt hanging from dark bones. If it hadn't been for the necromantic energy holding it together, it would have fallen into pieces. The empty eye sockets of its skull glowed with blue fire as it did its best to bury its teeth in the throat of the wolf.

The wolf was nearly twice the size of the dog, but it had been caught off guard and the dog had the benefit of not giving a damn if it lived through this. The two canines rolled across my front hall, slamming into a wall as they tore at each other. The wolf's teeth ripped out chunks of the dog's fur, but the dog, being dead, didn't care, and its teeth and claws were leaving significantly nasty bloody gouges in the wolf's fur.

That's the great thing about resurrecting animals as opposed to humans. Humans needed specific instructions to do anything. The list of instinctive behaviors a resurrected human can do I could count on one hand, while

animals live on repeated instinctive behaviors and only get stuck when it comes to complex problem-solving. A dog knows how to hunt and fight from birth. So, as long as what you're asking them to do isn't too complicated, you can let an animal run on autopilot.

I stood on the stairs, bat ready, and watched the animals wrestle. The dog was winning, but it was losing body mass at a worrying speed as the wolf tore at it. Soon there wouldn't be enough for my magic to hold it together. Steeling myself, I moved down the stairs to end this the only way I could.

I waited, subtly steering the dog, until it had driven the wolf back to the stairs. Gathering my courage and using every ounce of leverage my position higher on the staircase gave me, I waited until the dog was clear and swung the bat down hard at the wolf's head. It looked up just a second too late and caught the full force of my swing in the face. The blow knocked it back, sprawling across my front hall, where it lay motionless.

The dead dog and I watched it silently, waiting to see if it would move again. But it appeared to be out cold. I breathed a sigh of relief, only to tense again a moment later as the wolf appeared to move. But as I raised the bat to hit it again, I realized it wasn't getting up, but rather . . . shrinking. I watched in morbid fascination as the hair and muscle melted away, revealing a familiar, human shape underneath. Too familiar. I used my toe to flip the wolf, now a naked man, onto his back. The wolf was unmistakably Ethan the EMT.

“Son of a bitch,” I muttered, lowering my bat. “No wonder he didn't want to go out with me.”

* * *

By the time Ethan came around, he wore my favorite bathrobe and was tied to a kitchen chair. I sat on the island countertop, the bat across my knees and the undead dog sitting at my heels, watching him squint and shake his head as he tried to figure out what had happened. The wound hadn't disappeared when he'd become human again. I'd done my best to patch it up, but having his curly brown hair caked to his head with blood made him marginally less charming. The dog growled threateningly as soon as Ethan was aware enough to notice it. Ethan jumped and the kitchen chair

squeaked under him. I'd put my years of funeral corpse preparation to use trying to patch the dog up while Ethan was out, reattaching the bits it had lost and sewing its fur more solidly into place. It looked, arguably, better than it had when it had climbed out of its grave. Unfortunately, stuffing its hollow spaces with potpourri had only done so much for the stench of death.

“So,” I said as Ethan eyed the patchwork black wolfhound warily. “You're a werewolf.”

“Uhhh, what gave you that idea?” Ethan replied with a nervous laugh.

The dog, under my influence, gave another warning growl.

“Yeah, all right, yeah, I am,” Ethan gave in. “But you're a witch, so I think we're even.”

“Necromancer, actually,” I said primly, leaning back on the counter. He was close enough that I could rest my foot on the chair seat between his thighs. “There's a difference. And being able to raise the dead doesn't mean I can't be a respectable member of society, unlike you, who apparently uses his job to rob the houses of people he knows will be out cold on painkillers!”

“It's not like that,” Ethan said, looking a little pale. “Honestly! I'm just here for the candle.”

My eyes widened and I gripped the bat tighter. I planted a foot in the center of his chest and leaned closer to menace him with the bat.

“How do you know about that?”

“It's—” he sighed, flustered, and looked for the right words. “It's my job, okay? My other job, I mean. Aside from being an EMT. I work for a group of people who try to keep things like that candle from falling into the wrong hands. Someone who works with us said it was at the funeral home, about to be given to some normies who would probably sell it.”

“Yeah, that'd be my cousins,” I said, beginning to understand.

“The plan was just to buy it whenever your cousins sold it,” Ethan said. “Except then our contact told us you'd taken it.”

I nodded, jaw tightening with anger, and raised the bat a little higher

“So you tried to kill me and take it back,” I finished for him. “It was one of your people that totalled my car this afternoon!”

“No!” Ethan said quickly. “God, no! Never! Even if we were willing to murder people, which we aren't, we'd never risk bringing that much attention to it! I figured you didn't know what it was and I'd just sneak in

and grab it while you were asleep. If I'd known you were planning to *use* it, I wouldn't have come here without backup, for one thing."

"What do you mean 'use it'?" I asked, cold with suspicion.

Ethan looked at me in confusion for a moment.

"You've bonded to it," he explained. "I can smell it on you. And you on it. You've made the covenant."

I stared at him, waiting for further explanation, and he took a deep breath.

"You really didn't know what it was, did you?"

"No," I answered tersely. "I didn't. But when I touched it, it woke every dead body in the building, so I figured it was a good idea to get it out of the funeral home."

Ethan leaned back in the chair and blew out a long breath, eyes wide.

"Oh boy. Well. Uh, you did at least know about the necromancy thing, yeah?"

"Of course," I told him, and leaned back myself, lowering the bat back onto my lap. "It runs in my family. But my aunt can barely raise a mouse, so she never really taught me anything beyond how to keep from using my powers by accident. I didn't even know werewolves were a thing until tonight."

"Oh, really?" Ethan looked slightly impressed. "Well, damn. You're handling this really well."

"I work with dead people," I said with a shrug. "Your shock response ends up kind of numb after a while. Are there a lot of werewolves?"

"Well that kind of depends on which kind of werewolves you mean," Ethan replied casually. "Natural werewolves are critically endangered, less than a hundred left on the continent. Viral lycanthropy is a little more widespread, but there are people working to control infection rates and they're saying it'll die out in a few generations. Curse-associated lycanthropy and spell wolves are so rare that I don't even know the official numbers on them."

"So . . . no?" I summarized.

"Pretty much."

We sat staring at one another for a moment. Guilt hit me for tying him to the chair and whacking him with the bat, now that I knew he didn't mean any harm. I mean, assuming he was telling the truth. I didn't sense any lies

so far, but I didn't know the guy that well. And cute guys were always great at lying.

"So, where did you put the candle?" Ethan asked, looking around curiously like I might have left it sitting on the kitchen counter.

"It's gone," I said, deciding there was no benefit to hiding the truth. "I told you while I was loopy from the car accident. Whoever hit me took it."

"That's not good." Ethan paled with concern. "If they're willing to go to those kinds of lengths for it, they are definitely not the kind of people that should have it."

"What even is it?" I asked impatiently. "You said I was bound to it. What the hell does that mean?"

Ethan chewed his lip for a moment, considering.

"I'm not sure if I'm the right person to tell you," he said after a moment. "I don't know everything. But Yvette, a friend of mine back at the library, could probably give you a better explanation. She knows more about this sort of thing."

"Yvette isn't here," I said impatiently. "You'll do your best if you ever want to get untied from that chair."

"Point taken," Ethan agreed. "To put it as simply as I know how, it's the source of all necromantic magic."

"What?" I stared at him, certain I'd heard wrong.

"All necromancy that's ever been done is connected to that thing," he said. "It's older than time. Beyond time. It's directly tapped into—to death itself, I guess. A necromancer properly bound to it has basically unlimited power. They could do just about anything. Which is why it's a really bad idea for it to be floating around out there unaccounted for. Not to mention what it could possibly do to you."

"What's it doing to me?" I asked, my heart rate skyrocketing.

"It is you, magically speaking," Ethan said. "The flame is bound to your life force. It's not easy to put a fire like that out, but if someone did manage to snuff it, well, let's just say you wouldn't be far behind."

"Holy shit," I said, turning pale. "We need to find that candle. Immediately."

"I agree," Ethan said at once. "If you let me take you back to the library, Yvette can scry for it—"

"No need," I said, shaking my head and sliding off the counter onto my feet, ignoring the ache of my bruises and intense exhaustion. I turned my

head west, feeling the buzz of what I now realized must be the magical bond between me and the artifact currently holding my life force hostage. “I can track it.”

“Shit, really?” Ethan looked excited for a moment, then shook his head. “Wait, no, look at you. You can’t go fighting evil right now. You just got hit by a car.”

“Well, then it’s a good thing I’ve got a professional EMT coming with me,” I said. “Quit moving and I’ll untie you.”

“Don’t bother,” he said, holding up his completely unbound hands, currently more paw than hand and tipped in sharp black claws. “I broke loose right after I woke up. Figured you’d be more comfortable if I kept pretending to be caught.”

“How considerate,” I said dryly. I guess that did prove he was at least somewhat trustworthy. If he’d wanted to attack me again, he could have done it at any time. “Let’s just get going.”

“Uh, you may want to put on pants first,” Ethan suggested, and I remembered that I was in my nightclothes. “Although I guess that’s the pot calling the kettle black . . .”

He scratched his head, looking down at the bathrobe he wore. It didn’t fit him, but he still managed to look fantastic, unlike me in my ancient band T-shirt. Scowling, I headed for the stairs. This guy had two impressions of me so far: immediately post-car accident and makeup-less in my rattiest nightshirt. Fantastic.

“Don’t go anywhere,” I warned him as I left and sent the undead dog to sit in front of the door. As I hurried up the stairs, Ethan took a seat on the bottom step, locking eyes with the partially decomposed wolfhound, who stared back with eerily illuminated eyes. I felt its desire to fight Ethan again. Apparently, it had found the first fight pretty enjoyable. This was going to be a long night.

CHAPTER 7

As I got dressed, I worried, among other things, about what I was going to do with the dog.

It bursted with energy. I'd thrown everything I had at it in my panic. I could put it to rest again, but it would take time I didn't have right now. Hopefully, I'd be able to get it back into its grave before the neighbors noticed.

I went downstairs once I was a little more presentable in gray denim shorts and a black-collared sweater with golden bees embroidered on the points. I'd pulled my hair up into a high ponytail and thrown on as little makeup as I could stand, considering the time constraints.

Ethan studied me thoughtfully when I came back down the stairs. I hardly blamed him, considering what a disaster I'd looked like the last two times he'd seen me. At least he knew I cleaned up well now.

"Let's get going," I said, and Ethan stood up, reminding me he was only wearing a robe again. "I assume you have clothes in the car?"

"Nah," he said with a shrug. "I ran here. When planning a break in, big-ass wolves are less suspicious than strange cars parked in the area. But it's no problem. You can ride me."

"What?"

Instead of answering, he started taking off the robe. I turned my back quickly, which made him laugh.

"Oh, hang on. Here, take this."

I glanced over my shoulder, trying not to stare, in time to see him remove a necklace I hadn't even realized he wore. I caught it as he threw it to me, examining the wooden pendant curiously.

“Were you wearing this the whole time?” I asked, turning it over in my hands. It was shaped like a wolf, curled up in a circle, the back side heavily engraved in tiny, esoteric symbols. It hummed with a strange energy, which got stranger the longer I stared. The power was barely noticeable at first but then folded in on itself like a fractal, deeper and deeper, denser than the wood it inhabited. Someone had made this, I realized. Someone had worked this spell, folded and shaped it into this incredibly subtle, delicate item. The person who had made this was an artist while I was like a toddler upending buckets of paint onto the floor. I just threw power at corpses and hoped for the best.

“Yup,” he confirmed. “It’s got a don’t-look-at-me spell on it. Makes it easy to miss. Which is a real bitch when I put it down somewhere and forget where I left it.”

"What is it?" I asked, refusing to meet his gaze.

"Just put it on," he said, and then I heard him groan, a sound which changed as I listened, becoming a low growl. When I peered back, the enormous wolf stood in my front hall, shaking itself. The undead wolfhound growled at it in warning. Ethan just let his tongue hang out of his mouth, tail wagging happily.

"Now what?" I asked warily.

He trotted closer, expectantly. I wasn't tall, and the wolf was at least four feet high at the shoulder. He stared at me until, remembering what he'd said a moment before, I put the necklace on. The pendant settled on my sternum, radiating a strange warmth.

"Can you hear me?"

I jumped, startled, as the words appeared in my mind, accompanied by a sensation of distant fondness.

"Was that you?" I asked the wolf, unsettled.

"Yep." The wolf Ethan grinned at me, tail beating the floor. "That there's a thought-speech charm. A friend made it for me. It, uh, translates the directed thoughts of the subject directly into the mind of the wearer. Means I can think it and you'll hear it. Nifty, huh?"

"It certainly is convenient," I agreed, a little skeptical. "Whatever. Let's get going."

He faced the door and the wolfhound moved out of the way. Ethan looked back at me like he was eager for a walk. Rolling my eyes, I opened the door for the massive wolf, which ran out into the yard.

The sky was pre-dawn gray, probably around four or five in the morning. Mist lay heavy on the neighborhood, turning the bare, early spring trees and wet lawns into an ominous monochrome. I shivered as I moved out onto the doorstep, then peeked back in at the wolfhound sitting in the hall. I couldn't bring him with me, not appearing as obviously corpse-y as he did, but guilt assaulted me about leaving him behind. I bent to pat the stitched-together fur between his ears.

"Stay put and guard the house, buddy," I told him. "I'll get you back to your rest soon, I promise."

To my surprise, he licked my hand, wagged his tail, and trotted off farther into the house. I wasn't used to corpses, even animal ones, being that active on their own. But then, he was unusually full of energy.

I tried to shrug off my worries, following Ethan out into the yard.

"*All right,*" he said, crouching down. "*Get on.*"

"What?"

"*I didn't bring my car and yours is in the impound lot waiting for your insurance company to declare it totalled,*" Ethan said, hiding his impatience under his good-natured attitude. "*We don't have time to walk. Get on.*"

I wanted to argue, but I knew he was right. Cautiously, I swung a leg over his broad, furry back, holding on tight to the ruff of longer fur at the back of his neck as he stood up.

"*Ow! Don't pull,*" he complained.

"How am I supposed to hold on?" I asked.

"*Use your thighs. Haven't you ever ridden a horse before?*"

I blushed, deciding against citing the pony ride I'd had for my sixth birthday.

"This is a bit different!" I said, instead. "I don't exactly have a saddle, for one thing."

I heard him sigh inside my mind, which was a strange feeling.

"*Just squeeze with your knees and lean down low against my back,*" he said. "*And hang on tight.*"

As soon as I leaned down he took off, bolting down the road at breakneck speed. I yelped, hiding my face in his fur as the cold morning wind tore at my hair.

"*Which way are we going, princess?*" Ethan asked. "*Give us an inkling.*"

"West," I told him, not moving.

He turned, following my directions, and ran away from the slowly rising sun. We needed to do this fast, before morning commuters spotted a bear-sized wolf running down the road carrying a terrified funeral home employee.

"So what kind of werewolf are you?" I asked, mostly to distract myself from how close I was to being flung off at any moment.

"Um, cursed," Ethan admitted, sounding a little embarrassed. *"Years ago. It's kind of a complicated situation. There's a natural werewolf colony up in Maine and I figured they might have some tips on how to cope. Instead I met the folks at the library and ended up hanging around to help them."*

"Yeah, you mentioned them before," I said, curious and sensing that the curse wasn't something he wanted to discuss. "Who are they exactly?"

