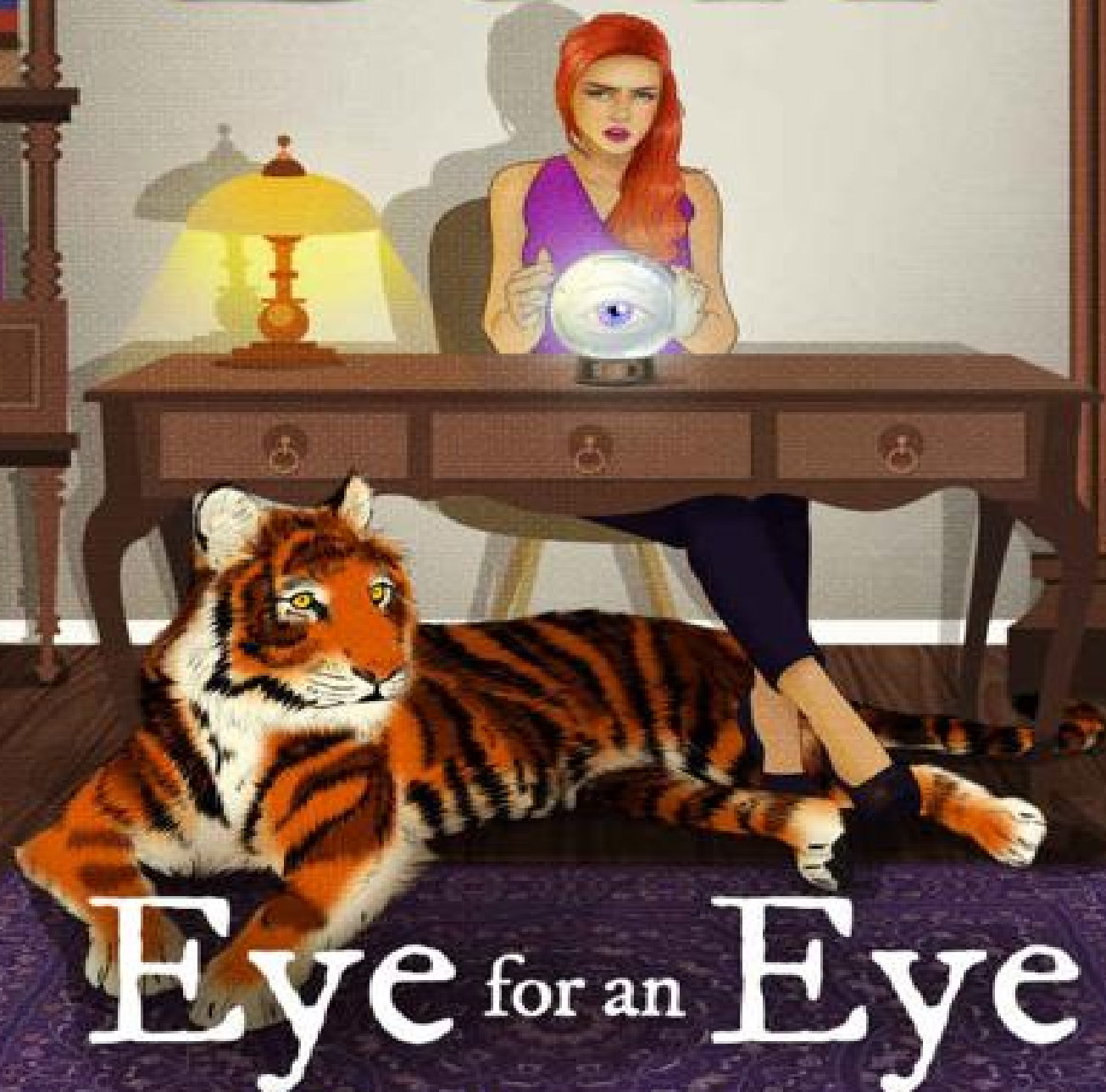


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ALYSSA DAY



Eye for an Eye

A Tiger's Eye Mystery

EYE FOR AN EYE

TIGER'S EYE MYSTERIES

ALYSSA DAY

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I based the Eeyore ball in this book on a true story. I once tagged along with a girlfriend to her psychic. My friend claimed the psychic was brilliant and always got everything right—but only negative things. When I met her, the psychic said, in a low and hopeless voice, “You need to pay in advance, because I only see bad things, and then nobody wants to pay me.”

I was a little taken aback by this, but I paid—why not? It was a lark!—and she read my future in my hand. This is what she said:

1. My boyfriend was cheating on me. (This clearly was wrong because I was in a very happy relationship).
2. Someone at work I was very close to was about to be fired for wrongdoing. (This also was wrong because nobody I knew would commit any fire-able offenses).

I smiled and wrote it off as twenty-five bucks for entertainment.

Then—I bet you can guess where this is going—within two weeks, I discovered my boyfriend had been cheating on me, and my best friend at work got fired for theft. Yeah. The psychic—I called her the Eeyore psychic in my mind—was right! And I never went back to her. Who needs to know bad stuff in advance? LOL.

And my son (and research assistant) Connor says I need to tell you (because he didn't know) that Aloysius is pronounced Ah-Low-ISH-us, so it makes sense that his nickname is Ish. So, there you go. 😊

XOXO

Alyssa

St. Augustine, Florida, October 2023

T^{ess}

January in Florida is absolutely wonderful until a haunted crystal ball shows up in your pawnshop.

Sheriff Susan Gonzalez and I stared down at the glittering sphere.

It stared back at us.

All three of us stayed silent.

“So.” I looked up at Susan. “You said it was ... haunted?”

My raised eyebrow was implied.

“Yeah. Madame Leota vibes, for sure.”

She was right. This had a Disney Haunted Mansion feel all over it. Sadly, I hadn't been to any theme parks since I'd come into my “gift” as a teenager. It's not the happiest place on earth when you might bump into somebody and see how they're going to die.

All that aside, it wasn't that I didn't believe Susan. I'd taken in too many magical items via pawn and just outright bought too many others to disbelieve any tales of a magically infused object.

But, according to her, this wasn't just a haunted crystal ball.

“It's an ... *Eeyore* ball?”

She sighed. “I know. It sounds ridiculous. But it’s an Eeyore ball, according to everybody I know in the psychic business. My grandfather left it to me. I tried to give it away, but nobody would take it. Not even anybody from the Phleabottom side of the family. Trust me, they actually tried to take the wooden paneling off the walls of my grandfather’s house until I threatened to shoot Aunt Cordelia, so it’s not that they aren’t greedy enough to take a very valuable antique like this one.”

“Your aunt’s name is Cordelia Fleabottom?”

“With a P H. *Phleabottom*.”

“Oh.” I bit my lip against the laugh trying to escape. “That makes it so much better. Also, don’t you feel lucky to be Susan Gonzalez?”

She grinned at me. “You have no idea. Sometime over drinks, I’ll fill you in on the varied and spectacular family tree that resulted in me and Carlos.”

“Carlos is another good name. I mean, he could have been ... “ I couldn’t help it. I burst out laughing. “He—he could have been—oh, wow, this is killing me. He could have been *Carlos Phleabottom, the vampire!*”

Susan gave me a flat look, but her lips quirked. It was the first sign of animation I’d seen in her since she’d returned from her mysterious errand over Christmas. Not so mysterious, it turned out. She’d been settling her grandfather’s estate.

Susan was everything our previous sheriff hadn’t been: calm, competent, and extremely intelligent. She was also gorgeous. Criminals who underestimated her because of her silky black hair, deep brown eyes, and curvy figure soon learned, to their dismay, just how wrong they’d been. Usually from inside a jail cell.

“I’m sorry, again, for your loss,” I said, my laughter fading. “I didn’t mean to joke when—”

“Trust me, Tess, it’s nice to have something to smile about. My extended family is ... well. Let’s just say they’re difficult.

In the extreme. Aunt Cordelia wasn't the only one I wanted to shoot."

I ran a finger over the crystal ball's beautifully carved cherry-wood antique base and then blinked when a thought occurred. "Are you even allowed to shoot people in Ohio? Your jurisdiction—"

She threw up her hands. "Of course not. But it's not like they wouldn't have deserved it. I also caught Cousin Aloysius in the library stuffing silver candlesticks and knick-knacks into a massive tote bag. You'd think somebody who'd only gotten out of jail three days before would have been more careful."

"Which one just got out of jail?" I might need to take notes to keep track of her felonious relatives. "Also, Cousin Aloysius in the library with a candlestick sounds like a bizarre game of Clue."

"Right? Aloysius is the felon. He claims he was innocent, and nobody knows what happened to the rhubarb. The llama wasn't talking, of course."

"Of course," I said faintly.

"Aunt Cordelia got out of prison the year before last, I think. Not really sure. After the third or fourth time, it all blurs together."

I couldn't think of a way to respond to that, so I settled on ignoring it. "I need more coffee." I smiled at my friend. "You?"

She drained the last bit of coffee in her DEAD END PAWN mug and followed me into my back room. It was still a quarter to nine, so the shop wasn't open, and I didn't have to worry about customers yet.

I refilled our mugs and pointed to the box of donuts. "I stopped at Mellie's on the way. Help yourself."

"I hate to fall victim to the stereotype about cops and donuts, but I see a blueberry glazed," she said, snagging it.

I took a chocolate frosted with sprinkles and we returned to the counter out front and resumed staring down at the

crystal ball.

The crystal ball resumed doing nothing.

“Are you sure it’s haunted?”

Susan shrugged. “It moans sometimes. Mostly when it’s lonely, if my grandfather’s housekeeper, Mrs. Butler, was telling the truth. Never sure about that. She drinks. Not that anybody could blame her, working for him all those years.”

“Your housekeeper is named Butler.” Now she was just putting me on.

“Listen, I know it’s weird. Her husband—he *doesn’t* drink—drove the moving van down here for me.”

“Okay, okay,” I said, laughing. “Well, how does the crystal ball work? I mean, in the movies, the psychic stares into the swirling depths of the ball and sees something that she interprets for the client. Like, ‘you will meet a tall, dark stranger,’ or ‘you will come into money,’ or something.”

We looked down at the ball. No depths, no swirling. It was just a sparkling, transparent quartz crystal sphere, resting innocently on its base. Pretty, but nothing special.

“You don’t believe me, do you?” Susan polished off her donut and washed it down with the rest of her second cup of coffee. “That’s fine. I wouldn’t believe me, either. I just don’t want it. Can you buy it and sell it as a paperweight?”

“Don’t be so hasty. Let me have a look.” I cupped the ball in my hands and lifted it to inspect more closely. Tried to lift it, I should say. It took me a second try, after I almost dropped it the first time. “This is a lot heavier than I expected!”

“Eight inches in diameter, forty pounds if you include the base.” Susan peered at the ball, now resting in my hands. “Hey! I think it likes you.”

I didn’t know if it liked me, but the surface of the ball was warming up. Within a few seconds, it heated so much I had to replace it on the stand before it burned me.

I shook my hands until they cooled off and then checked for blisters. “That was unexpected. Why does it get hot when

you pick it up?”

Susan ‘s eyes widened. “No idea. It never got hot when I picked it up. Or for anybody else in the family, either.”

“Not again,” I groaned. It wouldn’t be the first magical object to develop some kind of weird attachment to me. The music box that liked to make its opinions known through song—all on its own—still appeared randomly in my life, home, and shop. On New Year’s Eve, it had appeared on the nightstand on Jack’s side of the bed and started playing *The Lion Sleeps Tonight*, after which he’d snatched it up, stalked across the room to open the window, and tossed it out into the yard, muttering “Tiger. Not a lion. *Tiger*.”

It showed up again, not a scratch on it, on New Year’s Day, taunting Jack with a medley of songs about lions that prominently featured *The Circle of Life*. Honestly, after the New Year’s Eve we’d had, it was lucky Jack hadn’t smashed it into tiny musical pieces.

“Tess?”

I blew out a breath. “Sorry. Memories of other magical objects. Listen. I’m not sure I understand this Eeyore thing, but I’ll sell it for you. Maybe some of Dead End’s magic users can look at it and let us know what’s going on with it.”

“The Eeyore thing? They call it that because the crystal ball foretells your future, but only the bad parts.”

This kept getting better and better, by which I meant worse and worse.

“That’s ... not exactly the vibe I’m going for here in the shop, Susan,” I finally said. “I prefer more positive, cheerful things.”

She folded her arms. “Like the Christmas tree that kept stealing kids’ presents?”

She had me there.

“Fine. I’ll try to sell it, but ...” I trailed off, staring down at the ball, which was finally doing something.

“Is that *swirling*?”

“What?”

“Look!” I pointed at the ball. A silvery mist had appeared *inside the ball* and shadows were moving in the mist.