"The curators?" I sensed the wave of nervous evasiveness rising in Ethan's thoughts. *"Uh, I can't really tell you too much. I'm not supposed to."*

"Then just tell me what you can," I said. "If this candle is connected to my actual life and they want to take it, I need to know if they're trustworthy."

"Oh, they are!" Ethan said quickly, with doggish enthusiasm. *"They're great people! They work in conservation mostly, monitoring and maintaining magical populations, locations of magical importance, and magical artifacts. Relocating pixie nests endangered by development, rehoming domovoi. Just recently they stopped a proposed dam that would have cut off a river teeming with twenty different kinds of water spirits. You ever see a kelpie, a kappa, and a vodyanoi cohabitating? It's amazing!"*

"I don't know what half of those things are," I admitted.

"Oh, wow. You're in for a treat. Magical folk are real thin on the ground, and isolated, but with the internet and the efforts of groups like the curators, we're starting to build a real community."

It was a strange thought, the idea of having a community. People I wouldn't have to hide from or explain myself to. I never dared to imagine it. Aunt Persephona had made it seem like necromancers were the only magical people in the world.

"You'll get to meet them all once we get the candle back," he said. "I mean, probably."

"Why only probably?"

Again the awkward discomfort coming from his thoughts whipped through me as he searched for the right words.

"It's complicated," he said at last. *"They're secretive, you know. But even if the curators don't want to meet you, I can put you in contact with the New England Coven. There are a handful of magic users, witches, mages, and specialists like you, scattered around the area. They get together a couple of times a year to swap spells and such. You won't be alone anymore."*

That was a dizzying thought, and also an emotional land mine I wasn't ready to deal with right now.

"Let's just focus on the candle for now," I said, unsettled.

"Are we getting any closer?" he asked. We had left my more urban neighborhood behind and moved into the more spaced-out residential streets, the houses separated by generous groves of spruce, fir, and just-budding oak. I turned my head, searching for the buzz of the candle's presence.

"Yeah," I said, feeling it jump in strength. "Turn here."

We ran on, occasionally adjusting direction as I tracked the candle. Once I'd moved past being terrified, riding on a wolf's back was exhilarating. The world rushed past on either side of us, a green-gray blur in the early light. Ethan's energy was evidently endless, like he could run forever. The air was cold as it flung my hair out behind us like a golden banner. It wasn't a smooth ride and my bruises complained, but I was finding it hard to care.

I'd loved fantasy stories as a little girl and, when I'd found out I was magic, I'd been certain it would lead to exactly the kind of fantastic adventures I'd always dreamed of. I'd searched every inch of the backyard for fairies and checked the backs of every wardrobe for secret passages. I never found them, of course. And my kind of magic was more likely to make me a villain in those kinds of stories, anyway. But this was closer to that old, indulgent fantasy than I'd been in a long time. It was a good feeling.

"So, do you know any more about the candle?" I asked. "Where it came from, I mean?"

"Not really," Ethan said. *"You're more likely to know about it than I am. It belongs to your family, after all."*

"I know," I said. "That's why it's so weird that I've never heard of it. The only thing even close to it that I can remember is this fairy tale my aunt used to tell me."

"Hey, in this business, fairy tales tend not to be too far from the truth. Maybe it's a clue. What's the story?"

I was quiet for a moment, considering whether he might be right. I supposed it was silly to discount all fairy tales as nonsense when you could actually do magic.

"It's called Godfather Death," I explained. "A poor man has too many kids and decides the only way he can ensure his youngest son has a good life is to find him a rich godfather. He gets offers from both God and the Devil, but he turns them down because they don't treat people fairly. Then Death walks by, and Death treats everybody exactly the same, so the man begs Death to be his son's godfather. And Death agrees and makes sure the kid is taken care of."

"I got a feeling something else was going on in that house if God, the Devil, and literal personified Death were regular visitors," Ethan said, amused. *"Can you imagine God offering to be your kid's godfather and rejecting him? The guy had some balls."*

"Oh definitely," I said with a laugh. "I'm betting that was a very interesting family."

"What happens? I'm guessing that's not the end."

"No, the kid grows up and needs to get a job, so Death tells him he's going to be a doctor. Death gives him a magic herb that cures anything and says that whenever the doctor goes into a patient's room, he'll see Death standing by the bed. If Death is standing by the foot of the bed, the doctor should use the herb and cure the person. But if he's standing at the head of the bed, it's that person's time and the doctor has to let them go."

"Good, simple rules," Ethan says as we head farther out of town, the sun growing brighter behind us. *"But this is a fairy tale, so he fucks them up somehow."*

"Not at first," I say. "He becomes a famous, wealthy doctor whose prognosis is always correct. Eventually he ends up working for royalty. But then the young, popular king falls deathly ill and everyone begs the doctor to save him. The doctor agrees, of course, but when he goes into the king's room, he sees Death standing at the head of the bed."

"Ah, there it is. I knew it was coming."

"So the doctor can't let the king die. He'd probably get killed for failing to save him, not to mention throwing the kingdom into turmoil or whatever. He orders the king's bed turned around backward, so that Death is now standing at the foot."

"Clever."

"The doctor treats him with the herb and the king recovers. But Death is pissed at the guy for misusing his gift. Death treats everyone the same, even kings. He warns the doctor never to do it again. But then the king's beautiful daughter gets sick. The king begs the doctor to save her and promises the doctor can marry her if she lives. And the doctor is already in love with the princess. But Death is standing by the head of her bed. The doctor decides he has to save her anyway. He orders the bed turned around backward again and the princess is saved.

"No sooner is the color back in her cheeks than Death drags the doctor away, down into the underworld, where there are millions of candles, jumping to life and being snuffed out in sequence, so it appears like the fire is jumping between the candles. Death says these are the lives of all mankind, and that when one is lit another must go out. Death shows the doctor a candle that's been melted down to a puddle but continues to burn and says it belongs to the king. And next to it a tall candle belonging to the princess, whose light would have been snuffed out to keep her father's lit. And next to them both an almost vanished stump, which Death says belongs to the doctor. The doctor starts to beg for his life, but Death treats all people the same, even his godson, and blows out his candle. The doctor falls down dead immediately."

Ethan was quiet for a moment, as though waiting for me to keep going.

"That's it?" he said when I didn't continue. *"What a weird ending."*

"Yeah, I always thought so, too," I said with a shrug. "But that's really how it ends."

"So, you think the Candle of the Covenant is like the candles from the underworld in the story?"

I shook my head, the buzz of the candle's presence becoming annoyingly strong.

"Probably not," I admitted. "But it's the only thing I could think of that involved candles, death, and bringing people back from the dead."

"I can mention it to the folks at the library," Ethan offered. *"They might know if there's a connection."*

"It can't hurt to try," I said. "Turn here. I think we're getting close."

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CHAPTER 8

This part of Connecticut was littered with historic houses dating back to the 1600s.

Some had been restored and preserved, some were modernized, but a few, like the one the candle's signal came from, had just been forgotten.

It was far off the main road, down a dirt track that may have been a long driveway or just a highly neglected road. Deep in the trees, practically lost within the boundaries of the nearby land preserve, the ancient colonial was lovely despite its obviously dilapidated state. Parts of the mansard roof were falling in, deep blue-gray under the shadow of the ancient oaks that sheltered it. Bright yellow Forsythia grew wild along the sides. The porch was almost lost under a mountain of invasive bittersweet vine, slowly pulling down the once beautiful hand-carved posts. But someone had cut a path through the brambles to the front door, which had been set back in its frame though the hinges had rusted away. I climbed off of Ethan's back, glad I'd gone with sneakers rather than heels as we picked our way through the wet, overgrown lawn.

"Not going to change back?" I asked Ethan, as he nosed around under the thorns, sniffing for something.

"Not the best place to be naked, I'm thinking," he replied, shaking his head and pawing at his snout to try and rid himself of the thorns now stuck there. *"And something smells off. I didn't get a good scent of whoever took the candle from the scene of the car crash—too much burning metal and grease and blood—but I don't smell anything like it here. Or at least, it's so faint they probably haven't been here in ages."*

"But I can feel the artifact," I said with a frown, rubbing my aching temples. "It's buzzing like a motherfucker."

Concern radiated from Ethan's thoughts as he bumped his furry side into my shoulder.

"Stay close," he said. "And stay alert."

We moved together onto the porch, the wood creaking under Ethan's paws. I jumped as the rotted planks gave out entirely under my feet, jumping to the side to avoid falling through. Ethan whined and walked a little more carefully.

The door was heavy, waterlogged and rotting. Ethan surprised me by rearing back onto his hind legs. Standing that way, he towered over me. Probably seven feet tall and then some. I barely reached the bottom of his chest. His front paws were hand-like, and he grabbed the old door, shifting it carefully aside before dropping onto all fours again.

"I didn't realize you could go bipedal," I whispered, a little awed. "Why don't you do it more often?"

"Standing up in this shape kills my back," he said as we slipped inside. "It makes some things easier, but the ache the next day isn't worth it."

The inside of the house had not held up as well as the outside. Moss and grass invaded and padding the ruined hardwood floors. The walls were cracked, dusty, the plaster slumping and sloughing off. Whatever furniture and decorations had once filled this house had been moved elsewhere. Every room was echoingly empty, full of nothing but weeds and dust moving through the sunlight like ghosts.

The eastern side of the house felt liminal and unearthly with the early morning glow through the profusion of dusty windows, painting it in white and gold. But as we moved farther into the side of the house not illuminated by the rising sun, we waded into deep blue shadow, heavy with cobwebs, our path blocked by sections of collapsed ceiling and, once, a ragged hole in the floor too wide for me to confidently jump over. I assumed it led to the basement, but the pitch-black darkness within looked to go on forever into the farthest quiet depths of the earth.

"Here," Ethan said, his voice a whisper in my mind. "This way. I can smell something."

As we stepped into the next room, a black bird, disturbed by our entry, flapped noisily away through a hole in the floor. Pale light strained through it, barely touching the floor, like light glimpsed from deep below the ocean.

It was the only source of light in the interior room. Little remnants of death crawled toward me in slow tendrils from the recently deceased insects and creatures.

Unlike the other rooms, this one was not empty. It was scattered with trash. A worn sleeping bag lay in one corner, next to a stack of old books. A small camp stove had made the room smell like smoke.

"Someone's been living here," I said, hushed, like I thought someone might sit up from the sleeping bag at any moment.

"*Could just be squatters,*" Ethan said. "*It might not be our guy. Any sign of the candle?*"

I shook my head, frowning.

"It feels like I'm standing right on top of it," I told him. "The sensation is the same in every direction."

Curious, I went to investigate the books next to the sleeping bag. As soon as I saw the titles, I waved Ethan over.

"That's *Society of the Dead*, the *Grimorium Verum* and Kardec's *Spirit's Book*," I said and pointed them out. "These are texts on necromancy and black magic. My aunt has some of these. Jesus, is that Kieckhefer's *Forbidden Rites*? My aunt has a collector's copy of that. She wouldn't even let me touch it, the stuff in that is so nasty. This copy is probably even older than hers!"

"*And look at this.*"

I followed his nose to a small altar hidden in a heavily shadowed corner. I might not have spotted it at all if it weren't for Ethan. The buzzing sensation came from it even more strongly. The altar, a small wooden table with a cloth draped over it, had two normal tea lights in each corner and a small copper dish in the center containing what looked like a small black ball. As I touched it, the buzzing jumped to new, skin-tingling heights. I realized it was wax. Wax drippings from the candle.

"This resembles tracking magic," I said, carefully pocketing the little ball of wax and disassembling the altar. The buzzing died down at once. "I recognize it from Aunt Persephona's books. They were using it to find the candle. This kind of spell works by imitating the magical signature of whatever it's searching for and amplifying it. Which is why my connection to it led us here."

"*So then this is our guy,*" Ethan said, sounding puzzled. "*Can't say I was expecting our enemy to be a hobo.*"

He turned away, snuffling, and proceeded to the large doors across the room.

"Me either," I agreed, picking up one of the books to page through it. "There's got to be something else going on here. Maybe he—"

I cut myself off as something fluttered out of one of the books. I squinted through the gloom as it landed at my feet, bending to pick up a worn Polaroid. It was a family photograph of a handsome, smiling couple standing in front of a modest but pleasant house, their children gathered around them, an older girl, a baby in the mother's arms, and a dark-haired younger boy. He was young, maybe ten years old, and he was not happy to be there. A big black Labrador sat at his feet, its tail a blur. Something so idyllic looked incredibly out of place tucked between the pages of a book on necromantic rituals. Something terrible had happened to that family. I just knew it.

"*Vexa!*"

I glanced up at Ethan's urgent call and saw he had pushed the doors to the next room open.

"*You want to come see this.*"

The heavy odor of death sifted toward me as I approached the doors and I quickly realized why. The room was large and square, probably once some kind of formal dining room. Diffused light through the tall windows illuminated the mutilated bodies of seven crows, arranged around the edges of a circle painstakingly laid out in what could be a mixture of ash and blood.

Why hadn't I smelled it earlier? Sure, there were small fragments when I first entered the house, but something of this magnitude should've been on my radar. Perhaps there was magic inhibiting me?

"*Vexa?*" Ethan's wolf form stood across from me, his large, furry head tilted in concern.

"Sorry." I stepped around carefully, studying the scene beneath my feet.

I recognized some of the symbols that made up the complex geometric shape of the circle from Aunt Persephona's books. Someone had been working a ritual here, and a dark one from what I could tell. I shivered at the implications of what I saw, though I didn't know enough to tell what it was for.

On a paper dropped near the door, someone had drawn a half-finished sketch of the circle and I picked it up, squinting at the notes written in

barely legible spidery handwriting.

"Virgil's seal," I read, struggling to pick out letters. "Binding, unbinding? Unstable reaction . . . Why were they taking notes on their own ritual?"

"*Hell if I know,*" Ethan replied. "*But this place gives me the willies. Let's get out of here.*"

"Hang on," I said. "I want to take those books with us. They might give us an idea of whatever this person is planning."

There was an empty bag near the books, presumably the one this person had carried them in. I stuffed them back into it quickly, glancing at the titles as I went. I paused, seeing one out of place.

"*Forgotten Royalty,*" I read. "Banished and disgraced aristocrats of medieval Europe—"

"*Hurry up,*" Ethan said, discomfort coming from him in waves. "*I don't like it here.*"

"All right, all right. Let's go." I hurried after him as he loped away, hurrying to the door. I was glad to leave the eerie place behind, though a bit uncomfortable turning my back on it.

I yawned as we reached the yard and I climbed onto Ethan again.

"So what now?" I asked, as he started to pace away. "The candle wasn't there, but maybe there were more clues about who's responsible for this. Maybe we should have checked the basement."

"*Like hell,*" Ethan said, and his fur stood on end. "*Pro tip: Don't go poking around in the basements of places where people have been doing black magic. Even if they didn't put something in there themselves, that kind of magic attracts things. Things I'm not interested in tangling with by myself.*"

"Then what do we do?"

"*You got anything on that radar of yours now that the decoy is gone?*" he asked, nosing his way through the tall grass as we headed back to the road.

I turned my head, searching, but couldn't find anything.

"Maybe it's too far away," I said. "Or they have it hidden."

"*Possible,*" Ethan said, and I held on tighter as he ran back to town. "*Any chance you can work that tracking spell they were using?*"

"I don't know how," I admitted, ruefully. "I barely know enough to recognize one. Like I said, the only training I've had is how *not* to use my

powers."

"Seems kind of frustrating," Ethan said. "Didn't you ever want to try and learn anyway?"