“That can’t be good,” Susan said, taking a step back. “Knowing my grandfather, it’s going to explode any minute.”

I jumped back and away from the possibly explosive ball, but then I saw the object inside it take shape. As the mist cleared away, a tiny Jack, his face as grim as I’d ever seen it, carried a suitcase out what was clearly the front door of my house.

Before I could process that, letters formed words on the inside of the ball, with an effect in the mist like a finger writing on a foggy mirror in the bathroom.

HE

WILL

LEAVE

YOU

I waited, but that was it. No more words. No punctuation. No emojis.

Crystal balls really suck as modes of communication.

I looked up at Susan, whose mouth hung open, and tried to smile. “Well. I guess the Eeyore ball thinks Jack will leave me.”

But he loves me, my heart protested.

Then why are you listening to a rock? my brain replied.

“That’s not—that doesn’t—who cares what a piece of glass says, anyway?” Susan muttered, shoving her hands in her uniform pants pockets. “Tess. Forget this. I’ll go toss it in the lake.”

I shook off the chill that had snaked down my spine at the vision. “Nope. I’m not going to let an inanimate piece of rock scare me in my own business. Leave it. We’ll get an expert to

have a look at it. Who knows? It may have some historical value. Did your grandfather have any provenance on it?"

"Maybe? I have boxes of his papers to go through. I finally just gave up and hauled everything from his study home with me to look at, or I'd be spending months up there."

"What if—"

But the door connecting my shop to Jack's new private investigations business flew open, interrupting me, and Jack strode into the room.

"Hey, Jack," Susan said.

"Welcome back, Sheriff." His smile didn't reach his eyes, and when he turned to me, his expression was grim.

"Is everything okay?"

"No. Not really."

I involuntarily glanced down at the crystal ball.

Surely not.

"Jack?"

He shoved a hand through his hair, frowning. "Tess. Sorry, but I have to go home and pack."

"What?"

"I'm leaving. Today."

T*ess* “So.” I looked at Susan. “Haunted crystal ball. Check.”

She took one look at my face and backed toward the door. “Gotta go. Duty calls. Criminals to catch, yada, yada.”

“Coward!” I called after her, but she was already gone.

Jack raised an eyebrow. “What was that about?”

“Who knows?” I gave the ball—now perfectly clear and empty again—a dirty look and then leaned over and put my elbows on the counter. “What do you mean, pack? And leave? Today? You’re not getting out of the father-daughter dance that easy. Shelley will hunt you down like a ... tiger.”

Since Jack was one of the few existing tiger shapeshifters in the world, as far as we knew, a lot of tiger puns showed up in conversation.

My adopted little sister had lost her mom and grandparents. Just before Christmas, she’d asked Jack to stand in at the school dance for the father she’d never known. Jack had promised a sparkly dress for her and a sparkly tuxedo for himself, much to the rest of the family’s amusement.

“The dance is Saturday. It’s only Monday. I’ll be back in plenty of time.”

“You might be gone all week,” I said slowly. “What should I do if a severed body part shows up? Again?”

This was a real possibility, sadly.

His distracted frown turned into a slow, deliberate smile. “Are you saying you’re going to miss me, Tess?”

He prowled toward me with the casual grace of the jungle cat he was in his other form. I sighed and enjoyed the view—Jack was worth watching. He was six feet, four inches of hard-muscled deliciousness. Wavy bronze hair curled around his strong face, framing the brilliantly green eyes and sensual lips. He wore a green flannel shirt I’d bought him with his jeans and boots and looked better than any supermodel wearing designer clothes ever could.

Of course, I was madly in love with him, which maybe meant I was biased.

I laughed and shook my head.

“What’s funny?” he murmured, pulling me close.

“I knew you were gorgeous before I ever fell in love with you, so it’s an objective truth.” I snuggled closer and put my arms around his waist. He smelled like soap and home and happiness to me, and I wished I could stay right there for an hour or two.

I looked up at him and saw the flush of embarrassment that happened every time I told him he was beautiful. Jack was *not* a vain guy.

“Wait.” I stepped back. “Don’t distract me. Where are you going? Why are you going?”

“First, this.” He gently took my face in his hands and kissed me until I almost forgot what we’d been talking about.

Then my elbow bumped into the crystal ball, and it all came rushing back.

“Stop! Jack. Stop kissing me and tell me what’s going on.”

“Okay. Okay. I ran into a vampire ... well. A villainous vampire, shall we say? In Sedona some years ago. He has since reformed his ways and needs help. Since I promised a friend I’d show up if *he* ever needed help, and he’s working

with the vampire, who's in love with the witch, and she got kidnapped by the—”

I thumped my head against his chest. “Jack. Stop. Please, for the love of my tired morning brain, just stop. Of course, go help your friend and his vampire and his ... whatever.”

“I—”

I grinned at him. “Also, Villainous Vampire would be a great name for a rock band.”

The chimes above my door tinkled and my first customers of the day walked into the shop. I glanced at the clock on the wall to confirm it was nine o'clock—the clock shaped like a teddy bear, not the one built into the breastplate of a bronze gladiator sculpture. When you paid too much attention to the gladiator, he was prone to shouting “Spartacus!” in his little metal voice and attacking the taxidermied squirrels until his clockworks ran down.

Maybe they didn't have a lot of squirrels in ancient Rome?

Anyway, customers didn't like to buy stuffed squirrels with tiny sword holes in their clothing (the squirrels' clothing, not the customers, although I suppose that would be bad, too), so we all ignored the tiny Thracian as much as possible.

“Hey, Ollie,” I called out. “Long time no see! How's the nursery?”

Oleander—nickname Ollie—Gardner was the eldest son of the hippie goblin couple who had bought Dead End Nursery. Nursery as in plants, not kids. He was also a terrific lead guitarist in their folk band. Susan had gone out with him once or twice but said the laid-back hippie thing was too much for her.

“Too bad,” she'd said wistfully. “He looks like a rock star and is one of the nicest men I've ever met.”

He did look like a rock star. And so did his dad and brothers. All long, skinny arms and legs, long hair, and that look in their eyes that said, “I'm a sexy musician.” Evidently effortless hotness was a goblin thing.

Ollie grinned at her. “Hey, Tess. Hey, Jack. Glad to see you’re okay after the New Year’s Eve craziness. This is my girlfriend, Prism.”

I ignored the comment about New Year’s Eve, as I’d had to do over and over since January second. I also silently vowed to hide in my bedroom on holidays from now on, after the Thanksgiving debacle and then New Year’s.

Prism looked exactly like what you’d expect from her name. She was maybe five six and delicately built, and she wore a dress that seemed to be made of nothing but floating translucent handkerchiefs. She had long, pale blond hair, glowing copper-colored skin, and sparkling hazel eyes, and she dazzled us with one of the best smiles I’d ever seen.

“Hi. It’s nice to meet you,” she said shyly.

“Nice to meet you, too,” I said, blinking my eyes in bemusement from the power of that smile. Prism was a force of nature. Her delicate beauty had me wondering if she had Fae in her family tree, but of course, I’d never ask. I glanced over and caught Jack looking at her with a dumbfounded expression that mirrored the one I knew must be on my face, and I grinned.

“Yeah,” Jack said. “Nice to meet you, Prism.”

Ollie beamed, and Prism beamed, and for a moment we all stood around, beaming, and being beamed at, but then her gaze landed on the crystal ball and her eyes lit up like Shelley’s at a funnel cake stand.

“Ooh! It’s beautiful! The quartz is just perfect! And so clear, not even a minor flaw,” she said, almost crooning, her nose inches away from the ball’s shiny surface.

“Are you a ...” I did not know how to finish that sentence. A psychic? A medium? A Fae princess? A con artist?

Ollie, oblivious to my hesitation, nodded, the pride radiating off him. “Yes, she is. My Prism is a Wiccan, and she works with crystals and auras.”

Because of course she did. She probably sang folk songs, too. I tried not to wince.

“Oh, Ollie, I’m just a beginner,” she said, touching his arm but not taking her eyes off the crystal ball. “But Tess, this is remarkable. Is it activated?”

“Huh?”

She finally, almost reluctantly, straightened and moved away from the ball. “Is it activated? Has it been used to foretell the future and cleansed after each use?”

Jack tilted his head. “You mean like with Windex?”

I grinned at him. “Not like with Windex. You are an odd man.”

Ollie and Prism looked puzzled, so I pointed at Jack. “The man likes to wash dishes. By hand, even though I have a dishwasher. And I even caught him washing the windows in the kitchen one day.”

“Wow,” Ollie said, clearly fighting a grin.

But Prism only bestowed a gently benevolent smile on Jack. “It’s so much better to live in serenity, isn’t it?”

“Um...” He smiled back, clearly caught in Prism’s ... prism. I heroically refrained from rolling my eyes.

“To answer your question, I don’t know if it has been activated, but it certainly works,” I told them, caught between flinching at the memory and rolling my eyes at Jack.

“What does it do, Tess?” Ollie put the plant I finally realized he was carrying on my counter to free his hands and reached out to touch the top of the ball. “Hey! It’s warm!”

Oh, no.

First things first, though. I pointed at the small pot. “Why are you carrying a zucchini plant around with you? Is it take your cucurbit to work with you?”

Jack looked at me. “Your what?”

“*Cucurbitaceae*,” I loftily informed him. “The gourd family.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“Hey. I read, and I know things.”

Ollie laughed. “Yes. My squash and cantaloupe are in the car.”

We all chuckled, but at least Ollie quit touching the crystal ball. Prism, however, was edging closer. She put her hands on the sides of the ball and murmured a few words too quietly for me to hear.

“Wait! I don’t think that’s a good idea—”

But it was too late. She had her hands firmly on the ball now, and the familiar mist swirled inside again.

“It’s an Eeyore ball,” I mumbled. “Not a good idea at all.”

But nobody was listening to me, because we were all watching a tiny Prism inside the ball get hit by a tiny red truck. She gasped, and then words started forming on the inside of the ball again. But this time, they read:

YOU

WILL

DIE

IF

YOU

GO

TO

IOWA

Jack and Ollie both had confused looks on their faces, and I was just about to ask who was going to Iowa, but we’d all seen the mini-Prism get hit by that truck.

Prism’s face drained of color, and she burst into tears. “I didn’t even have time to tell you yet!”

Ollie took her hands in his. “What? Sweetheart, what?”

“I have to go home to Iowa, and my horrible brother has a red truck!”

After that, there were tears and hugs and wailing (Ollie and Prism, not me and Jack), and the two of them headed for the door, forgetting their plant in the chaos.

“Wait! Ollie, you forgot your zucchini!” I picked it up to carry to him, but he just waved a hand. “Consider it a gift. Happy New Year!”

Then they were gone. It wasn’t even nine-thirty yet, and I’d had two encounters of the weird variety. Plus, we still hadn’t finished talking about Jack’s trip.

Before I could ask him, though, my cell phone rang.

“It’s Susan,” I told Jack, surprised, and put it on speaker.

“Hey, Sheriff, what’s up? Jack’s here, you’re on speaker.”

“Have you heard from anybody who’s seen my grandmother? She’s disappeared! Tess, my cousin said Grandma G’s bed hasn’t been slept in!” She sounded frantic with worry.

Susan’s need to protect and take care of her family extended to all her relatives in Dead End, but she had a special relationship with her wonderful, more-and-more-forgetful grandma.

“I’m sorry, Susan. I haven’t seen anybody but Ollie and his new girlfriend since you left. Do you need help to look?”

“Where does she like to go?” Jack’s deep, lovely voice was soothing. “We’ll find her. Don’t worry.”

“I have no idea. She keeps telling me that grandpa—who has been dead for a very long time—is taking her to the prom. She’s getting more and more out of touch with present-day reality. I never should have let her out of my sight.”

“It’s going to be okay,” I said. “Did you activate the town’s text loop?”

“I should do that.” Her voice was distracted, and I heard someone in the background talking to her. A few seconds later, she was back, exhaling a long breath. “Tess, Andy saw her in a car outside the bakery.”

“Oh, great. Then everything’s fine. I’m so relieved. Give her a hug for me.”

“No! Everything’s horrible.”

“What’s wrong?” Jack demanded. “Is she hurt? Do you need us?”

She sighed again. “No. There’s nothing you can do. She’s surrounded by the worst possible villains right now, and nobody knows where they drove off to. It’s going to take everything I can muster to get her out of there.”

Jack’s gaze met mine, and we both flinched at the idea of just how bad it must be, considering the year we’d had.

“Is it warring Fae royalty?” Jack asked.

“Killer leprechauns?” I asked.

“Clowns?” Jack.

“Ghosts?” Me.

“Worse,” Susan said, cutting us off. “Phleabottoms.”

Jack

With Susan's news, telling Tess about Sedona dropped on my priority list, and I tried not to feel relieved. She knew about my past, at least in broad strokes, if not the details. She knew that sometimes I had to go help in a crisis when people from my former life as a soldier and rebel leader in the vampire war popped up.

I thought how I'd feel if Tess dropped "I'm leaving town, can't tell you much, back in a week" on *my* head and suddenly felt like a jerk. Or at least jerk-adjacent. But there was no time to dwell on guilt. We had a missing grandmother to find.

"Jack, find Mrs. G and make sure she's okay. From what Susan was telling me before you came in, these Phleabottoms are not the most ... reliable. Or even trustworthy. If they've had her out all night—does she even have her medicines?"

"She takes medicines? What medicines?"

Tess threw her hands up in the air. "I don't know! But she's old, so probably. Please, just if you have time, please go help."

"Of course, I'm going to help. I'll let you know as soon as we find her and have her tucked safely into her house."

She bit her lip. "I'd go if I could, but I'm on my own here this morning. Eleanor has wedding stuff to do. I guess I could close up ..."

I pulled her close and kissed the top of her head. This was one of the many reasons I loved her: She'd do anything, anytime, for people she cared about.

Okay, and I'm a guy. It didn't hurt that she was gorgeous, either.

Even in her faded jeans, sneakers, and Dead End Pawn sweatshirt, her gorgeous flame-red hair drawn back in a ponytail, she only had to look at me with those sparkling blue eyes, and I was toast. For a few seconds, I got stuck in a memory of Tess that morning, her hair spread out on the pillow next to mine, and my brain melted into my shoes.

"Jack! Stop it!" Her face was pink, as if she'd read my mind, which I knew wasn't one of her gifts. The look on my face had probably been obvious, though.

I grinned at her. "I can't help it. You're so beautiful."

She flashed a smile at me and rose to her toes to kiss me. "Right back atcha. Now go find Granny G."

I left Tess giving the zucchini plant a puzzled frown and headed for my truck. Sedona could wait for a few hours. I owed that vampire nothing. Well. Maybe a right hook.

I had a missing granny to find.



An hour later, I was having my doubts. Finding a lost woman in a town the size of Dead End should have been a piece of cake, and I wasn't even the only person looking. Dead End, Florida, population 5,000, depending on when the McKees had their family reunion, was not exactly a sprawling metropolis.

Thinking of the McKees, I shook my head when a pair of the younger ones ran across the road directly in front of my truck, and I had to slam on the brakes. That family. I'd heard about Frank Sr. summoning a demon. I'd met Frank Jr., aka Frog, when he was running around with a murder weapon, and

everybody knew about Bubba and his boa constrictor. Factor in a couple dozen cousins, and you had a very odd family tree.

“Hey, Mr. Shepherd,” one of the kids said, racing up to my open window, clearly unaffected by his near brush with death. “Are you looking for Granny G, too?”

“Yeah,” the other piped in while jumping up and down behind the first, her cheerfully freckled face shining with enthusiasm. “You’re a tiger, right? That is so cool! I wish I could be a tiger! I’d roar and roar and scare off all my cousins when they’re mean to me.”

She aimed a fierce look at the back of the boy’s head.

“Well, tigers are pretty fierce,” I drawled. “For example, we don’t like to see kids run in front of traffic, where they might get hurt. It makes us think about how tasty they might be.”

The little girl grinned, but her cousin gasped, his eyes widening. “No!”

“Not really,” I admitted.

“Can you really use your tiger nose and find Granny G?”

I sighed, but before I could answer, the girl jumped in.

“No, Bug, that’s wolves and dogs. Tigers have super hearing, not sense of smell, right? Right, Mr. Shepherd?”

“That’s right. You’re pretty smart,” I told her, pleased to see her face light up. She must not be much older than Shelley. “Hey, shouldn’t you be in school?”

Both immediately looked anywhere but at me and started backing away.

The boy started stammering. “Um, well, we...”

“We are on the way,” the girl announced firmly. “Bug made us late when he spilled milk all over the kitchen, and we had to clean it up. We didn’t even get breakfast. But we’re going now.”

The boy, who must be Bug, groaned. “Aw, Lily. We’re already in trouble for being late. And I’m hungry. We may as

well skip.”

I heard a car pulling up behind my truck and made a quick decision. “How about you both hop in the car, and I’ll take you to school? We can stop at Mellie’s, and I’ll buy you donuts for breakfast.”

I watched the battle between donuts and school on Bug’s face for a moment, but the donuts won.

“Okay!” the boy shouted, and they scrambled around to the passenger side of the truck and clambered in.

The two of them chattered nonstop on the way to the bakery. I listened with half my attention, constantly scanning the area for any sign of Mrs. Gonzalez, but saw nothing. When I parked and followed the kids into Mellie’s, I said hello to the people I knew and the very few I still didn’t. A couple of them gave me curious looks when they saw the kids, but I didn’t offer explanations.

When we reached the counter, Mellie smiled but raised an eyebrow. “Are you the new McKee babysitter?”

“Nope. Just found them roaming the streets. I’m getting them breakfast and taking them to school.”

“We’re not *babies*,” Lily said haughtily. “I’m in sixth grade.”

“Me, too,” Bug said absently, staring wide-eyed at the array of delicious pastries in the sparkling glass case before him. “I’ve never seen so many donuts in my *entire life*.”

He spun around and stared up at me. “Can I have one of each?”

I shrugged and opened my mouth to say “sure,” but then I caught sight of Mellie narrowing her eyes at me.

“Jack will be happy to buy each of you two donuts and a carton of milk, and then he will drive you to school,” she said, using what all three of us recognized as a Mom Voice. “I’m sure Jack doesn’t want to explain to your parents why you’re in the nurse’s office throwing up.”

I flinched. “No, Jack definitely does not.”

“Anyway, we can’t get sick today. Today is the day the new high school chemistry teacher starts, and we want to see what goes wrong this time,” Lily said in her prim voice.

Mellie and I stared at each other in amusement, but the kid might have a point. The first chemistry teacher, who’d been there since Tess was in high school and even before, had been a snake shifter—not that *that* was the problem. He’d also been a criminal who’d threatened Tess and her Aunt Ruby with an enchanted dagger. He was currently enjoying the ungentle hospitality of the Fae queen and was no doubt regretting his life choices.

His replacement had unknowingly brought a hibernating baby gargoyle to school. When the baby had woken up and cried out for his family, a horde of angry, full-sized gargoyles had rampaged through the school. When she recovered from the fright, the teacher ran away, never to be seen again. Who knew what might happen this time?

“Surely not,” Mellie said. “What are the odds that yet another chemistry teacher will cause problems?”

I groaned. “Pretty good odds now that you said that and jinxed us. This is Dead End, remember?”

Lily, apparently impatient with this adult chatter, stepped closer to the counter. “I’ll have one chocolate frosted with sprinkles, please, and one with pink icing. In two separate bags, if that’s okay, Miss Mellie, so the icing doesn’t smear. And white milk, not chocolate. Thank you.”

“Two jelly donuts and chocolate milk,” Bug said, jumping up and down.

When Lily glared at him, he subsided. “Um, please and thank you, Miss Mellie.”

“And six apple fritters for me, please, Miss Mellie,” I added, grinning. “Plus napkins. Thank you.”

Mellie rang them up, handed over extra napkins, and wished us a good day, and then my happy new friends and I headed back to my truck.

“No spilling crumbs or milk in the truck, Bug,” Lily said.

“It’s an old truck,” I began. Lily hit me with an implacable stare, and I backed down immediately. “Okay, yeah, thanks.”

The kid was *tough*.

“Thank you for the donuts, Mr. Shepherd,” Lily said sweetly.

“Frnnghh ooo,” Bug chimed in, with what looked like an entire donut jammed in his mouth. Then he yelped, and I was pretty sure Lily had elbowed him.

When we reached the school, donuts consumed, the kids both thanked me and hopped out of the truck.

“Do I need to come in with you and explain or anything?”

“No, we’re okay,” Lily said.

Bug raced off toward the school, but Lily hesitated.

“Is there something else, Lily? Are you okay?” My radar was pinging at the look on her face.

“No. Maybe. It’s just ... maybe you could come visit my cousins and use your tiger roar to teach them not to pick on me?” Her eyes were enormous and suddenly shimmered silver, and my protective instincts kicked into high gear.

“Listen.” I leaned toward her and lowered my voice. “You tell your cousins that I said I’d be happy to stop by and have a chat about bullying any time you want me to do it, okay?”

She nodded, a gap-toothed smile spreading across her face like sunlight.

“But in the meantime, let me tell you two secrets. First, talk to your parents about this, okay? Parents can usually help.”

She looked doubtful, but nodded.

“Second, if I’ve ever in my life met a person who is exactly as fierce as a tiger, it’s you. I believe you can handle your cousins all by yourself. Just tell them—and yourself—that you will not stand for it.”

She raised her chin and beamed. “I am?”

“You are. Fierce.”

“I will! I’ll tell them!” She whirled to leave, but then turned back. “Mr. Shepherd?”

“Yes, honey?”

“I just remembered that I saw Granny G in a strange car with a guy yesterday.”

“Really?” I admit I was a little skeptical. It seemed like she would have remembered that before; maybe she was trying to reward me for the donuts and advice.

“Yes. But I only remember now because the guy looked just like the janitor, Mr. Peabody.” She pointed.

The man Lily indicated was roughly six feet tall, with shaggy blond hair and a broad-shouldered build. He wore gray coveralls and an unzipped fleece jacket and was pushing a large yellow plastic cart.

“Bye!” She turned and skipped lightly across the parking lot toward the school.

When she reached the sidewalk in front of the office, the janitor turned and caught sight of her. He smiled at the little girl. But when he glanced up and saw me, his smile vanished. As soon as the door closed behind Lily, he started toward me with a determined stride.

I stepped out of the truck and waited, curious to see what he wanted. I also wanted to ask him about Mrs. Gonzalez in case it hadn’t been someone who *looked* like him with her, but *actually* him.

When he reached my truck, he scowled at me and clenched his fists. “Who the heck are you, and what were you doing with those kids in your truck? You’d better tell me *right now*, or my first call is to the sheriff.”

T*ess*

After I rang up the last customers from the Monday visit from the Golden Years Swamp Tours bus and gave Mr. Holby his fifty-dollar tip in a small envelope, I smiled as they headed back outside to the tour bus. Once a week, the GYST tour came by my shop in between other adventures on the continuing mission to save the grandparents of theme-park-obsessed tourists from one more day of roller coasters and gift shops.

Of course, technically, you could consider Dead End Pawn to be a kind of gift shop, but I prided myself on having better prices, less merchandise made of plastic, and a considerably more interesting inventory than anything Orlando offered.

After all, you couldn't find taxidermied animals who occasionally came to life and chased each other around just anywhere. Or—I shuddered and glanced at the crystal ball I'd put on a high, high shelf behind the counter—a bad-fortune predictor.

I'd easily cleared five hundred dollars from the hour-long visit, which was going to help pay the bills this month. December hadn't been as great as usual, considering the dueling Santas and threat of murder by corporate conglomerate.

But January, so far, was looking up.

Now that the shop had emptied, I realized that my stomach was empty, too. I hadn't eaten breakfast, and whether it was

the most important meal of the day or not, it was definitely noticeable when I missed it. I checked my phone to see if anybody had found Granny G., but no luck.

Eleanor was due in after lunch, but I was on my own until then, so it looked like another protein bar meal.

Yuck.

Unless I wanted to eat the glossy green zucchini on the plant Ollie had given me. I considered it—even raw zucchini had to be better than protein bars—and turned to look at it. The pot sat right where I'd placed it, on the far end of my sales counter, but the plant was ... different.

I blinked.

I must not have been paying attention to the plant, what with the crystal ball's death forecast going on because I'd been sure the plant, though leafy and healthy looking, had only had one zucchini on it.

Now it had three.

Three full-sized zucchinis, so it wasn't like they'd been camouflaged by the leaves.

I laughed and shrugged. Great. I'd make zucchini bread. Not noticing fruit—zucchini was technically fruit, like tomatoes, and yes, I'm a killer at trivia—was very low on my to-worry-about meter for the day.

Jack was leaving to deal with something dangerous.

Granny G was missing.

I had a scary crystal ball in my shop. Was it even ethical to sell something like that?

I sighed. All this on an empty stomach was messing with my GYST-induced good mood. I ducked into the back to grab a fake-chocolate protein bar and a glass of water and had just returned to the shop and taken my first bite when the door opened again.

I smiled and waved at the woman who entered and then turned away long enough to choke down the nasty mouthful

and wash it down with a drink of water. I really, really needed to hire another part-time employee, so I could eat lunch regularly.