"Keeping it hidden was always a pretty reasonable decision to me," I said. "It chafed when I was little and I wanted to raise an army of zombie squirrels to torment the obnoxious kids from school, but there was an appeal in having a magical secret, too. And Aunt Persephona made sure I was completely aware of the potential consequences of revealing myself. Our kind of magic isn't exactly well received by the general public."

"I suppose it is pretty divisive," Ethan said with a chuckle. "I sure didn't expect a necromancer to be as friendly and helpful as you've been. Or as cute."

"Cute?" I repeated, feeling my face heat.

"You know," Ethan replied, and his heavy shoulders rolled beneath me in a shrug. "You imagine a necromancer, you kind of imagine a creepy old wizard dude."

"Oh," I said. "So you're saying I'm only cute for a necromancer?"

"Now, I didn't say—"

"Would you rather there was a creepy old wizard dude riding you right now?" I wiggled suggestively and Ethan stumbled, missing a step.

"All right," he said, embarrassed. "You're cute, okay? Not just for a necromancer. You're cute!"

"Damn right I am," I said, satisfied.

"I'm going to make a small detour," Ethan said, eager to change the subject. "I don't think I can get you home without being spotted, and I don't want to spend the rest of the day being hunted by animal control. My place isn't far from here. I can grab a change of clothes and drive you back."

He kept to the outskirts, eventually jumping the back fence of a decidedly shoddy apartment complex.

"It's not much to look at," Ethan said, sounding a little self-conscious as we slunk around the back of the plain, dilapidated building. I heard the sound of glass breaking somewhere and two people arguing loudly. "But it's cheap, and no one pays too much attention to what I'm doing. Which is important for someone with my, uh, condition."

I got off his back as he led me up a dangerous-looking fire escape to a room on the third floor. The studio itself was as rundown as the building and sparsely appointed. A cheap sofa, probably a curbside salvage, sat in

the middle of the room. Judging by the blanket crumpled at one end and the empty paper plate forgotten on the cardboard box acting as a coffee table, the couch served as both a bed and a dining table. Ethan trotted past me and with a shake changed back. I averted my eyes, both to preserve his modesty and because watching his bones shift back into place unsettled me.

"Did you just move in?" I asked, concerned as, now human-shaped again, he dug in a box near the far wall.

"Uh, no, I've been here about a year," Ethan said, not looking at me. "I've just found it's better not to get too settled, you know? Travel light. Never know when you'll need to skip town."

He kept his tone upbeat but even without the mind-reading connection, I knew it was forced.

"Plus, between the library and my day job, I stay real busy," he went on. "I'm barely even here. I'm gonna go get changed. You can make yourself at home."

He hurried off to the bathroom with a fistful of clothing, and after standing around awkwardly for a moment, I sat down on the end of the couch. I couldn't make this sad, bare little room fit with the cheerful, laid-back, friendly man I'd spent most of the day with.

I double-checked the time on my watch. Past noon. Playing hot-and-cold to find the candle had taken a while, and inside the old house, time had slipped by strangely in fits and starts.

"Do you want to get something to eat before you take me back home?" I asked, realizing I'd skipped breakfast. Between that and my phenomenally bad night's sleep, I was exhausted.

"Sure thing," he called back, muffled through the bathroom door. "You like pizza? I know a great place."

Scanning my phone, I realized I'd missed several calls from my parents and one from my aunt. I had a feeling I knew what they were about. I hit the return call button for my aunt first.

"Did you just wake up?" Aunt Persephona asked. "I know you said those painkillers would knock you out, but it's half past two!"

"No, I've been out of the house since before sunrise," I told her, rubbing at my eyes. "I didn't even take the painkillers, and I feel like death warmed over. But we might have learned some things about whoever took the candle."

"We?"

I remembered Persephona hadn't met Ethan and scrambled for a way to explain him. "Well, uh, I met a guy?"

"When? This morning?"

"When I got hit by the car, actually. He's an EMT."

"And he's helping you search for the candle? How much did you tell him?"

"Nothing he didn't already know, so relax. He's already in on the secret. He's a werewolf."

"A were—Vexatious Tzarnavaras! Do you have any idea how dangerous those things are?"

"No, I don't," I said, a little offended by her vehemence. "You never even told me they existed. Apparently, there's a whole magical community you never told me about."

"A handful of would-be witches and snobby old-world types who don't approve of our kind of magic," Persephona said dismissively. "Or dangerous monsters like that werewolf. No one you needed to know."

"First of all, his name is Ethan and he's not a monster," I said sharply. "Second, you could have at least told me they existed!"

"Well it's too late for that now, isn't it?" she replied, just as defensively. "Why don't you tell me what you found out while you were cavorting with a wild animal instead of resting from the car accident you were just in?"

I sighed, rubbing the bridge of my nose. She was impossible when she got like this. I'd just have to hurry through it and hope she didn't blow a fuse.

"Apparently the candle is some kind of source for all necromantic energy in the world. And I'm connected to it somehow."

"A . . . what now? And you're—"

"Yeah, so I can kind of feel it all the time, or I could, so we followed it to this old house outside of town. But it turns out it wasn't there. Whoever stole it had a tracking spell going and that's what I sensed."

"Were they—"

"No, they weren't there. But they'd been doing some nasty rituals in that place. Something involving killing birds. I found some notes, something about Virgil's seal? And some books. I took those. I'm hoping there'll be something in there to tell us what this guy is up to."

"Maybe you should bring them here so I can—"

"I will, as soon as I get something to eat and a long nap," I promised. "In the meantime, do you know how to do a tracking spell? Maybe we can use the same one they were using to hunt them down."

"Well, I've never done it before, but I could try. I think I'd need something from who or whatever we're tracking though."

"I have a bit of wax from the candle," I told her. "And some things that belonged to whoever stole it. That should be enough, right?"

"Hopefully," she said, and I heard the concern in her voice. "But this all sounds like a dangerous mess. Is there some way you could just sever your connection to this thing and let it be?"

"I'm not sure," I confessed. "If there is, I'll jump on it, I promise. But even if I could break my connection to the candle, I'd still want to help Ethan find it. This thing is crazy powerful, and the kind of people who are willing to murder me to get it probably shouldn't have that kind of power."

"That doesn't have to be our business," Persephona pointed out. "This isn't the first or the last time something like this has happened. It can work itself out without us."

Well that was a rabbit hole I wanted to follow. But Ethan was coming out of the bathroom, and I didn't have time.

"Just do me a favor and look into that tracking spell," I said. "I'll talk to you more later. Oh, and did you tell my parents about the crash? I've got like six calls from them."

"No, that would be the impound lot's fault," she said with a sigh. "Apparently your father's name remains first on the title so they called him about picking up the wreck. They gave me an earful about it, though. I would suggest calling them soon."

"Son of a bitch," I muttered. "All right. Talk to you later."

I hung up, putting my hands over my face. What if whoever was after me targeted my parents, too? With everything going on, I didn't have a moment to call and explain—but I needed to. I had to warn them.

"Give me a sec." I told Ethan, stepping away and taking the phone from my pocket. Quickly, I dialed my dad's cell number. I could call the house, but my dad tended to be less emotional than Mom.

My mom answered on the second ring. "Vexa!"

"Hey, Mom."

"What in the world is going on? Are you all right?" She exhaled but didn't give me a chance to answer. "Of course you aren't okay. What's

happened?”

I didn't have to see her to know she was pacing, “Mom, I'm okay, seriously. I couldn't call you if I wasn't.”

“Don't minimize the severity of this situation, Vexa.”

“Is Dad there?”

“Your father is in the shower.”

Damn. “Okay, look. Technically, things are not as okay as they could be, *but* I'm figuring it out. In the meantime, I need you guys to be careful.”

“Oh, gods. I knew it. Careful of what?”

“It could be nothing.” I ran a hand through my hair, hoping to stop the ache forming between my eyes. “Look, can you just let Dad know I'll call him? In the meantime, Aunt Percy is taking care of things, I promise.”

“Vexa?”

“Yes, Mom?”

“I'm trusting you blindly because my gut is telling me to. But I don't like this.”

“I understand, and I love you, both of you. I'll be in touch again soon. I promise”

I spent another few minutes placating my mom and finally was able to get off the phone.

"Still want to do lunch?" Ethan asked, sitting down next to me with a sympathetic smile. "We could hang out here if you want? That place I know delivers."

I contemplated going back out right now, facing people and noise and the general exposure of being out in public. My skull buzzed with exhaustion and every inch of me was bruised and achy.

"That sounds great," I said with a sigh. "Do you have any Tylenol?"

"I think you need a little more than Tylenol," Ethan said frankly. "And a very long nap on top of that."

"I'll sleep when I'm dead," I said with an ironic smile. Ethan rolled his eyes.

"I'll go call the pizza place," he said. "Try to relax."

I kicked off my shoes, huddled up against the arm of the chair, and dragged one of the books out of my bag to start reading. I didn't have time to relax while some unknown bird-murdering weirdo was in possession of a super-powerful antique that could potentially kill me at any moment.

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CHAPTER 9

"You know," Ethan said through a mouthful of pizza, squinting at an old text on European magical traditions. "I expected necromancy to involve a lot more human sacrifice and a lot less menstrual blood."

"Yeah, early European witchcraft looved their menstrual blood," I agreed. I had my feet stretched out on his lap and a slice of pizza in my off hand. I'd started flipping through *Forgotten Royalty*, though so far there wasn't much in it beyond some minimally interesting trivia.

"There isn't even that much in here about actual necromancy," Ethan said.

"It's hard to find books dedicated just to necromancy," I said, distracted as I read about a Byzantine prince banished to a Turkish island. "Usually it just gets folded into other books of dark magic, when it gets addressed at all. Purely necromantic texts tend to be personal works passed down through families and never published. Aunt Persephona has all of ours."

"She seems like an interesting lady," he said.

"You don't want to meet her," I said. "I just found out she is apparently wildly prejudiced against werewolves."

"Well, I should have seen that coming," he said with a sigh that implied it was a common occurrence.

"Oh, shit," I said, sitting up and putting aside my pizza.

"What? Did you find something?" Ethan asked, scooting closer to examine the book I held.

"Not about whoever took the candle," I said. "But read this, I'm in here! I mean, my family is."

I pointed out the section I read and Ethan leaned close to read, putting an arm around me in the process. I tried not to think about it too much, though his warm skin against mine was very distracting.

“Prince Aethon Tzarnavaras,” Ethan read. “Briefly heir-by-marriage of the Empire of Trebizond, a Byzantine Roman state that fell to the Ottomans in 1475.”

“My great-uncle had a portrait of him,” I told Ethan, excited. “I saw it earlier today. He was holding the candle in it.”

“Do you think maybe he’s the one who made it, or whatever?” Ethan asked.

“Maybe,” I said with a shrug. “It appears like he kind of came out of nowhere. No title, no history. They’re not even sure how he got close to the royal family. There are rumors the king met him at a brothel and they had some kind of relationship, but that may have just been slander made up later when they tossed him out. He married the king’s daughter and the king declared him his official heir. But when the king died, there was apparently some dispute, which ended in Aethon declared as a witch and exiled to an island where he presumably spent the rest of his life. The princess and his children were exiled, too, to a convent on another island. But I’m guessing they didn’t stay there, since I exist.”

“Sad story,” Ethan said sympathetically. “They couldn’t have at least banished his family to the same island?”

“Yeah, that does suck,” I agreed. I reached for my phone, figuring I’d text Aunt Persephona about our royal ancestors, when I noticed what time it was. “Shit. It’s almost eight.”

“Really?” Pink tinges Ethan’s cheeks. “Sorry. I better get you home.”

“It’s cool,” I said immediately, gathering the books back up. “I needed the help going through all this, and the pizza was good. This was nice.”

“It was nice,” Ethan agreed, smiling as he handed me back the book on European magic. “It’s probably pretty obvious that I don’t have people over often.”

“Well, if we’re going to keep working together anyway,” I said, unable to face him fully, “maybe we could do it again sometime soon.”

“I’d like that,” Ethan said, his voice strangely soft. “You, um, you really don’t mind the whole . . . werewolf thing?”

“No,” I said at once, turning around as I finished packing up the books. “Why would I?”

“Some people have a problem with it,” he confessed, rubbing his arm. “Like, they worry I’ll be violent or dangerous or something, or that I’ll turn them.”

“You don’t seem particularly violent since I hit you with that baseball bat,” I said. “Are you planning to turn me?”

“No,” Ethan said with a relieved smile. “No, I can’t. I’m not that kind of werewolf.”

“Yeah, you mentioned you were cursed, right?” I asked as I headed for the door. He followed me, and we descended the poorly lit staircase together.

“Yeah. I don’t really know how yet. I upset someone with cursing powers apparently, but they’ve never bothered to let me know who they were.”

"That sucks. Are there any big downsides?"

"Uh, a few," he said, scratching the back of his head as he held the apartment door open for me. "So, natural werewolves only have to shift on the full moon, right? And they keep their minds while they're in wolf shape. Viral werewolves can get hit with compulsive shifts randomly and basically become wolves for the duration. Cursed werewolves vary depending on the curse, but I have compulsory full moon shifts, and shifts can be triggered by extreme emotion and certain substances. If I shift voluntarily I stay conscious and in control, but when the shift is involuntary I . . . I black out, but I don't just become a wolf, either. It's like something else takes over. Something angry and destructive. Something that intentionally targets people I care about."

"That’s terrible," I said as we left the apartment building.

"Yeah," Ethan said with a rueful smile. "I've never hurt anybody, thankfully. And when I realized the wolf was going after my family, I hopped the next train out of town. It's easier this way. And the folks at the library have done a lot to help stabilize my shifts and make sure I stay contained during the full moon. It's the closest I've been to a normal life in years."

"How long ago were you cursed?" I asked, curious, then realized this was a pretty personal subject. "Sorry if this is uncomfortable. You don't need to tell me if you don't want to."

"No, it's all right," Ethan said with a small laugh. "You're taking a leap deciding to be friends with a werewolf. You should at least know the

details. I was cursed seven or eight years ago. I'm older than I look." He winked.

As we drove, he continued to tell me about being a werewolf. The differences between natural and viral werewolves. The different varieties of werewolf curses. And spell wolves, which were actually the result of an enchanted object rather than a permanent magical condition. And the more personal details of how he dealt with his own condition.

"And there's no chance for a cure?" I asked, as we pulled up to my house.

"Not with no clue who cursed me," Ethan said with a shrug. "Curses usually have conditions built in for reversing the effects or for making them worse. But every curse is unique. I'd have to ask whoever cursed me for the details. But it's no big deal. I was real upset the first few years, but I've adjusted. I'm used to it now. I'm not sure what I'd do with myself if I did manage to break the curse."

"You could go back to your family?" I suggested.

"And tell them what?" he said with a snort. "Sorry, I went out for milk and got lost for eight years?"

He had a point. I slipped out of the car, grabbing the bag of books.

"I could drop by tomorrow afternoon if you like," he said. "Maybe take you by the library."

"That'd be great," I said. "I'm probably going to have to work tomorrow so, sometime after six?"

"I'll see you then." He gave me a crooked smile that had my heart beating a little too fast again.

I waved and headed up the walk to my apartment. I paused, a chill running up my spine, as I realized the door wasn't closed. I reached for the mind of the wolfhound and was answered by a wave of anger and fear. Something was desperately wrong. I glanced back at Ethan's Jeep, idling as he waited for me to make it inside. An instant later, the Jeep shut off and Ethan was beside me, hands already distinctly claw-like, warm brown eyes turning golden. He said nothing but gave me a confident nod. He had my back.

Cautiously, I pushed the door open, sucking in a sharp breath through my teeth as the catastrophe within was revealed.

My apartment had been destroyed. The fight between Ethan and the dog had already left things in slight disarray. This was different. Someone had

systematically pulled out and dumped every drawer in the kitchen, emptied every cabinet, flipped the couch, and slashed the cushions. My home had been turned completely inside out.

I searched for the wolfhound, following the echo of my own energy, while Ethan paced after me, sniffing.

"It's him," he growled. "This place smells just like the room where you found the altar. He was here."

"Is he still here?" I asked, tense. He shook his head.

"I don't think so," he said. "I can't tell. Everything smells like death."

"There you are!" I said, as I spotted the wolfhound at last, behind the overturned couch. He was in several pieces, remaining animate but huddled in the corner and whining.

"Don't worry, boy," I said gently, trying to coax him out. "I'll patch you up. You'll be okay."

There was fresh blood on his muzzle. He must have taken a bite out of whoever did this.

"Vexa," Ethan said quietly, his voice growing deeper as his appearance grew more wolfish. "We're not alone."

I heard it now as well as I listened. A low, rolling feline growl. Out of the shadows of the downstairs bathroom an animal slunk, muscular shoulders and tawny fur lit by the moon, its eyes reflecting the light.

"Is that a fucking mountain lion?" I whispered to Ethan, my voice a thin, terrified hiss.

"It used to be," Ethan whispered back, and I recognized the glint of bone through the lion's thin pelt, and the flicker of green fire behind its eyes. "Can you put it down?"

"I've never put down something someone else raised," I said, tense with fear. "I can try."

"Do your best," Ethan said and pulled his shirt off over his head, shoving his pants down quickly. A breath later he'd finished his transformation and rose as the giant wolf. *"I'll hold it off."*

He stepped in front of me, dark brown fur spiked with anxiety, and the lion stopped its advance, its growl growing louder. Ethan growled back, standing his ground.

I closed my eyes, reaching for the creature with my powers, feeling for the void. It brimmed with power, but it was an energy completely foreign to me. It was sharp, its edges almost jagged, and hostile. It stung like salt in a

wound, burned in my nose and throat like acrid smoke. I tried to wash it away like Aunt Persephona showed me, but there was too much, and it actively resisted me. Like pouring water on a grease fire, my efforts only appeared to make things worse.

The cougar took a swipe at Ethan, yowling a threat, trying to scare him off. But Ethan only snarled back and snapped at it, making it clear he wouldn't back down.

And that's the thing about animals, even apex predators, even necromantically resurrected mountain lions. No animal wants to fight if it doesn't have to. Especially not a fight it might lose or might win but get severely injured in the process. When given the option, an animal will almost always choose to de-escalate or run. Necromancy can override that instinct with a direct order, but there was no one here now to tell the lion it had to fight. As I struggled to unravel the energy keeping the cat animate, it evaluated the situation and decided escape was the better option.

It turned, facing the open sliding glass doors before it sprinted out into the wet grass of the backyard.

"Stop it!" I shouted to Ethan, thinking about it crashing into my neighbor's yard. He was already running after it, sinking his teeth into its leg to drag it back. It screamed loud enough to wake the dead. That was definitely going to wake the neighbors.

I grabbed at the energy filling the mountain lion, actually stretching out my hands as I tried to drag it back, panic filling me at the thought of being seen like this, of being exposed. This wasn't like a hundred years ago or even a few decades back. You couldn't just move to another country when your neighbors saw you controlling an undead mountain lion and have everything go back to normal. If I was seen, worse if I was filmed, the entire world would know before the week was out. Aunt Persephona and I would end up in some government bunker doing gods knew what.

My power swelled with my panic. The flame of the candle flared within me. It rushed out, an all-consuming flame, and engulfed the mountain lion, not just washing the energy away but burning it clean like a purifying flame. The lion screamed one last time and then collapsed, nothing but an empty shell. But my power kept running, like a burst pipe, like an open artery, gushing energy that burned the lion's fur away, blackened and charred its bones, taking it apart with a force that was half the ravages of time and half a blue funeral pyre. Soon there was nothing left at all, but my

energy kept running, flailing for something to pour itself into. The wolfhound howled as I dumped more energy into its battered body. I couldn't control it or stop it, but I knew soon there would be no more energy left to spill out.

"Vexa!"

Impossibly large, strong arms wrapped around me. Ethan, in his wolf form, was holding me tightly, trying to shake me out of my trance. My power lashed out at him mindlessly and I saw him wince, but he only tightened his grip on me, hugging me close against his broad chest, pressing my face into his soft fur.

"Hang on," he whispered into my mind. *"I'm here. I've got you. Just hang on."*

Slowly, gradually, the torrent of energy faded, because I had nothing left. I lay limp in Ethan's arms, barely keeping my eyes open, breathing shallowly.

"You still in there?" he asked gently, brushing my hair out of my face.

I mustered the energy to nod. I couldn't do much more.

He carried me carefully up the stairs to my room, laying me down on my bed. He fumbled with my shoes for a moment but couldn't do much with his claws and finally gave up, leaving the room. He returned a little later, back in human shape and dressed, and carrying a glass of juice and some toast.

"I thought this might help," he said, pushing the glass into my hand. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I just ran a marathon," I croaked. "This is worse than the car accident."

He pulled my shoes off, then sat next to me, taking my pulse and temperature.

"What happened?" he asked. "Was that normal? You burned that lion to ash."

"Not normal," I confirmed. "It's the candle, I think. I couldn't stop. There was just so much . . ."

He put a hand on my shoulder and I stopped before I could work myself up.

"Remember how I said before that you needed rest?" he said. "You really, really need to rest."

"Got it," I said, closing my eyes.

"Good." The bed shifted as he stood up and, in a rush of sudden fear, I found the energy to grab for his hand. He stopped, staring back at me.

"They know where I live," I said weakly. "I . . . really don't want to be here alone."

He smiled gently and squeezed my hand.

"I'm not going anywhere," he promised. "Just relax."

Reassured, I relaxed again, the darkness of exhaustion reaching up to swallow me before his hand had even left mine.

I stirred briefly a little later, hearing him close the bedroom door. Squinting at my clock, I saw a few hours had passed. He carried something, which he laid carefully down in the corner of my room. A moment later, I recognized my own energy in it. Ethan had gathered up the pieces of the wolfhound and attempted to put them back together. It growled at him weakly.

"Yeah, yeah," he whispered. "I know, you don't like me yet."

"He's just hurting," I said, surprising Ethan. "He knows you mean well."

Ethan turned back to me with a smile.

"Sorry for waking you," he said. "This guy kept trying to drag himself up the stairs. It was too sad to watch."

"Thanks," I said. "He's a good dog. I'll reattach his parts as soon as I can move."

"Go back to sleep," he said. "I've got things mostly straightened out downstairs. I'm about to go crash on the couch."

"Oh," I said, confused by my own worried disappointment.

"Unless you wanted me to stay in here?" he asked, grinning.

"I don't know how I feel about strange men sleeping in my room," I said.

"What about strange dogs?" he asked with a laugh, and I heard him shed his clothing and shift. A moment later, my bed bounced as the huge wolf jumped up onto my mattress and curled up near the foot. He was so big that even curled up, his legs and tail hung over the edge.

I considered telling him dogs weren't allowed on the bed, but I felt safer having him there, as well as the undead wolfhound, who I would have to name. I didn't have time to contemplate name options for long. I was soon asleep again, my weary bones and various injuries glad for the brief, peaceful reprieve.

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CHAPTER 10

I woke stiff and sore to the sound of birdsong and the distant rush of the shower running. My bedroom window was open, letting in the sunlight and the late morning air. I rolled over slowly, groaning. I'd clearly been hit by a truck. No inch of me didn't feel absolutely terrible. The wolfhound remained in the corner, tail wagging as he saw I was awake.

"Morning," I muttered. "Where did that wolf get to?"

The dog couldn't answer, so I dragged myself out of bed and tried to get dressed. Moving hurt. Breathing hurt. I needed another week in bed.

"I need to come up with a name for you," I said, eyeing the wolfhound as I got dressed, "since it seems like you're going to be around a while. What do you think of Cerberus? Thanatos?"

The dog cocked its head skeptically.

"I'll keep working on it," I said with a shrug, pulling on my shirt. "In the meantime, let's get you patched up."

I pulled out my sewing kit and got to work. It was a quick, messy job wiring his bones back together and stitching his fur back into place. The mountain lion had done a number on him. I ended up patching some of his fur with an old pillowcase.

"I'll get some craft fur later," I said. "Try to make that a little more natural in appearance. But at least you should be able to walk a little easier now, Faustus."

The dog didn't seem to care for the name but climbed to his feet, testing out his reattached limbs. His tail wagged happily.

Job done, I stood and stretched, walking to the door with the dog beside me.

As I reached for the door it opened and I yelped in surprise. Ethan, freshly showered, stood in the doorway, holding a very small towel closed around his hips. My eyes traced a bead of water running down his stomach until it vanished behind the towel.

"I didn't expect you to be awake yet," he said. "How are you feeling?"

"Uh, I'm all right," I said, focused intently on the moisture glistening on his tanned skin. "I'm fine."

He chuckled, waving a hand in front of my eyes to direct my attention back to his face.

"You sure about that?"

I crossed my arms over my chest, flustered and embarrassed.

"I'm just a little out of it," I said. "But I'm doing a lot better than last night. Thank you."

"Anytime," he said.

"That's twice you've saved me now," I said, risking a smile in his direction, though it made my heart race. "A girl might start to think you have a crush."

He grinned, lopsided and hopelessly endearing.

"Well," he said. "I didn't do much except carry you to bed last night. I wouldn't exactly say I saved you. And frankly that lion would have torn me apart if you hadn't burned it with your crazy necro fire. I'd say we're square."

He leaned against the doorframe, peering down at me with eyes like molten gold.

"But I will say I am getting mighty fond of you."

"Does that mean you'll reconsider that museum date?" I asked, teasing.

"I was actually starting to hope we might skip ahead a few dates," he said, and brushed a strand of my hair back behind my ear, fingers just grazing my cheek.

"Sounds like a good idea to me," I agreed, and his touch moved to my chin lifting my face to meet him.

"Wait."

He pulled back, "I'm sorry. Do you want me stop?"

"Yes—I mean, no." I ran a hand over his damp chest, "I want you, want this." I laughed. "I just *really* need a shower."

He smiled down at me. "Of course."

I grabbed a towel from the side cabinet and slipped passed him into the bathroom. “To be continued?”

“Absolutely.”

I shut the door and leaned back against the frame. My body ached and the pain from the last few days wouldn't disappear easily. But even now, my heart felt light and airy, as though something exciting was about to begin.

Steam coated the mirror from Ethan's recent shower and the scent of soap and clean linen filled the bathroom. If I could, I would've bottled it up and made perfume out of it.

I didn't take my normally long shower, deciding to rinse and come out in less than ten minutes, anxious to continue where we'd left off. So much of my time lately had been spent absent a bed partner. It would be nice to feel the weight of a man against me again, especially a man like Ethan.

I tied the band on my lavender, knee-length silk robe and exited the bathroom. When I stepped out, I expected to find Ethan dressed and the mood lifted, but I was pleasantly surprised. Ethan sat on the edge of the bed, bare chested, towel around his hips, leaning back onto his arms. A dimple formed in his cheek as I appeared in the doorway.

“Hello, again,” he said.

I'm not an easily embarrassed kind of girl, especially with a name like Vexa Tzarnavaras. But facing this man, facing Ethan in nothing more than a towel, I found myself keyed up. The good kind, though.

He stood from the bed and walked toward me, slow and predatory, the towel on his hips testing fate with every motion. “So.”

“So?” I tucked the wet strands behind my ear. His bare feet came into view, and the heat of his body radiated against my bare skin.

He grabbed my chin between his thumb and forefinger, drawing my gaze up to his. “Can I take that raincheck now?”

I nodded and he immediately lowered his full lips down to mine. It's amazing how easily the body forgets one sensation and replaces it with another. The painful aching had shifted into another type of aching.

The kiss started sweet, cautious, the press of his mouth warm and tender, lingering for just a moment. When it broke, he scanned my eyes like he was giving me one last chance to back out. Instead I closed the distance between us again, the kiss more heated now, more insistent. His fingers slid into my hair, pulling me closer against his chest. His skin was hot under my

hands, enough to melt any misgivings I might have about jumping into this. Besides being hotter than hell itself, he'd also pretty thoroughly proven that he was someone I was safe around. And even when he was teasing me, I was more comfortable around him than I had been around anyone in a while. I didn't need to hide who and what I was from him.

My teeth pressed against his lips and his burning tongue swept across mine. His hands found my hips, pulled them hard against his own. The barely-there fabric left little to the imagination. I heard his towel hit the floor, followed seconds later by the press of his erection against my belly. I couldn't stop the breathy moan that escaped me.

Too long. It had been *much* too long.

He placed kisses along my jaw, his tongue trailing the same path over. "Vexa. Fuck, I want you."

My hands automatically lowered down his chest to the V in his abdomen. The sinewy muscles of his sculpted torso were like a perfect mountain range, made to be caressed. Rough fingers slid from my hips and lifted the robe until it wrapped around my lower waist. He grabbed the bottom of my bare ass and squeezed hard.

"Oh, gods. Yes," I whispered.

I wanted him worse than a starving animal wanted food, and pain be damned, I didn't want to wait any longer. I lowered my hands, letting them trail the farthest part of his belly and along the line of dark hair that lead to his full erection. My fingers gripped the hot, firm flesh in my hand and tugged, drawing out a long, deep moan from Ethan. He backed us up toward the wall beside my bed and hoisted me into the air. Trapped between his insanely hot body and the wall, I wrapped my legs around him. His dick slid against the wetness, coating my core and I almost orgasmed right then.

"Is this okay?" he said between labored breaths, adjusting himself to enter me.

"Hell, yes." I grabbed the back of his neck and slammed his mouth into mine, showing him with my tongue exactly what I wanted. He devoured my lips, teasing me with his hips, slowly rocking forward along my pussy, making me practically cry out but never entering.

He broke the kiss for me to meet his gaze. "I'll stop as soon as you say the word," he said, close enough that his lips brushed mine, his hands squeezing my hips, the unspoken promise that he would take this as far as I would let him. "We don't have to go down this road if you're not ready."

“More, Ethan. Please, I need you inside me.”

“Yes, mam.” He ground his cock hard against my center in sinful thrusts a few more times and then suddenly set me down. “One sec, gorgeous.”

I almost yelled, “What the hell!” when I realized he had grabbed a condom from the back pocket of his discarded jeans.

He wiggled the plastic square. “Better safe than sorry.”

“Good call.”

He winked and walked back over, condom between his fingers. As he reached me, he untied the belt of my robe, exposing my wholly naked body to him.

“God, you’re beautiful.”

I stuck my tongue out and climbed onto the bed, resting on my elbows. “Shut up, Fabio, and fuck me.”

He growled and practically leapt forward, but before he could oblige, we were interrupted by the buzzing of my phone.

“Ignore that,” he said, wrapping his arms around my waist and pressing more kisses along my collar and breasts. Gods, I wanted his mouth lower.

“I think I will.”

Buzz.

Buzz.

Buzz.

The phone went silent, then a few seconds later, the buzzing began again. I cursed quietly, pulling away from Ethan to grab the phone off my nightstand.

Mr. Gould. *Ugh.* I did *not* want to hear from my boss right now. I debated silencing it, but chose to answer, hoping the conversation would be quick and short.