“Hello,” I said brightly, turning to find that a man had joined the woman in the shop, and oh, holy movie star, he was seriously gorgeous.

And I could tell he knew it, too, when he bowed extravagantly and flashed a smile that must have cost thousands of dollars in orthodontia and teeth whitening.

“Hello, my darling Tess. I’m so glad to finally meet you!”

I blinked, momentarily blinded by all that dazzling, toothy brilliance. He was maybe my height, five eight, maybe early thirties, and he had curling, thick blond hair with sun-kissed highlights. His brown eyes danced beneath strong brows, and he had a perfect nose and sculpted mouth. He wore blue jeans, a black turtleneck, and a black leather jacket.

I’d been thinking about gorgeous people before, and now I was faced with a supermodel. Wow! Maybe the manifesting thing was helping me for a change.

When his eyes lost a bit of their shine, I realized I’d been staring at him for a beat too long. “Um ...”

His smile turned warm and intimate, like we’d been besties for years or were about to be. The woman with him, who was maybe in her fifties, looked down her nose at me and sniffed. She wore a long black coat that looked like cashmere, black driving gloves, and an arrogant expression. I recognized the designer label on her handbag, so I knew it must have cost as much as my new car, if it wasn’t a knockoff.

“Not exactly what I’d expected,” she said in an unpleasantly nasal voice, her mouth pursed. She made a point of scanning my shop from one side to the other and then cleared her throat. “You *are* Tess Callahan? Susan’s friend?”

“Yes,” I said, starting to have a bad feeling.

“Cordelia Phleabottom,” she said. “And my son. How ... nice to make your acquaintance.”

Oh, boy. The felons were here.

The man crossed to where I stood, his hand held out. “Aloysius Phleabottom. *So* pleased to meet you.”

The odd thing was, he really seemed pleased to meet me. I suspected Aloysius would have been a great snake-oil salesman back in the day.

I took a step back, putting my hands behind me. “I’m sorry. I don’t shake hands. Germs, you know.”

His eyes sharpened. “So, it’s true. Your talent.”

“Susan told you,” I said flatly. Everybody and anybody could find out about me, thanks to unwanted press from the incident when I first came into my ... talent.

Gift.

Curse.

When I touch people, sometimes I can see—in full, living color—exactly how they’ll die. Context clues can even give me an approximate idea of *when*. And I firmly believe this isn’t knowledge that people should have.

I’d been eighteen, already working in the shop for Jack’s late uncle Jeremiah, who’d owned it then, the first time it happened. On my first day alone in the shop, too.

A painfully thin, skittish woman had come in. She’d asked me about something, I don’t even remember what, now, and I’d held out my hand to shake, like a real grownup would do.

And when she’d touched my hand, I’d seen a completely lifelike vision of her husband killing her with a shovel. I’d screamed and blurted it out and then collapsed in convulsions on the floor from a physical reaction to the vision. If the customer who’d walked in a few seconds later hadn’t been an EMT, I might have died, because the poor woman—Annabelle Hannah Yorgenson—had run away from me in fear.

I’d later found out that her death had happened just as I’d predicted. Somehow, horribly, the press had found out. The EMT had talked, or Annabelle had, or the people in the

Orlando ER had heard me sob the story to my Aunt Ruby and Uncle Mike and spread the word.

I didn't know and didn't care. I just never wanted to go through a media frenzy like that again. After enough denial and avoidance, the press had finally given up and gone away, thankfully, but I'd been fairly unpopular with some of the more private citizens of Dead End for a while.

The visions didn't happen with everyone, thank goodness. And the pain and convulsions were mostly a thing of the past. But when I saw violent deaths, it was still very hard on me physically, mentally, and emotionally.

Not to mention when, like now, nosy people wanted to pry into my life. Or, even worse, when the ones who wanted me to "use my gift" and tell them how they'd die showed up.

Idiots.

Aloysius casually put his hands in his pocket and stepped back, as if signaling he wouldn't try to touch me, which I appreciated.

"No, Susan didn't say anything. We do a bit of research on places and people when we visit," he said lightly, looking around my pawnshop with interest. "We knew you were her friend, though, so we thought we'd stop by and say hello while she's busy working."

This didn't make sense. Surely Susan would have told me they were in town when we'd talked earlier, if she'd known?

Hmm.

"Oh, for Pete's sake, Ish, just ask her," Cordelia demanded in her nasal voice.

"Don't call me Ish, mother," he said from between clenched teeth, never losing his smile.

"Ask me what?" I casually sauntered around the counter and stood behind it, because I wanted more distance between me and the felonious Phleabottoms.

Which would also be a good name for a rock band.

“We wondered if dear cousin Susan had entrusted any of her beloved grandfather’s estate to you,” she said, attempting a smile but only achieving a pained grimace.

“Oh.” I put on my best innocent expression and deliberately did not glance over my shoulder at the crystal ball. “I don’t really understand. What estate?”

“I told you it was too soon,” Aloysius hissed at Cordelia, and she glared at him.

Wow. Family dinners with these two must be loads of fun. At least Aloysius wasn’t carrying the tote bag Susan had mentioned, so he probably wasn’t planning to shoplift anything.

Hopefully.

My profit margin was narrow enough that I wouldn’t survive any measurable loss from theft. I’d never had to worry about it much before. Dead End folk were pretty honest, and the vague rumors that I might be a magic user usually kept the tourists from stealing. Especially after they saw the potions case.

But I’d been specifically warned about these two.

“We’ll be on our way, then. I’m sure we’ll see you again, Miss Callahan,” Cordelia said, before sweeping around and sailing out of the shop.

Aloysius, who hadn’t moved to follow her, tilted his head and grinned at me so warmly I almost thought I’d imagined the ice in his eyes as he’d stared after Cordelia. “Sometimes, mothers can be a real trial, can’t they?”

“I wouldn’t know,” I said, my gaze steady. “Mine died when I was three.”

“Oh! I’m so sorry, Tess.” Something flickered in his eyes, like he was adjusting his approach on the fly, and his smile turned sad and sympathetic. A chill snaked down my neck as I realized that this man replicated emotions at will to suit the situation. Emotions that he clearly didn’t feel.

I read a lot of mystery novels. A *lot*. And Jack's granddad and I watched a lot of true crime. Suddenly, I had a strong feeling that the man in front of me might have sociopathic tendencies, which were present in all the most successful con artists—and serial killers. He probably wasn't a killer, but he absolutely looked at me and saw a young, gullible woman who'd fall for his charm. But I was *not* an easy mark, nor was I gullible—and amazingly white teeth do not equal charm.

"It was nice meeting you," I lied. "I'm sure I'll see you around town."

It was a clear dismissal, and he was too canny to miss it.

"I'm sure you will," he said, a hint of amusement in his voice. "I'll be looking forward to it."

I didn't relax until the door closed behind him and I heard their car drive off. Then I threw a cloth over the top of the crystal ball to hide it and texted Susan.

Did you know the felonious Phleabottoms are in town? I just had an interesting visit. They want to know if you 'entrusted' anything to me. I didn't tell them, and they didn't see the crystal ball, but I thought you'd want to know.

A few seconds later, her response came in:

Crap.

And then:

Phelonious Phleabottoms would be a great name for a rock band.

There's a reason Susan and I are friends.

Jack

I sized up the angry janitor for potential danger—soldier’s habit—and determined that he didn’t pose any real threat to me, although he’d be no pushover in a fight. But I wasn’t here for that, and I admired him for protecting the kids. So, instead of giving him attitude, I held out my hand.

“Jack Shepherd. Mrs. Hamilton can vouch for me.”

Recognition clicked in his expression, and he grinned and shook my hand. “Rick Peabody. The pig in the principal’s office?”

“That story just won’t die.”

He shrugged. “Good story. But, speaking of stories, what was up with Lily and Bug?”

“Is his name really Bug?” Poor kid.

“Worse. It’s Peregrine.”

“*Peregrine McKee?*”

Peabody laughed. “His mom is a big *Lord of the Rings* fan.”

“You’re right. Bug is better.” I told him the story of finding the kids on the road and the donut stop. “What worried me a bit is that it didn’t sound like there were any adults there to help with breakfast or a way to school.”

The janitor's blue eyes widened. "They're in sixth grade. That's plenty old enough to get their own breakfast and catch the bus."

Thinking back, I realized he was right. I'd been getting my breakfast from the time I was even younger than that, since Uncle Jeremiah'd had to open the shop every morning.

"I guess I'm out of touch."

He turned and leaned against my truck, looking across the lot at the school. "Yeah. I, ah, heard that you were in some rough places. Thanks for what you did."

Soldiers always recognized each other, and I heard it in his voice. "You, too?"

His nod was grim. "The early days of the vampire wars. Not a great time. Almost didn't make it home." He pulled the collar of his coat aside, and I saw the distinctive slashing scar of a vampire attack. "Took me a while to get over the urge to take my shotgun to the sheriff's brother's house when he showed back up."

"Carlos is one of the good guys. Most vampires just want to live their lives in peace, like the rest of us. But I understand the urge. I fought in my share of those battles."

We were both quiet for a minute, lost in our memories of a time that would hopefully never come again.

"Hey, one more thing. Lily asked me about showing up as a tiger to protect her from bullying cousins. You know anything about that?"

"Unfortunately, yes. I keep an eye out, and so do the teachers, but we can't do anything about what happens at home. The McKee family's naming philosophy may be *Lord of the Rings*, but their parenting philosophy is more *Lord of the Flies*."

"I may have to stroll by their place sometime—with fur and four legs."

"I hope you do. She's a great kid. Bug is a good kid, too, just a little wild. Anyway, nice to meet you, Shepherd. Please

don't bring any pigs to the school now that I'm here, or you and I will have a talk about who's cleaning up pig poop." He chuckled and turned to go.

"Hey, Peabody, you mind if I ask you a question?"

He gave me a curious look. "Sure, go ahead."

"Did you hear Mrs. Gonzalez was missing?"

"Yes, of course. That town text loop is nonstop about it today." He rolled his eyes. "She's a nice old lady, but maybe a few fries short of a Happy Meal these days. I wish they'd keep better track of her."

"Well, it's funny, but Lily said she saw Granny G in a car yesterday with a man who looked like you."

Peabody raised an eyebrow. "Are you asking me if I'm having a secret fling with an octogenarian?"

"Not exactly," I drawled. "No, I'm wondering if you know anybody in town who looks like you. Got any cousins or brothers who may have picked her up to save her from her wanderings?"

"Nope. No cousins in town, and I only have sisters. But from a sixth-grader's point of view, any guy between thirty and sixty with blond hair probably looks like me. I'm thirty-six, and I've had kids here guess my age all the way up to seventy-five." He grinned, but then shook his head. "With five thousand people in Dead End, there are bound to be a lot of blond guys. Sorry. That's no help."

"Wasn't much of a lead, anyway. She may not have seen Granny G in the car at all. Anyway, nice to meet you. I'm going to get back on the road and keep searching."

"Good luck. And if you want to get together for a beer sometime and *not* talk about the wars, let me know."

"Will do. The guys out at Swamp Commando Airboat Rides and I get together once in a while to do just that. I'll call you."

"Great. Those are good guys. Well, I need to get back to work." He shook my hand again and headed back to his cart

while I climbed back into my truck.

One of the worst things you learn during desperate times is that everybody lies, so I took everything that anybody said to me with a hefty dose of salt. But if this guy had been lying to me, he was an Oscar-worthy actor. He just hadn't given any signs of concern, deception, or nerves.

Lily may have seen Granny G, and she may have seen her with somebody who looked like the janitor, but I was pretty sure it hadn't been Rick Peabody.

My phone buzzed on the seat next to me, and I glanced at it. It was the town chat:

Granny G found and home safe.

Good news and bad news. I was glad Susan's grandmother was home and safe, but now I had no excuse to further delay the trip to Sedona.

I'd never been so reluctant to leave a place—a person—in my life. Maybe I had time to stop by and see Tess one more time before I headed out of town.

I sighed. I shouldn't worry about her. She could take care of herself perfectly well, and at least there weren't any murderers in town this month.

Even as the thought crossed my mind, I wanted to bash my head on the steering wheel to unjinx myself. This was *Dead End*. Thoughts like that were just tempting fate, and that had never, ever turned out well during the past year.

“New year, new beginning,” I muttered.

Sadly, I didn't believe it.

T*ess*

When Jack showed up with pizza, my stomach loudly reminded me I hadn't had any breakfast other than one bite of a protein bar. After Cordelia and Ish visited, I'd lost my appetite.

"You are a hero among men," I told him, and the few customers in the shop perked up.

"Is that pizza for everybody?" Mr. Newton put the fishing gear he'd collected on the counter and turned a hopeful smile to me. "Kind of customer bonus, right?"