“Hello?” I said, trying to calm the roaring desire assaulting my every limb.

I didn’t have much luck.

“Vexa, it’s Mr. Gould. “Are you all right? I heard you were in a car accident.”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I told him. “Just sore mostly.” Ethan nipped at my bottom lip, and I had to hold back a moan.

“Good! I’m glad to hear it. Does that mean you’d be willing to come in today?”

“Mm?” I could barely form a sentence now as Ethan’s free hand cupped my breast.

“What’s that, Vexa? I can barely hear you.”

I bit down on my cheek. "Um, I was actually planning to rest a little longer."

Silence.

“Mr. Gould?”

"I could really, really use your help here today."

“Seriously?”

“Yes,” he said, “*very* seriously.”

I recognized the tone. It was the, “Come in today or you might not be working here much longer” tone. I'd gone through a handful of jobs during my turbulent post-high school days when I was just getting a handle on my powers on top of all the stress and confusion of starting an adult life. I was familiar with this tone. Mr. Gould was generally a nice guy, but he was still my boss. I glanced up at Ethan, his gorgeous dark hair hanging partly over his jaw as he hovered above me. He raised an eyebrow and I sighed.

"I'll be there as soon as I can," I said, resigned.

I hurried to get dressed, Ethan watching me with what could only be described as sad, puppy eyes.

"You need more rest," he said. "I could get you an actual doctor's note if you want."

"I don't think rest is what you have in mind," I said, turning my back on him to swap my T-shirt for a simple tailored black dress, tea-length over dark hose. "Besides, I really need this job. Especially with my powers out of control this way. If I don't have a way to siphon them off, I could become dangerous."

Ethan sighed but nodded in understanding.

"Let me get my pants on and I'll give you a ride," he said.

I made the mistake of kissing him again in gratitude. He grabbed the back of my head, pulling my mouth up to his in a deep, sensual kiss. Our tongues intertwined in a hot passionate dance that made my entire body turn to jello.

We lost nearly ten minutes before I remembered what I was doing and disentangled myself. I attacked my hair with the straightener, shoved my makeup into my purse, then rushed downstairs. Ethan had done his best to clean up last night, setting the couch upright and putting the kitchen back

together. He couldn't do much about the slashed cushions and broken lamps. I appreciated the effort anyway.

I grabbed the bag of necromancy books on the way to the car.

"What's that for?" Ethan asked.

"I figured I'd drop by my aunt's on the way home," I said. "She can probably do more with these than we can."

"Good idea," he said. "I'll probably wait in the car while you talk to her, though."

I laughed, shaking my head.

"Yeah, probably a good idea," I said. "She's a nice lady, honestly. She's probably never met a werewolf before. I'll try to warm her up to the idea."

"Don't worry about it too much," he said with a dismissive wave. "I'm not really here to change people's minds."

We climbed into the Jeep and headed for the funeral home, but we hadn't gone far before I noticed a distinctive smell coming from the back. I twisted and was greeted by an eager lick from the undead wolfhound.

"How did you get back there?" I asked, exasperated. "What happened to guarding the house, Azreal?"

"Azreal?" Ethan said, raising an eyebrow.

"I'm trying out different names for him. I haven't settled on anything yet."

"Well, guarding the house didn't work out so well for Azreal last time," he said. "Maybe he thinks he'll be safer following you around."

"That's the thing," I said, frowning at the dog in the back seat. "He shouldn't be thinking anything. The level of autonomy he has is . . . weird."

Ethan shrugged. "How are undead dogs supposed to act?"

I couldn't really answer.

We decided since we patched him up, he looked close enough to alive that you couldn't really tell he was dead unless you scrutinized him closely. He would accompany me to work where I could keep an eye on him. Ethan thought he'd probably be called into work soon. He dropped me off in front of the funeral home, and pressing my luck, I leaned in to kiss him goodbye. He smiled against my lips and held me there just a little longer. We separated reluctantly as I slid out of the Jeep.

"Be safe," he said. "I'll try to be back here around seven. That's when you get off, right?"

"Oh, we'll see when I get off," I said with a grin. Ethan laughed. "But yeah, around seven usually. I'll text you if anything happens."

He let the dog out of the back and leaned forward to kiss me one last time, then paused, nose twitching.

"What's wrong?" I asked. He tilted his head thoughtfully, but whatever scent he tried to catch appeared to have vanished.

"Nothing," he said after a moment. "Just thought I smelled something for a minute." He frowned, then shook his head. "I know you can take care of yourself," he said, "but stay alert, all right?"

"I will," I said, both flattered by his confidence in me and by his concern. "You be careful, too."

I headed inside, the dog padding along beside me. Mr. Gould waited inside before I'd even put my things down. He looked like he'd been pacing in the lobby waiting for me.

"Is that a dog?" he asked, as I closed the door behind me.

"My uncle's," I said, quickly making up a lie. "I'm just dog sitting for the day. Don't worry, I know he appears a bit . . . different . . . but he's trained. Very well behaved."

His uncertain gaze lingered on the makeshift dog skin. "Very unusual. Is he sick?"

"No, no." I patted his head to show he wasn't some diseased mongrel. "He's a mutt. A mix between two very odd dog breeds." I nudged my head toward my companion. "This is the result. Not too pretty and he does need a bath."

If he had any doubts, he ignored them and moved along. "Whatever. You can put him in one of the storerooms, just don't let him near the deceased," Mr. Gould said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "I have a client in the other room I need you to deal with."

"What's up?" I asked, curious. He didn't usually have me handle the families alone. He also usually called them the families or the bereaved, not clients.

"It's why I called you in," he confessed, and I realized the starched collar of his somber gray suit was damp with sweat. He was always a pale man, but now his face was positively ashen. "He is . . . extremely unorthodox. And he will only speak with you."

"What?" I scrunched my nose. Beside me, the dog stared hard at the door to the client meeting room, a quiet growl building.

"He requested you by name," Mr. Gould said. "He refuses to work with anyone else."

A cold shiver ran up my back.

"I'll handle it," I said quietly, my hand gripping the dog's fur for stability. "Can you do me a favor?"

"A favor?" Mr. Gould repeated.

"Go down to the prep room and just . . . stay there," I said, my expression grim. Gould regarded me strangely for a moment, then shook his head.

"Normally I would question that, but . . ." He glanced back at the client room and shivered. "Call for me if you need any help."

"I will," I lied.

Mr. Gould headed downstairs to the prep room. I checked the rest of the building quickly to be certain there weren't any other mourners around. I took a deep breath and opened the door, my cell phone in one hand ready to text Ethan if this turned out to be more than just a strange client.

There was only one person in the client room, and he was not what I expected. He faced the window, broad shoulders in a dark coat silhouetted by the light, but as I closed the door he turned to face me. Beside me, the dog's ears flattened to its skull, and it growled low and angry.

He was close to my age, maybe a little younger, with spiky black hair and sharp blue eyes. He looked thin but strong, like he'd been working too hard with too little to eat for most of his life with rangy, corded muscles and harsh cheekbones. A tattoo crawled up his neck and peeked out under the cuffs of his leather jacket, harsh black runic symbols familiar to me. The moment his eyes met mine, I sensed the energy boiling under his skin at just the same frequency as mine.

He was a necromancer.

Shit.

CHAPTER 11

“Finally,” the necromancer smirked. “I’ve been here for ages.”

He reminded me of Spike from *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer*, and my inner teen was having a giddy field day.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” I joked. “Work wasn’t exactly my priority today. Bigger things to deal with. Like, you know, the mountain lion someone left in my apartment.”

He scoffed, but I didn’t need him to confirm it was he who was responsible. I sensed it in my bones. The same energy, the same will that had animated the lion was here, standing across the room from me. But he had the candle, so why was he here? Tying up loose ends? But if he planned to kill me, why hadn’t he attacked already?

Focus, Vexa.

“Yeah, you kicked that thing’s ass,” he said. I couldn’t decide if his stare was defensive or a challenge. “I’d be impressed if I wasn’t so pissed off.”

“What a coincidence!” I said with a sharp, bitter laugh. “I’m pretty pissed, too. You’re paying for my couch.”

“Good luck with that,” he said, crossing his arms over his chest.

His boots were past worn out. And I started to think the distressing on his jeans wasn’t a fashion statement. I remembered the sad little campsite in the abandoned house and a flash of conflicted, uneasy pity hit me. He sensed it or at least my eyes on the duct tape holding together his left shoe, and scowled, drawing himself up taller.

“You’ve got some power. Even with the candle, I didn’t expect you to wreck my lion so . . . *thoroughly*. But this doesn’t have to end in a fight.”

“If you didn’t want to fight me, you probably shouldn’t have tried so hard to kill me,” I pointed out.

“I knew you could handle the lion,” he shrugged. “Seems like you’ve got experience with undead animals.”

He gestured to the dog beside me, who continued to growl. The blue necromantic fire in his eyes flared with hate. The dog remembered this guy from the break-in. The necromancer’s lip curled in disgust.

“All the power of the actual Candle of the Covenant, and you used it to resurrect a dog,” he said, sounding like the thought revolted him. “Was it a beloved childhood pet or what?”

“No, it’s my neighbor’s actually,” I said, confused by his reaction and fishing for more. “I just needed it to fight off a werewolf.”

“It’s not even yours?” he shouted, his tone angry. I knew this guy used his powers to resurrect animals, so why was he so scandalized by me bringing back a dog? I could have done that even without the boost the candle had given me. Yeah, the dog was a bit livelier than most animals I’d ever resurrected but come on.

The guy’s expression was thunderous now. The veneer of superiority he’d been trying to keep up had crumbled. There was something close to hate in his eyes, like I’d hurt him, deeply and personally.

“Enough,” he hissed, his power stretching out around him, reaching out like a fog. “You appear to have a really nice, comfortable life here. I can end that in an instant. I could wake every corpse in this building.”

My heart skipped a beat, remembering I’d sent Mr. Gould down to the prep room. If the bodies in the freezers started rising, he’d be right there to see it and possibly get hurt.

“You’d be exposed, too,” I said, plotting a plausible explanation as we continued talking.

“What do I care?” he said with a snort. “I’m nobody. I don’t have anything to lose. I can just disappear. But you’ve got a family, a job, a nice house. What are *you* going to do when your neighbors find out you can raise the dead?”

I threw my own powers out, quick and messy, shielding the corpses downstairs.

“What do you want?” I demanded.

“Work with me,” he said. His powers bore down on mine, testing for weaknesses. “You have no idea what you’re doing. I can help you.”

There was something oddly genuine about his offer.

Careful, Vexa. Don't go acting all kindred spirits and shit for the misunderstood necromancer.

"Help me do what?" I shook as I tried to hold him back. I could tell he wasn't even really trying yet, but I was almost at my limit. "What are you after?"

"I want to use the candle for something worthwhile," he said, and his energy grew heavier, crushing my inexperienced attempts to block him. "Something that *matters*."

Sweat formed on my brow, and I scrambled for some way to throw him off.

"Like your family?"

He flinched, and I took the chance to push back against his magic, driving him farther away from the corpses downstairs. I reached into my bag filled with necro books and watched his eyes widen as he recognized the object in my hands. Between the pages, I pulled out the photo of the happy family.

"This is you, isn't it?" I said. "Beautiful family, nice house, a dog. And now you're homeless and alone. What happened?"

"That's none of your business," he snarled. "Give that back, now!"

"So, what, you're trying to bring them back?" I pushed, trying to catch him off guard again before he put his full force into his powers again. "You know that's not how it works! Nobody comes back!"

"Liar!" he shouted, and I fell to my knees with a cry as his powers overwhelmed me, seizing control of the bodies downstairs. "No, it's worse than that. You don't even know what the candle is, do you?"

"I know I'm never going to let a lunatic like you keep it!" I said, bracing myself on the shoulder of the dog.

As I buried my fingers in its fur, its power rushed into me, replenishing the reserves I'd bled out the night before. I'd poured so much energy into the dog last night and when I'd first resurrected it, he had more than enough to spare. He overflowed with it. I channeled it through myself and directly into the corpses downstairs. The blue flame of the candle within me flared, my power swelling like a cresting wave, washing away the other necromancer's grip like footprints from the shore. As I took control, commanding the bodies to lie motionless, I saw the other necromancer's

expression turn to horror, fixed on a point behind my right shoulder. I sensed someone standing there, a steady and constant presence.

“You’re one of them!” the other necromancer said, somewhere between anger and fear. “Tzarnavaras!”

“Damn right I am,” I said. “And that candle is mine! Give! It! Back!”

Befuddlement crossed the man’s face and my will flickered for a moment.

“You already have it,” he said. “That’s why I trashed your apartment hunting for it! That’s why I’m here!”

“I thought you had it,” I said, my powers winding down as confusion left me unsure where to direct them. “You stole it from me during the car accident!”

“What car accident?” he said, and I didn’t doubt his honesty.

“I’m an idiot,” I whispered to myself.

There had been a third player involved in this all along. One who was aiming to pit us against each other, but to what end?

As if on cue, a fierce wind threw open the door behind me. Through it, I saw the front doors of the funeral home had been thrown open as well. As a stranger stepped through, dread settled over me.

He was not very tall, his stature not particularly imposing. He wore a plain black suit, the kind I saw here every day. His long, blond hair, braided to his waist, was at first glance his only striking feature. And yet the unearthly pallor of his skin, the eerie emptiness of his black eyes, drew the gaze and held it fixated like a sparrow before a cobra. I recognized the face at once, though in the time it took me to place where I’d seen it before, he had already crossed the distance between us to stand over me.

"Aethon," I whispered.

The portrait had been a good likeness. And he looked exactly the same as he had when it was painted thousands of years ago. He stood in the shadow of the doorway, just beyond the light of the windows. For a moment, I couldn't sense his power until I realized it was too big to perceive all at once. It surrounded us like air.

"Descendant," Aethon said.

I half expected his voice to echo as though from deep underground, but it sounded quite calm and ordinary. The wind had died down. He stood before me, by all normal senses just a man, albeit a very pale one with hypnotic eyes, while his power hung heavy over all of us, vast beyond

measure. He stared at me with bottomless eyes, and I felt like child, helpless, foolish, in the clutches of something I couldn't begin to understand.

"You have made a mistake."

Yeah, no freaking kidding partner.

"What did I do?" I asked, embarrassed by the hesitant whisper of my own voice.

Fear didn't begin to describe what I endured under that stare. It was a paralysis so total it registered as a buzzing numbness. An utter certainty that any attempt to fight or flee would not just fail but be inconsequential. I was an ant in the path of a giant, waiting for the heel to come down.

"The candle," Aethon said, his eyes never leaving mine, intense as a black hole. "What should have always been mine, stolen, hidden for hundreds of years. And when it finally emerges again after all this time, just as I am on my way to reclaim it, you make the mistake of binding your energy to it, accepting the covenant that should have been mine." The irises of his eyes pulsed with angry light. "I claim my candle again, only to find its powers bound to another and thus useless to me. You can see why I would be upset."

I nodded mutely, too afraid to do more.

"But you will be given an opportunity to correct your mistake," he said, and with a small gesture the candle appeared in his hand, flaring within its silver cage, the flame flickering in time with my erratic heartbeat. "Sever your connection, break the covenant, and all will be forgiven."

I stared at the candle and, for a moment, if I could have done it, I would have without even thinking.

"I don't know how," I said, bracing for him to lash out at me. But he just nodded in understanding and reached for me.

"Then you will come with me," he said. "And I will find a way to separate you from the candle."

The chill of his cold hand touched my skin although he was an inch away. Before he could connect, someone else grabbed me by the back of my dress and yanked me backward.

The other necromancer, clearly unsettled by Aethon's presence but ferocious in his determination, held on to me tightly.

"What are you doing?" I asked, trying to pull away from him.

"If you're the key to using the candle," he said, continuing to stare at Aethon, "then you're coming with me."

My anger at his presumption cut through my fear.

"Like hell I am," I said, and jammed the heel of my nice work pumps into the top of his foot hard enough to make him shout and release me. "I'm not handing over the candle to either of you! You've both tried to murder me!"

"Unfortunate," Aethon said without emotion. He hadn't taken his eyes off me since he entered the room. He didn't seem to even notice the other necromancer was there. "It would be wiser to cooperate. Killing you would be inconvenient. Making you wish you were dead, on the other hand, would be all too easy."

He raised a hand and sudden, burning pain flared in the fingers of my right hand, traveling up my wrist. I grabbed at them, an agonized animal sound leaving me, as I watched my fingers turn black and wither. The desiccation spread up my arm, carrying with it horrific pain as my arm died before my eyes.

"Stop!" I begged, unable to think of anything but the pain clawing at my own withered skin. "Stop, stop!"

"Hey!"

A chair collided with Aethon's head. It shattered into matchsticks without the man moving an inch. It did succeed in at last making him take his eyes from me to acknowledge the other man in the room.

"She's mine!" the other necromancer snarled, as though unaware he was a mouse picking a fight with a lion. "She and the candle both!"

As soon as Aethon's attention was off me, the pain and intense, paralyzing fear faded. My arm was tender and hurt more than anything I'd ever experienced, but I could think again, and I wasn't frozen with terror.

I watched as the other necromancer raised his arms and the walls trembled as every dead insect that had ever wasted into nothing in the shadows and crevices of this building swarmed into the room, flying at Aethon like an angry black cloud. Aethon gestured and half the swarm fell dead, but the rest flew at his face, biting and stinging. He didn't seem to react at all.

Imitating the flow of the other necromancer's powers, I reached for any other death in the building, bringing a swarm of lizards and sparrows and

one desiccated raccoon that took out a ceiling tile as it broke through into the room, chattering as rabidly as it had when it was alive.

Aethon stood there, slack, unreactive, as the insects crawled over him, the sparrows darting at his eyes, the raccoon clawing and gnawing at his ankles. They did damage, leaving bites and scratches. The raccoon tore into him deep enough to expose bone. But there was no blood. And if there was pain, Aethon didn't care. He only bothered to kill them when they got too close to his eyes, at which point they would just fall dead. Otherwise, he tolerated their attacks as though they were a minor annoyance, the tantrums of children.

The other necromancer, by contrast, threw all he had into this. I watched, a little awed, as he guided the swarm in rapid, coordinated attacks. Half the swarm dived in while the other circled to flank Aethon. Then just as quickly, they flew out of range and started again. Aethon just didn't seem to care. Nothing had any kind of impact. The other necromancer noticed this and while Aethon's vision was obscured by the swarm, he charged Aethon, swinging a chair.

It shattered into splinters just as the first one had, but the impact was enough to make Aethon's head jerk to the side. The other necromancer, still gripping two splintered chair legs, took advantage of the opening, swinging the improvised stakes at Aethon's throat. Aethon moved with shocking speed, considering how subdued he'd been so far. He dodged the strike, caught one of the chair legs and knocked the other spinning out of the necromancer's hand, skidding to my feet. I snatched it up as Aethon buried a fist in the other necromancer's stomach, sending him sprawling with the wind knocked out of him.

"This is foolish," Aethon said, and I was inclined to agree with him. "It is clear no one has ever properly trained either of you. You will not defeat me."

He stalked closer to me slowly, like he had all the time in the world. Judging by the fact he was alive even though he should have died with the Roman Empire, maybe he did.

I clutched the table leg with my good hand and summoned the remaining undead insects to stand between me and Aethon. I'd kept the dog away from the fight so far, seeing how easily Aethon returned the other creatures to death, but now I couldn't stop him from crouching between me and Aethon, growling in warning. The raccoon was stubbornly attached to

Aethon's leg, tearing muscle away from bone. A human would not have been able to walk on that leg. I'm not sure the necessary tendons were even connected anymore. But it was clear that whatever Aethon was, he was not human, and his ability to move was no longer dependent on such things.

"Yeah, that's probably true," I said, backing slowly away. "But first I want to know one thing."

"What's that?" Aethon asked, almost genial.

"Have you ever fought a werewolf?"

I appreciated the confusion on Aethon's face for about a half a second before Ethan collided with him.

Fully transformed and snarling like something out of a horror movie, he drove Aethon to the ground and pinned him there with one massive paw.

"Got your text," he said, glancing at me, his tail wagging. *"Who's this guy? And what is he? He doesn't smell right."*

Before I could answer, I felt Aethon's power building, boiling like storm clouds on the horizon. I saw him raise a hand wreathed in dark energy so thick even a normal person would have seen it.

"Look out!" I shouted, and Ethan leapt clear just as Aethon lashed out, his fingertips just stirring Ethan's fur.

But that was all it took apparently. Ethan turned, scratching and biting at his own coat, a high-pitched wounded dog whine leaving him. I watched, horrified, as the same black rot that had withered my hand spread across his side.

"You are beginning to test my patience," Aethon said, rising to his feet. "End this now and I might forgive you. Some day."

Ethan, ignoring the spreading blackness growing over his shoulder and side, threw himself at Aethon teeth first. His pain and rage drowned out everything sane in him.

Aethon didn't bother to try and stop Ethan. He embraced the wolf as it tore his throat out, and from his hands more of the black rot spread.

"Ethan!" Fear gripped me tightly. Aethon was killing him.

Ethan stayed on the attack as long as he could, but as the black started to climb over his face he fell back, whining, stumbling away a few steps and finally collapsed.

I ran to him, my hands on his heaving sides as his fur fell out and the gray skin beneath darkened and withered. He panted, eyes rolling, pain and fear streaming off of him in waves.

"Ethan, Ethan stay with me!" I begged. He didn't answer, too far gone to think of anything but pain.

Aethon watched us, deadly hands hanging loose at his side, throat open and bloodless though I saw his trachea and arteries, exposed and ragged. He waited patiently for Ethan to die.

"Stop it!" I pleaded. "Save him, please! I'll do whatever you want!"

"It's too late for that, I'm afraid," Aethon replied dispassionately. "If you had surrendered earlier, it might not have come to this. A lesson, my descendant. Do not risk anything you are not willing to lose."

I ignored him, returning my attention to Ethan.

"Just hang on," I told him, tears gathering in my eyes. "I'm going to fix this. You're going to be okay. Just hang on!"

I closed my eyes, reaching out with my powers for . . . I didn't know what.

I'm a necromancer.

Necromancy isn't really known for fixing things. We have a pretty narrow range of specialty. We bring back dead things and that's about it. But Aethon had apparently figured out how to just kill individual cells. Maybe I could figure out how to undo it.

I searched Ethan with my powers, rummaging for something, anything I could do. I recognized him, his energy, and it was getting weaker every minute. The dark, beating heart of his curse, entwined with every inch of him. I almost lost myself in it, a dense knot of grief and shame and rage, turning around like a prayer wheel, like an uroboros feeding on itself, threatening to pull me into its endless cycle of self-sustaining hate. I'd never seen a curse before, but this was a nasty one.

I wrenched my attention away from it, searching for Aethon's energy. I was used to energy that felt like a kind of fire. Even the other necromancer had burning hot and angry energy. But Aethon's was more like smoke, thick and oppressive, hanging heavy all around me, difficult to see, harder to catch. But it was there, in Ethan, winding its way through his life energy like mist through the roots of the trees.

I wanted to grab it, to drag it out of him, so badly that my hands clenched in his fur. But it just slipped through my metaphorical fingers. I couldn't get a grip on it. There had to be a way!

Desperate, I remembered Aunt Persephona's lesson earlier on putting down the bodies I'd accidentally raised with the candle. That was about

washing away unwanted energy, right? Then this was the same.

I visualized cleansing summer rains and rushing waterfalls and the patient through washing and care of the dead. I imagined scrubbing the ugly smoke away, rinsing it down the drain. I experienced a thrill of success as it started working, Aethon's energy retreating. I opened my eyes and saw the black, withered skin slowly returning to normal.

"Interesting," Aethon said quietly.

But I wasn't going fast enough. Ethan continued to fade. And the energy resisted me. It wasn't like the inert will I poured into the dead bodies I resurrected. It was alive and hungry and refused to just dissolve. It wanted to be.

Fine, I thought, then be in me. I opened myself up and turned up the metaphorical garden hose, washing Aethon's energy away from Ethan, letting it flow into me instead. It didn't feel that different than absorbing the energy from the dog earlier. I'd expected it to hurt, to rot me, too, but it was just power, filling me up the way the candle had, making me stronger. I saw the last of it pass out of Ethan, but I had room for more. I'd bled myself dry last night fighting the mountain lion. I was like a dry sponge, soaking up every drop of power I could get. I followed the energy back to its source.

I raised my head and saw Aethon's eyes widen as I pulled in his energy, drawing it out of him like a black hole. His supply showed every sign of being nearly infinite, but I was strangely confident I could take it. All of it. I'd leave him a husk. A wind rose around me, lifting my hair off my shoulders, hate in my eyes as I took in Aethon's power. The last of the pain receded from my right hand. I'd pulled in the energy he'd used to wither it, restoring it to health. Aethon, looking more like a walking corpse than those I'd raised the day before yesterday, met my stare with mild curiosity.

"Fascinating," he said. "You could do great things with training. It is unfortunate that will not happen."

He raised a hand, dark with his killing power, and stepped toward me. I pulled energy out of him as quickly as I could, but he simply had too much. I would never be able to stop him before he reached me. I closed my eyes, bracing myself to fight whatever he was going to do to me.

Someone's cell phone rang.

Everything ceased as the cheery default digital ringtone played in the abruptly silent room.

Aethon straightened up, reached into the pocket of his suit jacket, and pulled out a cell phone while I stared, baffled both that he had a cell phone at all and that he would answer it in the middle of *this*.

"Yes," he said, holding the phone to his ear. "Of course. Don't do anything until I arrive."

He hung up and tucked the phone back into his jacket. He straightened his tie as he looked down at me again.

"I have more important matters to attend to," he said, milder than he had been this entire encounter. "I will give you some time to consider. But I will see you again soon, descendant. Do me a favor and do not die in the meantime."

And with that he turned and left, walking casually out of the room as though this had been just a dull business meeting and not a fight for my life.

The other necromancer had recovered at some point during the fight, and he scrambled to his feet now to chase after Aethon.

"What are you doing?" I shouted after him. "He'll kill you!"

He paused in the doorway long enough to glance back at me.

"I'm getting that candle," he snarled. "And then I'm coming back for you."

He took off before I could say anything more, leaving me alone with Ethan who, now that the danger had passed, fell unconscious. I held him as he shrank back into a naked man.

The dog sat down beside me and put his shaggy head on my shoulder. I sighed and patted him thoughtfully, scrutinizing the room.

Dead insects, mice, lizards, and one raccoon littered the floor among the splinters of two broken chairs and plaster from the broken ceiling tile.

"We made quite a mess, didn't we, Mort?" I said, scratching his floppy ears. He chuffed happily. "Well, at least I finally found a name you like."

I pulled out my phone and dialed Aunt Persephona. I was going to need help.

CHAPTER 12

I lay on the bed of Aunt Persephona's guest room, Ethan sleeping next to me, and stared up at the ceiling, wondering what was going to happen to me.

Mort lay across our feet, looking more alive now that I'd had time to put some effort into stitching him back together and padding out his fur. In the chair on the other side of the room, a fluffy, black three-legged cat sunned itself, freshly returned from the vet. Aunt Percy had named her Morgana. The events of two days ago still played in a loop in my head.

I'd sent the dead animals back into the walls of the funeral home and promised to pay for the chairs and ceiling tile. After Mr. Gould had let me have it—and then some—he'd finally calmed down enough to listen. I'd explained that the strange client had been a nasty ex-boyfriend, which had earned me a few shreds of sympathy—but not nearly enough. If I hadn't been able to cover up naked Ethan with scattered debris and a tarp, gods know what would've happened.

Replacements of my caliber aren't easy to come by. If they were, he'd have thrown me out in a second after this last debacle. It's not like little girls and boys lined up for a career serving the undead. Now, I had the distinct feeling my job hung by a thread . . . and that thread was called "a lack of options."

At least Aunt Persephona had been willing to let us stay at her house a while. She didn't like the situation in the least, but some things take precedence. Her love for me far outweighed her hatred of werewolves. Not the most magnanimous reason, but I'd call it progress.

There'd been no sign of Aethon or the other necromancer since the fight at the funeral home, but I was uncomfortable going back to my apartment. I knew one or both of them was bound to show up again eventually. Probably sooner rather than later. And I didn't know what to do about it.

Aethon had been right. I wasn't strong or well-trained enough to take on either one of them. Aunt Percy didn't have much to offer. She was weak and untrained herself. What was I supposed to do? Wait for one of them to torture me until I broke my connection to the candle? Maybe Ethan's contacts at the library, the curators, would be able to help. They'd been planning to buy and hide the candle, right? I didn't want anyone else to get hurt and what had nearly happened to Ethan struck me as a dangerous move.

The stack of books I'd taken from the other necromancer, along with several from Aunt Persephona's library, sat on the bedside table.

I'd been studying them, trying to learn more about my powers and what I could do with them. If everything I'd read so far was anything to go by, what I'd done to save Ethan was pretty unheard of. Taking back energy once it had been put into something, dead or otherwise, was broadly considered impossible. That I'd pulled Aethon's death out of Ethan, then dragged Aethon's own energy out of him—there was nothing like it in any of the books. It was going to be even harder to figure out my powers, when I couldn't even accurately tell what they were.

As I lay there contemplating the future, my phone buzzed from on top of the stack of books. I grabbed it, frowned at the unknown number, and then answered anyway.

"Hello?"

"It's Cole."

I sat up, skin prickling. "Who?"

"The guy you fought a lich with day before yesterday," he said. "Never got a chance to give you my name. I'm Cole."

"How the hell did you get my number?" I asked in a low hiss, glancing at Ethan to make sure he was still asleep.

"Magic, genius," Cole said with a snort.

"How do you magic a phone number?" I slipped off the bed and closed the curtains, shutting out the sunlight. There wasn't anyone in the yard. I half expected to see Aethon standing in the pansies.

"Fine, I got it from your work. Happy?"

"No, I am definitely not happy," I said. "I've got two assholes trying to kill me and my life force is tied to some random candle which, by the way, Aethon still has."

"He doesn't want you dead," Cole said with strange confidence. "He practically said as much and judging by his actions, when he could've ended you—he didn't. I'm guessing it would interfere with however he wants to use the candle. And he knows more about it than either of us, so I'm not going to kill you, either. At least not until I know what's keeping him from doing it."

"Well that's reassuring."

"You did pretty well in that fight," Cole said. "I was actually kind of impressed. I mean, it was pretty obvious it was your first fight, but still. You did all right. For future reference, if you want to control a bunch of things, smaller and simpler is better. Insects are easy to coordinate, a ton of them at once. But something as complicated as a raccoon takes more focus and energy. You had to leave it and the birds on autopilot, so you couldn't take full advantage of controlling them."

"Are you seriously offering me guidance?"

He sighed into the receiver. "It would seem so."

"I thought you wanted me dead."

He remained silent as if debating how he wanted to respond. A full thirty seconds passed and just as I thought he'd hung up, he added, "Take it or leave it."