"Glad to share my lunch with my regular customers." And I could see Jack was carrying two large boxes, so there should be enough for everyone.

We ate pizza but didn't talk much. I could tell Jack's upcoming trip was on his mind, but he didn't mention it. I tried not to feel hurt; if he wanted to tell me, he would. If it was a confidential remnant of his war days, then he wouldn't—or couldn't.

Eleanor called and said she was running late, and she sounded so distraught I told her she should quit worrying about coming in. I'd be fine on my own. She was frantic with wedding plans, and I was trying to be so considerate that she would feel guilty if she even thought about asking me to wear a hideous bridesmaid's dress. Orange. Or pink. Two colors that would never, ever look good with my red hair.

I knew it was all about the bride, but ... No.

Jack raised an eyebrow when I hung up. “Are you still thinking about hiring somebody else, at least part-time?”

“I haven’t asked Eleanor yet if she’s coming back after the wedding,” I admitted, avoiding his gaze. I’d been promising to do that and kept putting it off. Kind of like I kept putting off asking Jack about his parents. Or asking him about his former rebel co-leader who’d been more than just his friend. Quinn Dawson.

It’s not that I was afraid of the conversations, exactly. It’s just that things had been going so well between us, not counting the dead bodies and theft rings and villainous Fae and whatever.

I sighed.

“I’ll ask her,” I promised. “By the time you get back, I’ll know her plans and figure out the help-wanted situation. If the Felonious Phleabottoms don’t cause more trouble.”

“The *what?*” Jack put his fifth pizza slice down, uneaten, which showed the extent of his concern. Jack wasn’t one to let his food go to waste.

“It’s more like the who, or is that the whom? I can never get those straight.”

He pinned me with that emerald gaze, hints of amber flashing in his irises. “Tess.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I filled him in on what I knew, and he glanced up at the Eeyore ball.

“Maybe you should put that in the vault,” he suggested. “Might be better not to get in the middle of whatever scheme Susan’s family is concocting. Should I have a talk with them? Especially this Aloysius guy who has you so spooked?”

“Definitely not!” I put my hands on my hips. “I’m perfectly capable—”

“Of handling this on your own,” he finished. “I know, I know. Anyway, I had an interesting encounter of my own.”

He told me about Bug and Lily and about the talk he'd had with Rick Peabody.

"That's ... odd," I said, thinking. "There may be an innocent explanation, though. Rick and Aloysius—Ish—have the same general size and hair color, though Rick's taller. Maybe Lily saw Granny G with Ish?"

"Not sure that would be an innocent explanation, though, from what you told me about them."

Before we could discuss it further, Mr. Newton came back to the counter with more fishing gear. Jack got a phone call just then and wandered over toward the door to his office to take it. I rang up the sale and learned more about the "silver king of sport fish," aka the tarpon, than I'd ever wanted to know. But all knowledge is a good thing, as Jack's late uncle Jeremiah had always said, and I really liked to learn new things. Plus, Mr. Newton was a sweet old guy who could charm the bees out of their honey, so I enjoyed our conversations.

I handed him his bag and thanked him, but he hesitated for a moment, glancing at me and Jack. "Is there something else, Mr. Newton?"

He scratched his balding head and looked at me, his face serious. Finally, he nodded. "Tess, you know I don't like to gossip."

I grinned at him. "That's the truth. I think you might be the only one in Dead End who could say that with any sincerity."

A smile touched the corners of his mouth. "Thanks for saying that. Mrs. Newton, may she rest in peace, used to tell me that there was nothing wrong with a little gossip in a small town, but I never got the point of it. Anyway, I couldn't help overhearing some of what you and Jack were talking about, and of course, I saw the town text loop." He paused and put his bag on the counter.

I said nothing, just nodded. Sometimes, silence was the best way to encourage other people to talk.

“Well, it’s just that the boy—Aloysius—he looks an awful lot like Mrs. G’s late husband. I won’t say may *he* rest in peace, even though that’s not very Christian of me, because he was a hard man. She deserved better.” He paused, looking inward at a time long before I’d been born. “Anyway, that’s gossip, and old gossip at that. But about that boy. He’s been in town at least once that I know of, when nobody else realized he was here, I think. I saw him with Mrs. G a few months back, and I mentioned it to the sheriff offhand, like ‘I saw your cousin at the gas station’ sort of thing. But she told me, nicely enough—Susan is a sweet girl—that I must be mistaken. That Aloysius hadn’t been to Dead End since he was a little boy.”

“Hmmm.” I didn’t know what to say, but my mind was racing. Ish had been in town secretly? On mysterious errands? With Mrs. G? Also, I was amused at what Sheriff Susan’s response would be to being called a sweet girl, but Mr. Newton had known her since she was a baby.

“What do you think that means?” I asked him.

He shrugged and picked up his bag again, looking troubled. “I don’t know. I just know that side of the family is trouble. I hope they’re not here to cause problems for Susan.”

“I hope so, too.” I thanked him again and watched him walk away, wondering what I should tell Susan about what he’d said.

Two more customers came up with their purchases, and then I wrote up a pawn slip for a Stihl Magnum gas chainsaw that was in great shape. They cost almost \$1600 brand new, so I could give my customer a nice chunk of change.

In case you’re wondering, pawnshops work like this: we give micro-loans based on the kind of collateral banks would sneer at. Try taking your chainsaw into your local bank and see what happens. They’d laugh you out of the place. But if you’re stuck for a bit of short-term cash and have something with value, you can come to a pawnshop, and we’ll help you out. You give us your item, we loan you some money, and we hold on to your item in a safe place. You pay installments to us

for the loan amount plus a bit of interest, and we give you back your item.

But if you can't or don't want to pay back the loan, according to the contractual terms, the item eventually belongs to the pawnshop. We then sell it to pay for the cost of the loan. It's a nice system, highly regulated, of course, so thieves don't think they can fence stolen goods with us. And it's what keeps my shop running and pays my bills.

People also often sell us stuff straight out they know they won't want back, like Aunt Ethel's ugly but valuable diamond brooch or the sports equipment they just knew they'd use and then never did. Those things we can sell right away.

This chainsaw would be labeled, noted in my spreadsheet, and carefully put away in the back room for now, and my customer had some cash for whatever unexpected expenses he'd had come up. It was a fair system, when both shopkeepers and customers were fair and honest, and Jeremiah had always operated that way. I was proud to say I'd continued that tradition. I'd never once done any deal that I'd be ashamed to own up to on the front page of the *Dead End Gazette*.

Jack, who'd been in his office making calls, walked back over to me after the chainsaw guy had gone out the door and I had a temporary lull. He had what I thought of as his "big trouble" face on: flat expression, narrowed eyes, and clenched jaw. Whatever was happening in Sedona must have been bad.

Suddenly, I didn't want him to leave.

"Look—"

"Listen," he said at the same time.

I tried to smile and then started again. "Look, Jack, I know that you have obligations. That you have to do what you have to do. But since we ... I mean, now that we ..." I blew out a breath in frustration. "I don't know how to tell you I'm afraid to let you go."

His face softened, and then he pulled me into a hug. "I'm sorry. I know this must be hard on you. I can't imagine how

I'd feel about letting you go off and do something dangerous."

"That's because you wouldn't," I said, laughing a little and pulling away. "You'd be right there next to me. Maybe I can ..."

"Tess." He touched my cheek. "I love that you'd even think that, but you have responsibilities here. And this situation isn't one that would easily accommodate a stranger to the game."

"The game?"

"Not the game, but ... well. This is just a continuation of an incident that happened before. It's somewhat delicate."

"So not something where you can just turn furry and snarl everybody into submission?"

He laughed at that, but I'd sort of meant it.

"I'll call you. Text you. Every day, I promise." He kissed me and then, before I could ask questions or make any objections, he was out the door and gone. I took a long, steadying breath and followed him to the door to watch him drive away, but I was too late.

His truck was still there, but Jack was gone.

T*ess*

The rest of the day was normal. I sold things, bought things, took a couple more things in pawn. I also gave away at least two dozen zucchinis from the plant Ollie left on my counter. The perfectly ordinary-looking zucchini plant that somehow grew new full-size fruit every single time I turned my back on it. Since I'd had far more dangerous magical objects in my store, I shrugged and just went with it. There were going to be an awful lot of Dead Enders eating zucchini bread over the next few days.

Around five o'clock, Aunt Ruby called. I smiled at my customer and handed her the package I'd carefully wrapped for her—a faux-Tiffany lamp with gorgeous colored glass—and answered my phone.

“Tess, hi, honey. Can you come for dinner? We're going to have meatloaf. I know you love my meatloaf,” Aunt Ruby said, speaking just a little too quickly.

Something was wrong.

“What's up, Aunt Ruby? Don't bother to tell me everything's fine.”

She sighed. “I never could hide anything from you or your uncle. It's not a huge thing. It's just ... we got a large donation —”

“We?”

“The town council, well, really, Dead End itself. A large donation—”

“How large?”

“Will you let me tell you this?”

“Sorry, go ahead.”

“Large enough that it’s absolutely going to cover the purpose it’s earmarked for, according to the lawyer who delivered it.”

She paused, and I counted to three before asking.

“What purpose? You seem freaked out. Is it something weird? The McKees don’t want to grow marijuana in the town square again, do they?”

She laughed. “Probably, but this isn’t that. The donor wants to fund a new, full-time deputy position. The donation is enough to cover a salary plus benefits for at least twenty years or, if we’re careful about investing it, maybe in perpetuity.”

I blinked. “I must admit, if I’d tried to guess, I’d never have come up with that. Really?”

“Really. The town council is thrilled. Susan is practically doing cartwheels, or at least she would be if she wasn’t so distracted by her awful family. I’m the only one with doubts.”

It only took me a few moments. “Because you’re worried that whoever donated the money may want some sort of concession. Or maybe for our law enforcement to look the other way when they break the law?”

“Exactly! Everybody else thinks I’m being too suspicious, but I take this mayor job seriously, Tess. I don’t want to make a big mistake.”

“You said lawyer. Can’t you work something out that it’s clear in a signed agreement that everything about the donation and your acceptance has to be completely aboveboard?”

“Hmm. Maybe? You know ... that might be perfect. Come to dinner! We’ll figure this all out. I told your uncle that I

needed to run it past you. Your business mind is excellent, honey.”

A wave of warmth swept through me. It had taken Uncle Mike and Aunt Ruby a long time to see me as an actual adult, and I wasn’t entirely sure they always did, even now, so this was a genuine compliment.

“Thanks, Aunt Ruby. I’m not sure I can tonight, though. I’m pretty tired. Also, we went to the beach this weekend to walk around, so I have chores and laundry to do. Maybe a raincheck?”

“Sure, honey. Hey, have you heard from your grandmother since Christmas? It just occurred to me that maybe this is from her? She’s the only person I can think of who has lots of money to do something like this.”

“No,” I said slowly, thinking. “I heard from both her and Dad then, but not since. She’s so busy organizing the banshees, and Dad is doing some top-secret undercover work with the feds, I think.”

“At least he’s on the right side of the law this time,” she said tartly. She was not a huge fan of my dad—my Uncle Mike’s younger brother—who’d abandoned me after my mom died. I’d only been three years old.

“Anyway, I need to go. Customers coming in,” I fibbed. It was only a tiny fib; customers probably would come in soon. I usually got a rush just before six o’clock closing time. But I needed a minute to think.

The only person who had lots of money ...

No. She wasn’t. Except Uncle Mike and Aunt Ruby didn’t really know about Jack and his money. He hadn’t earned much for running the war against the vampires, but when he’d helped save Atlantis from demons, they’d insisted he accept what he’d called a “hoard” of Atlantean gold and jewels.

He was probably a billionaire. Or at least a multi-millionaire. Which was crazy.

Since he wore old jeans and flannel shirts, lived in his old family home, drove an old motorcycle and an even older truck,

he wasn't exactly flaunting his wealth. I didn't think anybody but me even knew about it.

But he had done things like donate large amounts of money before. Anonymously, mostly. When the town was in danger, all the kids and their guardians and teachers had gone to a theme park for a few days, all paid for by Jack. Nobody knew about that, either.

Then there'd been the clowns and the donation to the hospital and...

Oh, yeah. It was definitely Jack.

Why hadn't he told me?

I sighed. It probably had never occurred to him because money didn't mean much to Jack.

I shot him a text:

Any thoughts on who donated money to the town for a new deputy?

I saw the three dots that meant he was typing a response almost right away.

Nope. Maybe somebody who thought if the town had another full-time deputy, they'd quit asking tigers who were minding their own business to help solve crime?

Then he sent me a laughing emoji.

I wrote back:

Busted. But I won't tell. I love you. Be safe.

I saw the three dots again, but then nothing. He was probably in the middle of whatever it was and too busy to text right then.

Certainly, it wasn't that he was hurt and couldn't answer. Not so soon after he left.

"Argh!" I shoved my phone in my back pocket and started my close-of-business chores. Nobody was going to be inconvenienced too badly if the town pawnshop closed half an hour early on a Monday.

When I was on the front porch, locking the door, my phone buzzed. Jack!

Nope.

Susan.

“Hey, Sheriff. What’s up? Ideas for more rock band names?”

“Tess, is there any chance you can come over to my place? Now? I know it’s a little before six, but—”

“I’m on my way. Just locking the door. Susan, you sound upset. What’s going on?”

“My house is full of dangerous magical objects that I had no idea were coming, including a dagger that has a mind of its own and may try to kill me. And my godfather is acting like he’s under the influence of dangerous magic.”

I immediately responded to the most shocking part of that:

“You have a *godfather*?”

She shouted something to someone and then returned to the call. “Tess. Hurry.”

Five seconds later, I was in my car and on my way to her house. Felonious Phleabottoms, magical objects, murderous daggers, and bespelled godfathers.

Susan was having an interesting day.

T*ess*

Susan's house was just outside of town on the other side of Dead End from mine. She'd inherited it when her great-aunt had died. The old woman had been famous for her crotchety nature, but she'd always claimed Susan and Carlos were the only relatives she could stand to be around for over five minutes. She'd also been vehemently anti-vampire, but Carlos had turned long after she died, so the issue had never come between them.

When I pulled into her driveway, I had to park behind her sheriff car, which was behind a U-MOVE-IT van. Luckily, it was a long driveway.

An older man opened the door, but I could hear Susan ranting in the background. She was usually the calmest person in any situation, but her temper may have zoomed past even her upper limit of control after all this.

"Hello, you must be Tess." The man held out his hand and then yanked it back. "Sorry. Susan told me you don't shake hands. Please, come in. I'm Greg Butler, Susan's godfather. I ... worked for her grandfather."

Mr. Butler would have been handsome, if he hadn't looked so peculiarly gray, like someone who'd been seriously ill for a long time. He had short, neatly cut dark hair, brown eyes, and a warm smile. He wore a heavy, navy-blue fisherman's sweater, dark corduroy pants, and had a thick scarf around his neck, which seemed like overkill for the relatively warm

seventy-degree day we'd been having. Most northerners would wear their tiny shorts and tank tops in this weather, which was uncharacteristically warm for January.

But, again, the gray cast to his complexion. If he'd been ill, or still was, or ... what had Susan said? That he might be under the influence of evil magic?

That would do it.

I smiled at him. "Yes, Tess Callahan. Glad to meet you. I didn't realize Susan had a godfather. Are you here for long?"

"Well, let her in already!" Susan shouted from down the hall, and Mr. Butler flinched.

"I'm so sorry. Come in, please," he said, waving me in.

I hesitated, not wanting to get too close to him in case the magic was contagious. He seemed to understand and moved away from the door.

"Come on back, Tess," Susan called. "I'm just putting a very heavy trunk on top of this knife, because it *keeps moving closer to me.*"

Maybe I should have gone to Aunt Ruby's for dinner, after all. I'd had enough of magical daggers when the Fae queen had accused Jack of stealing hers. Luckily, that one was long gone and presumably locked up or destroyed, but here we were, facing another.

Maybe.

Maybe Susan was exaggerating?

Not likely.

"I'm coming," I muttered, resigned to my fate.

Susan stood in the doorway to what she still called the doll room, since her aunt had filled it with hundreds of creepy, collectible dolls. When Susan inherited the house, she'd cleaned out the dolls, selling any that were valuable and donating the rest. She'd torn down the wallpaper, painted, and turned the room into a library.

Now, though, it looked like a hoarder's dream. Boxes—some sealed and some open—filled every inch of space.

“Not that I'm not glad to help if I can, but why am I here, exactly? I don't know anything about magical objects, really,” I said, scanning the room. The antique travel trunk sat lopsided, right in front of Susan, apparently on top of the dagger.

“You know as much as anybody else, and probably more, given what you deal with in the shop. Plus, Andy's still recovering from his injuries.”

Deputy Andy Kelly, Dead End's only full-time deputy, had been badly injured by very bad guys just before Christmas. We'd been solving a plot that included murder, theft, and fraud, so it had been for a good cause, but still. Luckily for Andy, our new veterinarian in town, Dr. Charithra Kumari, was a frequent visitor, or so I'd heard.

Gossip and Dead End: like peanut butter and jelly. Hard to think of one without the other.

Mr. Butler walked up behind us but didn't get too close. “I'm sorry, Susan. I didn't ... I couldn't fight the compulsion.”

I turned to see him massaging his left wrist, which had a pale stripe of skin all the way around it.

“Bespelled manacle?” I looked at Susan. “Compulsion built into the metal or leather?”

“I knew you'd be the right person. Yes. And the evil thing fell off the moment he unloaded the last of the boxes into my house.” She pointed at two semicircular pieces of what looked like copper. “It must have been triggered to release him once his mission was fulfilled.”

“The mission being to deliver all of your grandfather's trove to you,” Mr. Butler said sadly. “I tried to fight it, Susan. I'm so sorry. I'll load it all back into the truck right now.”

He took a step forward, lifting his chin and squaring his shoulders, but then he stumbled and collapsed back against a wall, looking grayer than ever.

“I don’t think you’ll be doing anything but resting for the near future, sir. Susan, which guest room?” I didn’t touch him, because I really, really didn’t want to see how he’d die, but Susan caught his arm and helped him stand upright.

Her godfather shook his head, a look of determination on his pale face. “No. I need to at least tell you what you’re dealing with first.”

Susan bit her lip and then nodded. “Okay. Let’s go to the living room and get him settled on the couch, and then I’ll make some tea.”

We did just that, and I put a folded quilt from the basket near the fireplace next to him on the couch, so he could tuck it around his thin, shivering body.

When Susan came back with tea for all of us plus a plate of cookies, she and I sat on chairs across from the couch and waited for Mr. Butler to tell us the story behind the dangerous objects now lurking in the house.

He drank some tea, shook his head when Susan offered him cookies, and then sighed and put his mug down on a coaster on the side table.

“First, I’m so sorry, Susie. I fought him—fought the manacle—but your grandfather was a powerful magic user after fifty years of collecting and using that stuff. He was determined that you’d carry on his legacy. When he gave me that armband, he said it was a relic from an ancient civilization. Made me feel honored that he’d give me such a valuable gift.” He twisted his shaking hands together. “I had no idea, because he always locked the door to his den when he was in there, that he’d put some kind of incantation or spell on the thing. As soon as I put it on, I felt the effects. The thing made me ... fuzzy. Agreeable—too agreeable—but only to whatever he told me to do. Just made me grumpy with Millie.”

Susan smiled for the first time since I’d arrived. “I bet she told you what you could do with your grumpiness.”

A ghost of a grin touched his tired face. “You know it.”

I cleared my throat. “Not to be overly personal, but why did you work for Susan’s grandfather if he was such a bad guy?”

“Nobody knew,” Susan said grimly. “I mean, we knew he could be a jerk, especially to his daughters. My mom and Cordelia. When mom married a Gonzalez, he disowned her. Not rich or elite enough for him. Cordelia and mom were never close, because Cordelia started her criminal ways pretty young, and mom wanted nothing to do with it. Or her, after that.”

I knew Susan and Carlos’s mom had died when Susan was still a teenager. They’d just moved to Dead End, and Carlos had stepped up and become his sister’s legal guardian. He had still been a plain vanilla human then, not that it probably would have mattered. Dead End was flexible about supernatural gifts, especially when someone was a good guy and standing up to take care of his sister.

“He never used the darker magic around us,” Mr. Butler said. “We really didn’t know, which sounds ridiculous, but it’s true. He kept all that side of things very private, and Millie and I were only there to do the normal things. Take care of the house and grounds.”

I remembered something Susan had told me earlier. “You said he left for home? What happened?”

“The spell was cued to make me unload these last boxes when Susan was out of the house, so she couldn’t stop me.” He looked down at his clasped hands, unable or unwilling to meet her gaze. “I’m so sorry.”

Susan inhaled a deep breath and shook her head. “No. Nothing to be sorry for. You didn’t have a choice, really. Now what’s important is for us to figure out what to do next. I’m guessing just tossing the lot in the dumpster would be a bad idea?”

I nodded since she’d directed the question to me. “Oh, boy, would that be a bad idea. This kind of thing can cause havoc, like you can’t believe. Well, you remember the presents-

stealing Christmas tree, right? We finally had to coat it in salt and then burn it and salt the ashes to be sure ...”

I snapped my fingers. “If it had been a snake, it would have bitten me. That’s the advice we got from Alejandro’s wife, Rose, a powerful witch. I’ll text her, but I’ll bet that the same strategy will work for this stuff. Salt grounds some forms of magic, apparently.”

Special Agent Alejandro Vasquez was high in the FBI Paranormal Operations division. He’d worked with Jack in the past and had helped us out with more than one problem over the past year, but he kept trying to get Jack to come to work for P Ops with him and be his partner. Happily, Jack had no interest in that, which thrilled me, because the job was dangerous.

Alejandro also was married to the head of a major magical family, the Cardinal witches. Rose was giving me advice on helping my sister Shelley deal with her budding magical powers.

Pulling out my phone, I shot off a text to Rose. She usually answered within seconds, but not this time. She was pregnant with twins and seriously distracted, according to Alejandro’s latest call to Jack, so we might be on our own for a while.

I told Susan and her godfather this and then hesitated. “I wish I’d gotten Erin’s phone number. I could ask Jack to reach out to Ven, but Jack might be at a dangerous point in this trip ...”

Then, of course, I had to explain that. Ven was the king of Atlantis’s brother, officially titled the King’s Vengeance, and Erin, his wife, was one of the most powerful witches on the planet. Jack and I had gone to dinner with them—in *Atlantis!*—on our first official date. (Long story: Many, many obstacles had come between us on our path to a relationship, but that had been maybe the best official first date in history.)

“So, Jack’s on a mission related to his old rebel commander days. In Sedona,” I finished, feeling grumpy but trying not to show it. “It’s probably dangerous, or they

wouldn't have needed him, so I'm not sure it's a good time to bother him about this."

"Who's 'they'?" Susan asked.

I blinked. "Ah ... I don't know. We got busy with him trying to find your granny and then various things in the shop ... he never got around to giving me the details."

Or else he couldn't tell me much because it was super-top-secret, but I didn't say that.

"Okay." Susan brushed her hands together like she was brushing the problem away and stood. "Let's get the salt."

Jack

I stood on top of Bell Rock, one of the most famous rock formations in Sedona, Arizona, a locale known throughout the world for its stunning vistas.

Unlike all the tourists who flooded the place every year, I wasn't at all impressed with the view. Instead of looking out at the scenery, I was staring at a vampire who'd caused me a ton of trouble in the past.

"He claims to be reformed," Alaric, former high priest of Atlantis, said, his voice as dry as the Arizona desert.

"Even vampires deserve redemption, don't they?" Nicholas ignored both of us and directed his question to Quinn, whom he mistakenly thought would be the more gullible target. Quinn, who was possibly the most dangerous of all four of us.

She didn't answer for several long moments. Then she turned to me—her former partner in the rebellion—and Alaric—her current partner in life and love for, I guessed, the next few hundred years, given the longevity of Atlanteans and the magical punch Alaric packed.

"He means it," she said, shrugging. She was a powerful empath and a dangerous fighter. "Maybe it's a Christmas miracle. In January."

Nobody laughed.

“Believe me or don’t,” Nicholas said. “But there are twenty-five humans in danger. Will you help me?”

“I don’t have anything else to do,” I drawled. “Quinn? Alaric?”

“We will help,” Alaric growled. “If you betray us, vampire, you will die screaming.”

I grinned. “Ah. Just like the old days.”

T_{ess}

Susan took her exhausted godfather to the guest room and got him settled, and then led me to her garage and pulled the big roller door open. “The Dead End city garage was out of space, so they dropped the salt here. This has been a couple of years back.”

“The salt?”

“For the roads, in case we get a serious snowfall.”

I just looked at her. “When did we last have a serious snowfall? In Florida?”

“Exactly,” she said dryly. “Which is why I still have a hundred fifty-pound bags of salt in my garage.”

I looked where she was pointing and whistled.

“Good thing you have an enormous garage.” The pile of salt bags took up most of the left-hand bay. “Um, do you have a wheelbarrow? Fifty-pound bags ...”

“I was thinking we’d carry one together and spread it around the outside of the pile of boxes. I don’t want to dump salt on everything until we get expert confirmation that it’s the right thing to do. Who knows, with magic? Salt could be a catalyst for something nasty with some of those objects. Let’s put a ring of salt around the pile of boxes for now. I’ll lock the door and keep the key on me. That should keep everybody safe from dangerous magic until we figure it out.”