Odd. But I refused to dwell on it. I had other pressing matters to deal with.

"Well, thanks for the advice," I said, rolling my eyes. "I'll keep that in mind when I'm kicking your ass next time I see you."

"I don't think it'll be too long until you get your chance," he chuckled. "Aethon slipped away from me with the candle, but he's bound to show up again, and when he does he'll be coming for you. I'm going to be staying close."

I shivered uncertain—or perhaps unwilling—to acknowledge why.

"Come anywhere near me or anyone I care about and you're dead," I warned him. "We'll see how good you are at controlling your little bug swarms after I've hit you in the head with a baseball bat a few times. And that's before I sic the werewolf on you."

"You might want to save that fight for your freaky-ass ancestor," Cole replied. "He's a lot more dangerous than either of us. Whatever he's planning for the candle, it's probably not good. We stand a better chance working together."

"Except, in case you've forgotten, you tried to kill me and still want to kill me, too," I said.

"I left a mountain lion in your apartment," Cole said. "Which you vaporized. I don't think it's quite on the same level."

"I don't have any reason to trust either of you," I said.

"Never heard of the saying, 'Better to lie with the devil you know?'"

"I'm not *lying* with anyone."

I could tell he was smirking into the phone. "I didn't mean in the biblical sense."

"Like I said, I don't know who to trust."

"You're really giving Aethon the benefit of the doubt? Especially after last night?"

"Aethon might have the best intentions in the world, but he didn't exactly share them with me before torturing me and trying to kill my friend. I don't know what you're after, either. You could be just as bad as he is. All I know about you is that you're the kind of guy who's willing to wreck someone's apartment to get what he wants, and then leave an undead mountain lion behind out of spite when he doesn't get it."

Cole was quiet for a few moments.

"It's personal," he said at last, voice soft. "What I want the candle for. It's personal. I don't want to hurt anyone or take over the world or whatever. I just want to . . . fix something. Once I'm done, you can have the candle back. Or give it to whatever secret society has been hiding it all this time or whatever."

He sounded sincere, but I still wasn't sure I could believe him. Or that I even wanted to. It's much easier to simply hate someone you're uncertain about, then to spend time pondering over their true motives.

I didn't answer and he took my silence as the perfect time for goodbyes.

"I'll be around, Vexa. Try not to die before I get that candle back, all right?"

"Yeah," I said, shaking my head. "You don't die either. I'd be pissed if you croak before I get a chance to kick your ass."

He laughed, a brief but pleasant sound that evoked as much surprise from him as me.

"Deal," he said, and hung up.

I sat on the bed putting the phone on top of the books, wondering what I was going to do next. I looked over at Ethan, sleeping peacefully, and smiled. At least, whatever happened, whatever was coming for me, I wouldn't be facing it alone. I cuddled into him until his arms instinctively wrapped around my waist, cradling me protectively against his chest.

Sure, I was a woman, a necromancer, who could probably kick more ass than the werewolf at my back, but sometimes, it's nice to know that if you *wanted* to be saved, to be protected instead of having to fight, you could. I closed my eyes and accepted the respite his arms offered me, even if it was only temporary.

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CHAPTER 13

Aunt Persephona once told me that *Déjà vu* was never to be ignored.

To the mundane, that odd sensation of already having experienced events was shaken off as just nothing more than a "weird unexplainable occurrence" everyone went through at one time or another.

In actuality, it served a higher purpose in the cosmic order. A warning. A prelude of something dark to come. Not set in stone per se, but alterable events that could come to pass if one didn't acknowledge the sign they'd been gifted.

In simpler terms, *Déjà vu* was *never* a good omen.

So the fact that I watched an obsidian-headed Magpie circle and land on the branch outside Aunt Percy's kitchen window in an all-too-familiar way irked me to my very core.

Its ebony eyes blended into its matching head, contrasting harshly against the white-and-blue feather's adorning its lower half. I stood unmoving, dirty dinner plates in my hand as it did exactly as I had known it would. It crossed the lawn, swooping into the birdbath, then landing atop the square feeder in the center garden, before taking its fill and ending up perched on the tree branch just beyond the kitchen sink.

I held my breath. Maybe it'll just fly away. Maybe it won't . . . *nope* . . . it completed my sense of *Déjà vu*. It took a few paces forward, the branch bouncing with each hop, and pecked its beak against the glass three times.

"Vexa?"

Startled by my aunt's voice, I jerked and the wet plate in my hands slipped. It caught the glass tumbler on the counter's edge along with it, and both hit the floor in a resounding smash. I dropped down to my knees, using

my fingers to scoop up the mess of porcelain and glass coating her wood floor.

“Don’t use your bare hands,” Aunt Percy said as she walked over to the pantry and grabbed a broom. “Here.” She crouched down beside me, handing me the dustpan.

I picked up a few of the large pieces and set them on top. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right, honey. Nothing a little glue can’t fix.”

The plate had only broken into six pieces, so it wouldn’t be much trouble to mend, but the glass couldn’t be saved. She cleared out the remaining shards and together we swept and vacuumed, making sure our bare feet wouldn’t get any painful surprises later.

“Are you all right?” she asked, leaning her back against the counter, the wet dish towel hung limply over her shoulder.

“Yes—I’m sorry.”

“It was an accident, Vexa. No need for so many apologies.”

“I know, I just . . .”

“Spit it out, love.”

“I saw something familiar.”

Aunt Persephona raised a brow. “Familiar?”

“Déjà vu.”

“What was it?”

I sighed. “Does it matter? You’ve told me. A bad omen is a bad omen. Unless there’s another way to interpret Déjà vu?”

“No.” She shook her head. “The omen is clear. Darkness is coming.” She sat down in the nearest chair at the kitchen table, her hands threaded together, gaze thoughtful. “When was the first time you saw it?”

I sunk into the empty seat beside her. “The day before Uncle Ptolemy’s funeral, and then just now.”

Her eyes focused intently on the bowl of fruit residing in the center of the oak table. “So, after the candle.” It wasn’t a question, merely her confirming the suspicions we both had. After *Aethon’s* arrival, my great-great-great ancestor and current nemesis.

“I mean he’s already here, so maybe that’s all its saying.” I lied to myself. “Just a reminder.”

“No. *Aethon’s* mere presence wouldn’t draw a sign like this.” She tapped her knuckles along the tabletop, deep in thought. “We have to be careful.” She looked to me. “*You* have to be careful.”

“I always am.”

“You know what I mean.”

I reached my hand across the table and set it on hers. “I know—and I will.”

“I mean it, Vexa.” She stood. “There’s something happening here. Something I can’t place or explain. Necromancy can lead you down many paths. Several of which are *not* good ones. This magic could affect you in ways even you won’t understand. Be cautious. Not just of your enemies, but yourself as well.”

Cautious of yourself. Three words no one wants to hear, especially anyone who deals in magic. That’s the equivalent of being told you may be losing your mind.

“I’ll be careful, I swear.”

“And you’ll tell me if anything strange happens? Or anyone new shows up?”

I smiled. “Of course.”

It was kind of a lie because I had yet to tell her about Cole. Why hadn’t I said anything to Aunt Persephona? Probably for the same reason I hadn’t told Ethan about the phone call the other night. I was afraid to.

Strange things *were* happening. I wasn’t ready to acknowledge them . . . not yet. I’d show Aunt Persephona and Ethan most of the deck but keep a few cards hidden in my pocket, at least until I figured out what they meant. And hopefully, that choice doesn’t come back to bite me in the ass.

Besides, what harm could a few small secrets really do?

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AURORA: THE KRESOVA VAMPIRE HAREMS
VOLUME ONE

Sometimes, it takes a pawn to dethrone a queen.

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THE KRESOVA

Blood.

The source of life—and the emblem of death.

For humans and vampires alike, blood determines the difference between survival or doom. For the ancient race of Kresova vampires, blood spilled in a centuries-old feud has forever changed the course of their future.

Many may know their name, and books may tell their stories, but little truth is actually known about those who stalk the night—especially by the vampires themselves—and the vicious Kresova queen plans to keep it that way.

She kills without prejudice. Eliminates anyone whose existence threatens her rule. Through fear and violence and her unmatched ability to anticipate her enemies, she's secured her reign.

She's thought of everything.

Done everything.

But her plan is flawed.

She didn't prepare for *her* . . . for *them*.

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PROLOGUE

The Chamber of Morana, Queen of the Kresova Vampires
Paris, France

Shades of crimson coated the walls of the small coliseum-like room. Smears of blood trailed along the steps like a winding river leading down to the dais. Every few feet, puddles formed in the crevices of the stone floor, staining the white grout a coppery brown.

The tangy scent of iron filled Carvell “Carver” Marceau’s nose, and his fangs descended.

He wished he’d eaten before he had arrived, but he never knew what the queen might demand. He doubted she’d ask him to slaughter thirty men—again—simply for her own delight, but he also knew better than to say “never” when referring to Queen Morana’s commands.

Many years had passed since his last visit, and he doubted she’d grown in patience or compassion. If she did demand such a thing from him, he’d have no other option but to oblige.

Corpses littered the walkway, sprawled haphazardly with their throats torn, lying in pools of their own blood. The rubber soles of Carver’s sable boots squished and squeaked as though he traversed through a rain-battered street. Rivulets of the thick liquid appeared in each crack that sloped downward toward her enormous marble throne.

At the base of the dais, he stopped. His face, often described by her majesty as regal, remained downturned until she deigned to acknowledge

him.

He cast his eyes up, only once, to see she clutched a man in her arms. Her embrace wasn't tender as she pulled at his jugular. When Morana's eyes darted to Carver, she paused, then ferociously tore the man's head from his neck and carelessly dropped his body. It landed with a thud. The crack of human bones shattering echoed throughout the empty throne room.

She kept her gaze fixed on Carver, watching . . . waiting.

For what? Weakness, possibly contempt, but most of all—anything that spoke of treason.

It was a test.

Everything was, when it came to the Kresova queen. But Carver had become a master of self-possession in his long years away from her court, and his expression remained composed. Face still lowered, he waited patiently for her to speak first.

One didn't talk to Queen Morana. Not unless a permanent death was planned. She hadn't maintained her reign over the ancient vampire race of the Kresova this long with kindness and shows of mercy.

Morana's beauty could not be denied, and though she appeared youthful and innocent, she was thousands of years old.

Most of the vampires in existence hadn't been around long enough to remember she was not the first vampire—simply the most cunning.

"Ah, *mon assassin*, you've come to see me at last." Her voice rippled through him like an electric shock to his nerves.

Carver couldn't deny his draw to her. She had sired and turned him. Their connection would never cease to be until her death—or his.

"*Oui, Majesté*, I am at your service." He bowed low, his gaze firmly on the blood-stained floor.

"Do you know why I have called you to my side?"

"*Non, je ne sais pas, Majesté.*" No, he wasn't sure why she'd ask for him after a two-hundred-year absence. He'd assumed she'd found a new butcher, as she liked to call him, and moved on from the slight obsession she had formed.

Carver tensed as her slipper-covered feet entered his field of vision. She stood on the upper steps of her throne, keeping herself high above his six-two frame.

"Will you not look upon your queen?" Her blood-soaked hand reached for his chin and brought his face up only inches from hers

Her silver gown had drops of blood over the bodice. Thick liquid dyed the hem a dark gray. He took in her angular face, and their eyes met. Though her wide mouth was still smeared with fresh blood, it didn't diminish the crystal blue of her irises.

He held in a shudder of distaste and kept his expression neutral.

“Ah, that is better, *n'est-ce pas?*” Morana clicked her tongue and stepped back toward her throne.

One of her recent meals lay slumped down into the seat, his blood leaving a puddle on the cushion. With a flick of her wrist, the man flew across the room. He crashed into the wall with a crack, his motionless body broken on the floor.

Carver nodded and waited for her to situate herself before she spoke. The back of his neck tingled as he sensed two bodyguards hidden in the shadows. He didn't need to look to know they scrutinized his every move.

“Now, where were we?” She clasped her hands together in her lap. “Oh, *oui*, I need you to track down the Kresova responsible for turning new members without my permission.” A smile lit her pixie-like face.

“Of course, *Majesté*. With whom should I speak to get the details?” He was careful in his wording, his voice steady, sure to include her title.

“Speak with anyone you choose.”

“*Oui, Majesté*. Anything else you require?”

A smirk lifted the corners of her mouth, and she tilted her head. She didn't move, but a vampire as old as she, didn't have to. Suddenly, Carver felt the heat of Morana's hand as it caressed down his chest.

Hundreds of years ago, part of Carver's purpose was keeping the queen's carnal appetites satisfied. Even as a human, his stamina and mastery had been something to behold. They'd often referred to him as the Lord of Pleasure.

The gift he possessed had been both his saving grace and his ultimate doom. When the queen of vampires chose someone, there was no walking away.

She stroked the muscles of his stomach, her hands slowly easing down the V of his abdomen to her favorite part of his anatomy. If she asked him to please her again, here and now—whether he wanted to or not—he would.

As quickly as her desire had risen, it dissolved. “*Non.*” Morana waved a hand to dismiss him. “I want this problem gone. *Compris?*”

Carver nodded, already making a mental list of who to talk to. “*Oui, considérez cela comme fait, Majesté.*”

Morana smiled, showing her fangs, then shooed him from her sight.

Carver lowered his head and bowed. He walked backward a few paces, then turned and took the last several steps from her chamber.

When his feet hit the pavement outside Morana’s chateau, Carver released the breath he’d been holding. A sweet, creamy vanilla scent enveloped his senses from the wide array of flowers lining her enormous property.

He’d prepared himself to witness her openly vicious behavior, but this new, quiet ferocity had Carver questioning his queen’s true plans. She’d never been one to hold back, so why now?

Carver climbed into his Ferrari Enzo, pressed his finger on the button, and the engine growled to life.

Tension bloomed in Carver’s chest. Whatever Morana had in store, it was big, and when Morana did big, the body count was always high.

CHAPTER ONE

*New Orleans, Louisiana - French Quarter
Mardi Gras, Fat Tuesday*

Fuck if I don't go blind.

Neon lights flash against the painted black walls in colors like Crayola on crack. Everywhere I look, light glints from heavy metal chains hanging from leather and faded denim. The reflections cast beams on the floor like a disco ball.

The sweet scent of hookah mingles with cigarettes permeated through the open side door, leaving a smoky film over the crowd. Bodies glisten with sweat as they writhe together on the dance floor. Wrinkle-proof Dockers and pastel-tinged polo shirts grind against flesh marred with piercings, symbols, and obscenities.

This is what I love about the French Quarter.

The vibrant mix of sinners and wannabe saints melds into one delicious pot. Walk the streets on any given day, and you could go from sniffing the most delicious fried beignets to being assaulted by the scent of fresh vomit and human waste. There's no real beauty in perfection—and Louisiana doesn't hide her scars.

That's what drew me here.

I'm a transplant. An outsider who arrived six months ago. In all this time, I've never regretted leaving California.

Not until seven days ago.

I lean back against the bar on my elbows, watching the masses. They move to the heavy beats of the music, heads thrown back in rapture exposing the smooth flesh of their necks.

The simple movement ensnares me.

Getting bitten by a vampire in New Orleans is about as cliché as it got. I can't even say the words out loud without feeling like I've landed in some badly written *Twilight* fanfiction.

Each night, I fall asleep hoping I'll awaken and discover that the crazy shit which transpired just outside of Bourbon Street couldn't have been real.