So that's what we did. I almost tripped over the dagger, twice, because the darn thing kept chasing Susan around the room whenever we weren't looking at it.

"This doesn't make sense to me," I told her, bent over and pouring salt out of an oversized measuring cup in a line around the room. "Why would your granddad send you a knife that seems to want to hurt you, when his entire goal was for you to take over his, pardon me, evil ways?"

"First, it's *grandfather*. Or *that evil monster*. Never granddad." She shoved her hair out of her face, leaving a streak of salt behind. "Second, who knows? He was a bad guy. He did bad things."

We finished laying down a thick line of salt all the way around the room, meeting at the doorway, and stepped out of the library.

"I sure hope that doesn't ruin your rug."

Susan looked at me and then laughed. "Tess, I gotta tell you that my rug is the least of my worries right now."

"If he was such a bad guy, why did you agree to deal with his estate?" I didn't want to be nosy, but I was curious.

She led the way to the kitchen, and we washed our hands and put the measuring cups in the sink. "I didn't really have a choice. The will said either I did it or the entire estate would be held in probate forever. Since Cordelia was really counting on her inheritance, I felt obligated. Plus, I thought he'd leave something to the Butlers, which would help them out in their retirement."

"So, your godparents—"

"Godfather. Greg married Millie later in life."

"Godfather. Did he leave them anything? Or Cordelia? Why did you get all this stuff, instead of Cordelia and Aloysius, who seem to really, *really* want it?"

She sighed. "I have no idea. The lawyers haven't told us all the terms of the will yet. Other than to think that even my horrible grandfather knew it was a bad idea to give anything

dangerous and valuable to them. They're ... completely without morals, as far as I can tell. They'd sell the stuff first chance they got, no matter that it might harm people."

"Good thing it's here," I said, determined to find a bright side. "Oh! And I need to bring you the Eeyore crystal ball to put inside the salt circle, just to be safe. I'm glad it's all here in a locked room. You can keep your aunt and cousin far, far away from it."

Just then, we heard the front door bang open.

"Yoo hoo! Susan, we're back, and we brought pizza."

It was Cordelia.

Susan's shoulders slumped. "Did I mention I felt I had to invite them to stay here? This was before Greg dumped the boxes in my house, of course."

The sound of Cordelia's high heels paused halfway down the hall—exactly where the door to the library was. I winced, looking at Susan's expression. This was not good.

Not good at all.

"We met that nice Mr. Judd at the pizza shop," Cordelia tinkled, mincing her way into the room on very high heels. She gave me a sharp look and then ignored me completely, turning to her niece. "You only owe me \$27.50 for the pizza, dear. He gave us a coupon."

Susan sighed. "Okay, Aunt Cordelia. I'll get it in a minute."

Aloysius showed up in the doorway, startling me, since I hadn't heard his footsteps at all.

"Ah, the lovely Tess," he purred, his smile wide and his eyes twinkling with what felt like entirely fake warmth. He started toward me. I took a step back and then regretted it when I glimpsed triumph cross his face.

"Time for me to get home and feed my cat," I said. "Susan, it was so nice to meet your godfather. I'll call you as soon as I hear from Rose."

I felt a bit cowardly, but I really needed to go feed Lou. Plus, I didn't want to spend another minute with the Phleabottoms. Maybe it was childish, but they—Ish, especially—gave me the creeps.

“Surely not so soon,” he crooned, shifting almost imperceptibly to block my path to the hall.

Maybe, in the past, he would have intimidated me. He was bigger than me, and I was absolutely sure he was a dangerous man. But I'd been through so much during the past year, I was pretty sure I had a spine of steel now.

I met his gaze and said nothing. For a long minute, we stared at each other, neither willing to be the first to look away.

When Cordelia realized what was happening, she grabbed her son's arm. He blinked, as if only then realizing what he'd been doing, and then he chuckled and moved aside, making a flamboyant “please go ahead” gesture.

I still said nothing, and I didn't smile, even though my Southern upbringing was chiding me to be polite. Something about these two poked at ancestral fears—I wanted to put alligators in the moat and pull up the drawbridge against them, no matter how silly that seemed to my rational brain.

I really, really didn't want to leave Susan alone with them, especially in a house full of dangerous magical objects, but I didn't know what else to do.

Finally, I nodded at them and then looked at Susan. “Walk me out? I want to ask you about the new regulations for reporting provenance at the shop.”

“Sure.”

As we walked out, I could feel the Phleabottoms staring at my back and had to work hard not to shiver or look back at them.

“I'm sure I'll see you soon,” Ish purred.

Not if I see you first.

When we got to my car, far from listening ears, I put a hand on Susan's arm. “I don't like them staying here with you.

I know they're your family, and I apologize for saying it, but I don't trust them. I think they're dangerous. Aloysius, especially. He sets off every warning sign and red flag I have."

"I know. But they're out of here in a day or two, whether they like it or not. I can't have them lurking about when I'm working. And Greg needs time to recover before he goes home. Unfortunately, Cordelia likes to treat him like the help, so she'll be bossing him around, and he's too polite to tell her no. It's a mess."

"Susan, I know you are a strong woman and an awesome sheriff, but maybe Carlos could help with some of this? At least take the night shift guarding that stuff until you find someone to defuse it?"

"My brother is in Europe on some super-important vampire business. I wouldn't bother him with this even if I could reach him. He's in the mountains somewhere. So, nope. On my own with this one. As you know, my cousin Sadie is my only family in town other than Granny and Carlos, and Sadie is so flaky I'd never let her get anywhere near this stuff."

She wasn't exaggerating about Sadie, who'd probably say "Ooh, shiny," and pick up the dagger. But she also sounded so hopeless that I felt guilty about leaving.

"Hey. I can stay longer if you need—"

"No. Go home, Tess. I got this. If they annoy me too much, I'll shoot them."

I laughed, but on the drive home it occurred to me she hadn't looked like she was kidding.

T^{ess}

After a quiet and, thankfully, peaceful evening at home with my cat, leftover baked macaroni and cheese, and a few hours of *Ted Lasso* to cheer me up, I got a good night's sleep, even though I was a little worried when I never heard from Jack.

I heard from Rose, though, with all bad news. There was no way for her or any other witch to give us advice on how to deal with the magical objects without being on site. Magical objects weren't fungible; they all had unique properties, depending on how they'd been bespelled. So, there'd be no good "one size fits all" solution, more than likely.

She told me what we *couldn't* do:

We couldn't set them on fire, because some or most of them might explode and release a typhoon of magic into the environment.

We couldn't sell them, of course. Unethical and dangerous.

We couldn't give them to anybody else to safeguard. Power corrupts and all that, and Rose said the magic might harm or seduce even the most honorable people, eventually.

I'd called Susan with this dismal update, learned that everything was the same at her house, with the fun addition of Cordelia's litany of complaints about the "rustic" pizza, and she'd caught Ish lurking near the locked door to the library

twice. She said she'd look for an expert who could come by and appraise the lot for danger and disposal purposes.

Tuesday dawned bright and gorgeous, and the weather forecast was for another seventy-degree day. I stretched and cuddled Lou, and then I cleaned up, dressed in a Dead End Pawn sweatshirt and jeans, and tied my hair into a ponytail. Then I wandered into the kitchen to make coffee and feed Lou a hearty helping of fishy goodness. The smell of tuna in the morning wasn't great, but it was her favorite, and I felt like I needed to make it up to her for being gone so long the day before.

I'd tried taking her to work with me a few times. A lot of small businesses had resident cats and even dogs, after all. But Lou was not a cat who was comfortable with strangers. She'd been a stray who'd found my porch in a rainstorm, and we'd been together ever since. The time at the shop had been hugely stressful for both of us, so she spent her days curled up on the couch, comfortable and happy, watching the world go by through my windows.

Recently, a pixie named Frazzle had become Lou's fast friend and liked to show up at my house to eat honey bread and hang out with my cat. They'd even staged a huge mock battle at Thanksgiving. I sometimes wished Lou could talk, because Frazzle never told me anything about their adventures, but since Lou clearly adored the tiny Fae, I didn't worry about it.

Much.

The Fae were ... different. Their ideas of what was dangerous didn't exactly coincide with ours.

"Okay, sweetheart, time for me to go. I won't be late tonight, hopefully. And if I go to Aunt Ruby and Uncle Mike's for dinner, I'll come get you first."

She loved my uncle even more than tuna.

I kissed her head and went to work, where something far more terrifying than dangerous magical objects or sentient daggers awaited me.

Eleanor had picked out the bridesmaids' dresses.

They were pink.

So pink.

And covered with ruffles. So, so, so many ruffles.

If a truckload of Pepto-Bismol exploded, the result would be these dresses.

"Eleanor. I ... um ... have you shown this to Aunt Ruby and Lorraine?" Surely my fellow bridesmaids would figure out a tactful way to tell her we couldn't possibly wear these.

"Not yet!" She beamed at me. "I wanted to show you first. Isn't it beautiful? My bouquet will be pink roses, so they'll be *perfect*."

Eleanor Wolf was one of my favorite people in the world. She looked like the actress who played the wonderful next-door neighbor on every TV comedy you've ever seen. She was kind and funny, and my customers loved her. She was also smart and a brilliant negotiator, and she almost certainly made better deals than I did in terms of profit.

She was also mom to Jack's best friend, Dave, and grandmom to Shelley's best friend, Zane. My biggest fear, before I'd seen the picture of this dress, had been that she'd quit working for me after her upcoming wedding, and I'd have to find a new employee who'd be even half as perfect.

Now that fear was neck-and-neck with the one where everybody in Dead End saw me wearing a humongous, ruffled, hideously pink cupcake.

Aunt Ruby might not be much help, since generations' worth of genteel Southern manners ran through her veins, but Lorraine was blunt and honest and outspoken. I pinned all my desperate hopes on Lorraine and pasted a smile on my face.

"They're beautiful. And it's your day!"

It's her day, it's her day, it's her day.

I loved Eleanor. I could grit my teeth and wear a meringue cupcake for her.

“Oh, and Tess, I moved your zucchini plant to the corner. It’s far too heavy for the glass counter.”

I turned to look where she was pointing and gasped. The plant had completely overflowed its pot and hulked in a three-foot-wide and two-foot-tall giant bush of ... zucchinis.

So. Many. Zucchini.

“But—the plant fit in a tiny pot yesterday! How ... why ...”

Eleanor raised her eyebrows. “Tess. There’s no way that plant fit in that tiny pot.”

She grabbed the small wastebasket behind the counter and held it out. We both looked at the shards of the pot inside.

“I cleaned this up off the counter ...” Her voice trailed off. “Wait. Are you serious?”

“Yes. Ollie brought it yesterday and gave it to me.”

She rolled her eyes. “Ah. Goblins. That explains it. They have a magical green thumb. This plant probably got triple-whammied.”

“Triple-whammied?” I was silently counting. There were at least seventy-two full-sized zucchinis on that plant now. I had to get rid of it before it ate my shop.

“I’m getting a Jack and the beanstalk feeling,” I said. “We have to get rid of it before giants and geese show up.”

She laughed, but the chimes over the door rang before we could talk about it anymore. We spent the morning buying and selling, taking in a few items in pawn, and giving zucchini to anybody who’d take some.

Everybody in Dead End would be eating zucchini bread for the next month, at this rate.

Otis stopped by around eleven with his gorgeous greyhound. He took three of the zucchinis and told us they were good snacks for dogs.

“It has lots of vitamins and fiber and not a lot of calories,” he said, sneaking a peek at our shop mascot, Fluffy, the

taxidermied alligator. “Beauty loves them.”

“Please, take more,” I offered, but he grinned at me and shook his head. “This is enough. They don’t last long, and I can always get more at work.”

Otis worked at the nursery these days, after years of not doing much, and the job agreed with him. He said goodbye, and then he and Beauty ambled out the door. He hadn’t bought anything, but at least we were down three zucchinis.

Just before lunch, I got a text from Lizzie Underhill, a temporary deputy on loan from Duval County. She was helping Susan until Andy got back on his feet. We’d had plans for lunch that I’d forgotten all about, what with Jack’s unexpected departure and Susan’s problems.

I still hadn’t heard from Jack, either.

“Are you okay to cover the shop while I have lunch with Lizzie? I know you’re heading out at one for wedding stuff, but I promise to be back by then.”

Eleanor patted my arm. “No worries. I’m glad you’re taking her to lunch. I think it might be lonely for her, not really knowing anybody in town.”

I texted Lizzie back and grabbed my purse, so I could stop by the post office and get stamps on the way. Before I reached the door, though, it slammed open, and a wild-eyed woman stormed into the shop.