I've come to the conclusion there are two options: I've been attacked by a psychopath and am now going through some form of toxic blood poisoning clearly affecting my mind, or the vampire was real and now life, or more correctly death, is about to get complicated as hell.

But my heart continues to beat. I draw breath. I want food. All of it. I even walk in the daylight. So, what does this mean?

Fuck, I don't know. I'm still trying to process.

The last two days, nothing but need and want plagues me. I suffer from an insatiable thirst for something I can't understand. A want for satisfaction. Desire. My skin doesn't even feel like my own anymore. I hover over myself, watching helplessly as the pendulum drops.

Is Aurora Hedvige dead? Or do I still exist?

After hours on google researching "vampire transformation," morbid curiosity got the best of me, and I'd indulged the crazy. I drove to the twenty-four-hour market and purchased a package of beef organs soaked in raw blood and a Twinkie so the clerk wouldn't look at me like a total freak.

I took two bites, then forced myself to drink the blood.

Did I get the satisfaction I sought? No, instead I spent the entire night barfing over the toilet with severe stomach cramps.

I'm out of options and about to do the most desperate and ridiculous thing I can do. I came to *The Yowlin' Wolf* looking for answers. Answers only one person can give me. When she's not creating voodoo dolls and selling magic candles to the drunken tourists, Mama Lisette rents the third-floor kitchen for her catering business.

It seems absurd to imagine a woman whose flyers proclaim her the Madame of Black Magic cooking pork shoulder and corn bread with an apron on. But as my best friend Reina says, "Even voodoo queens have to pay their bills."

At the very least, she'll laugh at me. At the very worst, she'll take my money, and I'll see shit for it. All I know is, if Mama Lisette can't help me, my second stop is the emergency room where I'll beg for a psychiatric hold.

What makes tonight so do-or-die?

Plenty. This morning, I lunged for my best friend's throat. She had to fight me off with all her strength, and I still didn't stop. Not until she smacked me over the head with my favorite lamp.

When I finally awoke five minutes later, Reina was crouched on the floor crying. I've never had a propensity for violence, and I'm not about to start.

Coming to see Mama Lisette is Reina's idea. She told me when her boyfriend's ex had gotten out of control, Mama Lisette had helped her create a protection spell which seemingly worked.

Did I believe that? I'm not sure, but I'm also not in the position to be choosy.

A hand taps my forearm, and I turn to see Reina. "Hey, chickadee! Sorry, I'm late." She leans in and gives me a half hug. "How are you feeling?" She flips her long bluish-black hair off her shoulder with her free hand. Reina is your typical gothic girl. She likes skulls, any shade of black, has a sharp tongue—and a hugely hidden heart.

Tonight, she's wearing a tight black dress, which flares at her hips. The material changes from solid to swaths of gossamer material trailing behind her like a train. Her pale arms are covered in fishnets, and her dainty hands are covered by clunky silver rings and bracelets.

No one ever expected the two of us to be acquaintances—let alone best friends. Between my love for pastels and flip-flops, long, blond hair and California beach tan, visually, we scream opposites. Together, we look like a yin-yang symbol.

Even if our conversation isn't secretive, the volume in this place requires us to huddle our heads together and yell.

"Considering everything?" I shrug. "As good as can be. I haven't attacked anyone—yet."

Reina frowns. "We'll figure this out, Aura."

Aura was the nickname Reina had given me when we'd first met.

"I should be the one asking you." I lean back and look at her neck. Faded purple marks, which will likely deepen over the next few days, mar her ivory skin. "Are *you* okay?"

Reina orders a vodka soda from the baby-faced bartender and turns her attention back to me. “I told you, I am.”

“And you promise to uphold the plan, right?”

The plan to get me admitted, by force if necessary, if this last-ditch effort didn’t pan out.

“I told you I would.”

Reina refuses to state whether or not she believes me. Instead, she only claims she believes *I* believe. Whatever the fuck that means.

“Good.” I turn my head, and my nose twitches. Tendrils of different smells tantalize me. Desire mixed with sweat and blood formulate the perfect cocktail. The coppery tinge stops my perusal, and I narrow my eyes. Searching. Just as quickly as the scent torments me, it escapes my grasp like a plume of smoke. I continue my search and wrinkle my nose as a strong draft of too much aftershave hits me.

“Aura?”

Reina’s concerned eyes study me. “What?”

“I was talking, and you didn’t even hear me.”

“I’m sorry.” I shake my head, “It’s getting worse.”

“I know.” She grabs her glass off the bar and downs it. I think she is feeling less confident than she wants me to believe. “All right, let’s do this.”

Reina drops a twenty on the bar and starts toward the back hallway.

Two flights up a creaky wooden staircase, a right turn, and we reach the third floor. A scratched-up door sits at the end of the hall and the sounds of Spanish music echo from a window. A white, handwritten piece of paper with the words *Mofongo Mama* is taped to the outside. My stomach growls as the aroma of pan-fried garlic and plantains floats through the frame.

I haven’t eaten since the organs incident.

Reina raises her fist to knock, and I catch it with my hand before she touches the wood. “Do you really think this is a good idea? I’m starting to genuinely regret this.”

“It will be fine. I promise.” She tugs herself free and knocks three times.

Dishes clatter from inside and the music lowers. Footsteps snap against the squeaky floorboards until they stop on the other side of the door. The deadbolt clicks before the door cracks open.

“Yes?” A young girl in her mid-teens with curly brown hair stands on the other side of the threshold.

Reina says, “We’re here to see Mama Lisette.”

“For?” The girl pivots on her hip, as though she’s done it a thousand times.

“My friend here has a problem.” Reina grabs my arm and pulls me forward to stand beside her.

The young girl assesses me from my worn converse sneakers to the messy blond bun atop my head. “She only sees clients at her shop on Royal Street. Visit her there on Tuesday.”

As the girl moves to close the door, Reina uses her booted foot to wedge it open. “This isn’t the sort of situation where we can just ‘come back another time.’ Please, we need to see her tonight. Now.”

“Reina, let’s just forget—”

“No. You promised we would try, and right now, you’re not even trying.”

She’s right. I gave up long before we even arrived.

Reina and I have been friends since we met eight years ago. When she moved from Cali to Louisiana, I thought I died inside.

Now, that statement feels far less authentic.

We remained close over the years, and as soon as I finished my two years at JC, I packed up my things and moved here.

We’ve never faced a problem without each other. When her neglectful mother died and left her their house, we’d moved in and made it our own. Now, I’m apparently a bloodsucker, and we’re here together, facing that as well.

I take a deep breath and look straight into the young girl’s big, brown eyes. “Look, just tell her something for me—and if she still doesn’t want to see us—then we’ll go.”

“And what do you want me to tell her?”

God, I can’t believe I’m saying this out loud. “I think I was bitten by a vampire. I crave something I can’t discern, and I tried to attack her this morning.” I gesture to Reina.

Surprisingly, the girl doesn’t laugh or even smile. She leans her head to the side, keeping her gaze on mine. The throb of her jugular captures my attention, and I can’t look away.

“Wait here.” She snaps the door shut. A minute later, she returns holding the door open, ushering us inside. As we slip into the entryway, she stops. “You’ll need to take off your shoes. Mama doesn’t like the soils from outside brought in.”

I lean one hand on the wall and kick off my converse shoes. Reina does the same with her boots. It feels strange to enter her home without knowing her name. I introduce myself. "I'm Aurora by the way, and she's Reina"

"Breanne." The girl nods. "You brought money?"

Reina pulls a wad of cash out of her purse and pulls two hundred-dollar bills. She places them in Breanne's palm.

Breanne doesn't say anything. She takes the money and turns. I can't tell whether she's always like this or she doesn't like me. Her bare feet pad down the hall ahead of us. I assume we're supposed to follow, so we do. We pass several bedrooms and an arched doorway which gives us a peek into a soft yellow-and-white kitchen. I can't see the stove, but the aromas floating around are revving my appetite again.

At the end of the hall, the space opens up to a large living room with high tray ceilings. A small TV hums in the corner, the barely audible sounds of a reality show competing with the low music playing from another room. This apartment appears aged and worn but not unappealing. A sea-green recliner faces the television, and the back of a woman's curly red-haired head perches over the top cushion.

Breanne walks up to her and whispers something into the woman's ear. She picks up a remote from the end table, clicks the TV off, and spins around.

I'm shocked to see that Mama Lisette is barely older than us, maybe late twenties at the most. Her strawberry blond hair falls in curls around her tan, heart-shaped face. She looks so different from the flyers. I imagine she must wear lots of makeup and a wig when she's playing the Madame of Black Magic.

"So, which one of you needs my help?"

I raise my hand slightly and smile. I've never felt more ridiculous in my life, but since no one else is laughing, I won't either.

She keeps her eyes fixed on me. "You were bitten?"

"I'm pretty sure."

"You either were—or you weren't—so which is it?"

This chick isn't fucking around.

I know it happened, but the longer I doubt it, the longer I have before everything in my life changes. "I was."

The cushion creaks as she stands and takes three steps toward me. "Where?"

This is the awkward part. He'd bitten me just over my left breast. I have to tug down the neck of my blouse to show her. "Here," I say, revealing the torn flesh.

The wound has yet to heal. If anything, it looks worse today than when it happened. Two red, angry bite marks surrounded by blue-green bruises and several other teeth indents.

She doesn't ask my permission as she traces her hand over my wound and then pauses. "I need you to sit down." She drops down to her knees before me as I land on the couch cushion. She returns her hand to my skin and closes her eyes. Her lips move, but no sound comes out.

No, this isn't awkward at all. There's just a voodoo queen holding my breast in her palm while she chants to herself.

I glance over to Reina. She smiles, encouraging me to stick with this even though I'm clearly not feeling it. Just when I'm starting to think this is a load of bullshit, everything in the room fades, and I'm thrust into a storm.

The world moves at an impossible pace of both slow motion and fast forward. Time lurches, and I'm back at work last week. My coworker, Ashley, drops her pen into the mocha she just bought. It splashes up and whipped cream hits her glasses. We both start laughing.

Time zooms again, and now I'm standing at the door of my car. It's evening, and low fog has rolled in. I pluck my keys from my purse. Seconds later, a hand grabs me from behind. I drop my keys and scream, and time moves again.

I'm being slammed against a grime-covered wall between two buildings. Another flash and the stench of rotten garbage and something I can't discern, something . . . metallic? My chest burns, and I open my eyes. I'm slumped against the wall as a man is biting into the top of my breast. I want to fight, but I can't. I feel the strength leaving me.

White light flashes, and now I am standing in a blood-covered room. No, not a room, a chamber. Bodies litter the floor as a sea of ruby flows from the ground. A woman sits on a stone throne. She raises a finger toward me, and as something flies from her hands, time zooms once more.

I stand before a man. Everything about him is in shadow except the piercing blue of his eyes. He turns away, and a door slams shut in my face, an enormous K engraved on it.

“Aura! Aura!”

I open my eyes and see Reina and Breanne leaning over me. I’m flat on my back, covered in layers of sweat. “What the fuck?” I say as I sit up. My head spins from moving too quickly.

“What the fuck is right.” Reina turns from me to Mama Lisette who’s crouched on her hands and knees several feet away. “What the hell did you do to her?”

“What happened?” I ask.

“You had a seizure or something. It’s been almost ten-freakin’-minutes, and nobody here would let me call for help.”

Reina’s pissed. Breanne watches us both, and Mama Lisette stares at me like I’m a two-headed unicorn. At that moment, I realize she’s also covered in sweat and shaking. Did she see all of that? Did she feel it?

“I can’t help you,” Mama Lisette says as she climbs to her feet. “You need to go.”

With Reina’s help, I stand. “What just happened to me? Why do you look so scared?”

She shakes her head and moves toward the kitchen, but I follow. I grab her arm. She tries to tug herself free, but my grip is too strong.

It’s *never* been this strong.

We both look down at my hand, and after a second, I release her. “You said you could help.”

“I never said that I could. I only asked who needed help and what happened.”

“Then why did you let us in?”

She shakes her head again, and I hear Reina and Breanne come in behind me.

“I can’t help unless—”

“Unless what?” Reina snaps. “Unless we give you another five hundred dollars? Is that what this is? A shakedown?”

Mama Lisette slams her fists onto the counter. “Unless the vampire is still alive!” Her hand points to me as if in accusation. “But your sire is dead. Of that much, I am certain. There’s no way to stop the change now.”

“Holy fuck.” Reina practically falls into a chair beside her. “This is real?”

A million questions rush my mind, but I can't formulate words. The sight of all that blood is doing something to me. My skin itches and aches at the same time, and a ravenous hunger, one I've tried to bury deep, has surged to the forefront of my thoughts.

"You're at the end of this, Aurora. I'm surprised you haven't already succumbed."

Reina looks from me to Mama Lisette before she speaks. "How long does she have?"

Mama shrugs. "Hours. Minutes? I've never seen someone go as long as she has without turning." She nudges her head toward me. "You're running on empty, Aurora. It will only take one moment." She snaps her fingers. "Then your control will disappear."

"Can't you give her something, to help?" Reina asks. "Cast a protection spell on her mind? Or something? Anything!"

Reina's desperation shocks me out of my thoughts.

Mama Lisette shakes her head, "This is different."

"Why?" I ask.

"You know why."

"No, I don't."

"You saw it too, Aurora. You felt it."

Reina grabs my bicep. "Saw what, Aura?"

"This kind of magic, this kind of power, it's connected to something dark. Something ancient." Mama steps toward me and places her hands on my shoulders. "The darkness is coming for you, Aurora. You can't outrun it. You can't hide from it. And you can't defeat it."

"What are you saying?" Reina asks.

Mama doesn't move her eyes from mine. "I'm saying Aurora is marked by death—and her time has run out."

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THANK YOU!

Thank you so much for taking the time to read *Grave Promise*. We hope you enjoyed reading about Vexa!

This is a slow burn reverse harem series with five books total, so make sure you're ready for each book as they come out every month!

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1. *Girl, Bitten*
2. *Girl, Forsaken*
3. *Girl, Immortal* (Coming July 24, 2018)

How to Be A Necromancer

1. *Grave Promise*
2. *Grave Debt*
3. *Grave Mistake*

The Kresova Vampire Harems: Aurora

1. *Thirst*
 2. *Tempt*
 3. *Turn*
- All in One: *Aurora*

The Kresova Vampire Harems: Lyra

1. *Favor*
2. *Fury*

Alana Creed: Timejumper

1. *Fae Kissed*

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The Wicked Kingdoms Series:

1. *Mark of Truth*
2. *Crown of Betrayal*
3. *Throne of Secrets*
4. *Castle of Illusions* (Coming August 31st!)

The Dragon Stone Saga:

1. *Kiss of Frost*
2. *Up in Smoke* (Coming Soon)
3. *Shake the Ground* (Coming Soon)

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The Relic Keeper Series

1. *Dark Summoner*
2. *Dark Illusions* (Coming Soon!)
3. *Dark Secrets* (Coming Soon!)
4. *Dark Destiny* (Coming Soon!)

Standalones:

City of Shadows: The Dark Fae Hollows

Wicked: The Isa Fae

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

USA Today bestselling authors, Graceley Knox and D.D. Miers may be long-lost sisters, but their moms continue to deny it. They are most definitely the co-writers of the Kresova Vampire Harem series, as well as a multitude of other upcoming projects they can't wait to share with readers.

Together they tend to share the same brain, finish each other's thoughts, laugh way too hard at inappropriate comments, drink enough coffee to qualify for an intervention, and talk about their fur babies. When they're not chatting, which is always, they can be found all over social media hanging out with their author friends and readers!

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