Eleanor and I both took a step back when she stomped across the floor, straight toward us.

The newcomer looked to be in her early fifties, with frizzy brown hair and dark brown eyes. She wore a bulky orange sweater with a long rust-colored skirt and brown boots. She had a deep, south Florida kind of tan, and she was tall and skinny. The bony skinny, not the “I run a lot and eat only veg and tofu” kind of skinny.

And her fists were clenched.

I motioned Eleanor to step behind the counter, sent up a quick prayer that she wasn’t carrying the gun she’d tried to

shoot Jack with, and stepped between Eleanor and the angry woman.

“May I help you?”

“Who are you?” she barked.

“I’m Tess Callahan. I own Dead End Pawn. And you are?”

“I’m here to warn you, that’s what I am. You need to stay away from those Phleabottoms!”

T *ess*

I wasn't going to make it to the post office.

"Oh, boy," I said.

"The who?" Eleanor edged out from behind me. I was pleased that she was unarmed, but I realized she hadn't heard about Cordelia and Ish or any of the associated chaos yet.

"I'll tell you later."

I smiled at the angry woman. Usually, I'd be annoyed by somebody acting like this, but if she was trying to warn me away from the Phleabottoms, we might have something in common. "Now you know my name, but ..."

"Henrietta Quirksley," she snapped, but then she blew out a breath and visibly calmed down, even shaking out her hands. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to come on so strong. But I know Cordelia and that horrible son of hers have been involving you in their plots, and I wanted to warn you. I don't care what she promised you. It's not worth getting involved with that snake. Not only that, but she'll cheat you out of your share of the loot!"

"I ... wow. Okay. That's a lot to unpack. Mrs. Quirksley —"

"Just Henrietta," she muttered.

"Henrietta, I'm definitely not involved in any plots with the Phleabottoms. And there is no loot to be shared, at least on

my part. What made you think that?”

She gave me a deeply suspicious look. “I saw them come into your shop, and then I tracked them to the sheriff’s house, and you were there, too. Don’t lie to me. I’m only telling you this for your own good.”

I didn’t like anything about that. “Okay, first, why are you following me?”

Henrietta heaved a sigh. “I’m not following *you*. I’m following *her*: Cordelia Cheats-Her-Partner Phleabottom.”

I knew I shouldn’t ask, but I was interested in the alleged cheating. (Yes, I watch a lot of true crime. I sometimes thought I should have been a lawyer.)

“Your romantic partner or business partner?”

She smacked herself in the forehead, apparently flabbergasted by my ignorance. “Not romantic. What did I say? How would I know about her stealing your share of the loot if she hadn’t done the same thing to me? First, she left me to take the fall. Five years in federal prison. Then she stole my share of the haul. I’m not letting her get away with that, let me tell you.”

I turned slightly toward Eleanor. “Maybe we should call Susan ...”

But Eleanor, her eyes wide, was staring past me. I whirled back around to see that Henrietta was pointing a gun at me.

“Listen,” she said, almost apologetically. “I don’t want to hurt you. I just wanted to warn you, but I can’t have you calling the sheriff. I’m ... technically violating my parole. By being in Florida.”

“The gun probably isn’t good, either,” I pointed out.

She glanced down at it, shrugged, and shoved it back into her bag. “Sorry. I overreact sometimes. But I have to protect myself. Cordelia and her son said they’d hurt me if they ever saw me again.”

“Wouldn’t it be better—just a thought,” I ventured. “To stay away from them, then?”

“Not a chance! She owes me a hundred thousand dollars!”

Eleanor, who'd been uncharacteristically quiet up to that point, whistled. “A hundred grand? What did you do? Rob a bank?”

“Just a small one,” Henrietta said, looking sheepish. “They put trackers in my molars when I was in prison! I showed them, though. I blasted myself with an EMP generator. Been a little fuzzy since then, to tell you the truth, but they can't track me through my teeth anymore.”

I blinked. “Your teeth? No. Wait. None of my business. Ma'am ... Henrietta. I can promise you I have never had and never will have the slightest intention of getting involved with any Phleabottom felonies, schemes, or plots.”

She studied me with narrowed eyes for a moment and then nodded. “You seem like you're sincere, and you're a polite young lady. Not a lot of them around anymore. Okay. Well, consider yourself warned. I've been following her for months, and I'm going to get my money from her, no matter what it takes. You can warn your friend, Sheriff Susan, that she should stay out of my way.”

“I don't—”

“How much for this shirt?” She sorted through the Dead End Pawn T-shirt basket and held one up to herself to check the size. “It's cute, and I left Detroit without a lot of clothes.”

“Fifteen dollars,” Eleanor said.

“Consider it a gift,” I said. “Please.”

“That's very nice of you, Tess.” She shoved the shirt in her bag, probably on top of her gun. “I hope I don't see you again, especially near those two crooks.”

“Have a nice day,” I said automatically to the woman who'd just threatened me, told me she was violating parole, and pointed a gun at me.

She turned and flashed a big smile, and then she was gone.

I raced over to the door to see what she was driving and maybe catch a glimpse of her license plate before I

remembered the new camera system set up outside my shop. It might not get the license plate number of the old Toyota, but I couldn't see it clearly, either. I didn't want to run outside and let Quirksley see me spying on her.

I really didn't want her to come back.

"Better call Susan," I said after she drove off.

"Already on the phone," Eleanor said. "There is something very wrong with that woman. 'They' put trackers in her teeth? Blasted herself with an electromagnetic pulse generator? What in the world?"

"This is turning out to be a terrible, horrible week for our friend, the sheriff." I sighed, and then I filled Eleanor in on what was going on. Not the private stuff that Susan might not want shared, but the broad strokes.

My phone beeped. "Oh, no. That's Lizzie. I'm late. I can tell her we have to reschedule, Eleanor. I don't want to leave you alone after this ... No. You know what? We're closing for lunch for once. You go do your wedding stuff, I'm going to lunch with our new deputy, and we'll hope Henrietta Quirksley doesn't decide we put trackers in her earlobes while she was here and come back for revenge."

Eleanor agreed, and then she burst out laughing.

"What?"

"Just think. Now we'll have that woman advertising our shop."

I groaned, but then thought of some of the other customers who'd come through the shop and shrugged. "There is no such thing as bad publicity?"

"Unless she shoots somebody while wearing a Dead End Pawn shirt."

Suddenly, I didn't have much of an appetite.

T^{ess}

Dead End is a one-diner town, and that diner has always been Beau's.

We had a pizza place that the new owner had recently renovated so you could sit at a table and eat there, and my friend Lauren's deli had a few tables. Even Mellie's bakery had places to sit and enjoy the scrumptious baked goods.

But Beau's was the center of town. The gossip hub. The epicenter when anything dangerous happened. We all gathered at Beau's to consult with our fellow Dead Enders, eat whatever Lorraine told us to eat for lunch, and catch up on the news.

Naturally, I was meeting Lizzie there.

I rushed in and started apologizing the minute I saw her at a table near the far wall.

"Lizzie, I'm so sorry I'm late. I had a weird ... *situation* at the shop, and I didn't want Eleanor to have to handle it on her own."

Lizzie Underhill smiled up at me and waved to the chair. "No worries. I was studying the menu, even though it seems futile. Lorraine never lets me order off it."

Our temporary deputy was young but knew how to handle herself, and Susan said she was good at her job. I'd clashed with Lizzie when I first met her, because she'd been treating a good friend of mine like a murder suspect. In that case, I'd been wrong, because there had been good reasons for her

suspicion, even though he was ultimately proven to be innocent. But she'd been straightforward about it and seemed to be smart and effective. All good things when you're a cop.

Appearance wise, she was nearly six feet tall, a runner with long, lean muscles, and pretty in an understated way. She had dark brown eyes, short brown hair, and warm brown skin.

And she had a gorgeous smile that was a little shy.

“Are you still staying at Andy's mom's house?”

She put her menu down and nodded. “Yes, she's such a kind person. I had to insist that she accept compensation for hosting me, though. She didn't want to take anything. I finally convinced her that the state was paying, and it would just cause confusion and red tape if she refused.”

“Is the state paying?”

She grinned at me. “Somebody is paying. I'm not sure if it's the state of Florida or the city of Dead End. Or maybe even Black Cypress County? I just know I get checks from the sheriff's office to give her every week.”

Lorraine bustled over to take our order, and all thoughts of Lizzie's rent and even Cordelia's crimes and stalker flew out of my mind when I looked down at her shoes.

Her neon-pink Pepto Bismol shoes.

“Traitor!”

At least she had the decency to blush, her cheeks turning a lighter shade of pink than her horrible shoes.

“I'm just trying them out, Tess.”

“You saw the dress! You're planning to go along with it,” I moaned. “Lorraine, we will look like giant cupcakes! Like ... like whatever a thing is, that's horrible and pink and *covered in ruffles!*”

“I know, I know,” she muttered. “But it's her day. When she started in about the pink roses in her bouquet, with those stars shining in her eyes, what was I going to say? We've been

friends for more than half a century. I'm not going to be the one to rain on her wedding day parade."

I sighed, my shoulders slumping. "Fine. But I am *not* wearing that dress to the reception. The skirt alone would take up the entire dance floor!"

"We'll see," she said ominously.

Lorraine was one of Dead End's former mayors and had been a mainstay at the diner for longer than I'd been alive. She stood maybe five feet tall in her orthopedic shoes, had short, silver hair, and wore a (pale) pink starched uniform and crisp white apron to work every day. She regularly got me into trouble, going on "adventures," and she was one of my favorite people in the world.

Lizzie, glancing back and forth between the two of us, started laughing. "I'm using my trained detecting skills to deduce you're talking about bridesmaids' dresses."

"Yes," I mumbled. "They're so, so ... Never mind. Lorraine is right. It's Eleanor's day, and we're just going to be the supportive, pink-cupcake-covered friends at her wedding."

"I always wondered about that," Lizzie said. "Why, when they're our friends, do they make us wear such horrible dresses? My sister put me in a gamma-radiation-green satin dress at her wedding. I looked like a six-foot-tall, sickly cucumber all day long."

Mrs. Quindlen, seated across from us with Baby Boo Q, her newest granddaughter, in her lap, started laughing. She'd been shamelessly listening in, of course. It was Beau's.

"You think that's bad? Ha!" Her Cajun accent became more pronounced when she was excited. She pointed at her husband. "This one's sister made us all wear orange. Bright Halloween orange at a December wedding, I ask you. My hair was the same bright red as yours, Tess, and I looked like a jack-o'-lantern!"

Lorraine laughed. "I remember that dress. Anyway, Tess, Deputy Underhill, the special is fried chicken and mashed

potatoes. Green beans on the side with apple pie. We're out of ice cream. Should have gotten here earlier."

Lorraine bustled off to get our drinks before we could respond.

"She doesn't really believe in taking orders, does she?" Lizzie said, staring after her.

"Not really, but the special is always great, so it all works out."

We couldn't chat for a few minutes, because so many people wanted to tell us their awful wedding clothes stories. By the time people quit stopping by our table, Lorraine had dropped off our water glasses and moved on.

Lizzie looked a little stunned. "I've gotta confess, I'm not used to this small-town thing yet. Jacksonville is a big city. The biggest in the country, sprawl-wise, in fact. I'm lucky if I run into somebody I know at lunch once every few months."

I gave her a sympathetic smile. "I know. It can be a lot. Sorry."

"No, it's not that. I like it. You have such a sense of community here. It's not something I've ever been part of before." She looked down at the table. "It's nice. People know my name and say hi."

"Have you ever thought of moving here on a more permanent basis? Getting a full-time job with the Dead End sheriff's department?"

Oops. I probably shouldn't have said that. I didn't know what was going to happen with that donation. Maybe the town council wouldn't accept it, or maybe they'd take it but use it for something else. Could they do that when a donation was specifically earmarked for a particular purpose? I didn't know.

Lizzie looked up at me, and I felt guilty about her hopeful expression. "Is that a possibility? Have you heard anything? I mean, I know your aunt is the mayor ... I'm sorry. Not trying to put you on the spot, but I'd really like the opportunity to take on this job for real."

“No, I haven’t heard anything official from Aunt Ruby, but I know we’ve been shorthanded for a long time, deputy-wise. The previous sheriff was a buffoon. A murdering, evil, buffoon. When the FBI arrested him, Susan got promoted to his job, but we never replaced her deputy position. So, I don’t know, but it seems like there could be an excellent shot.”

Lorraine arrived with our food and put plates on the table just as Lizzie, glowing with excitement, impulsively reached out to grab my hand. “Oh, Tess, that would be wonderful. I hope—”

But I never got to hear what she hoped because I had to watch her die.

T*ess*

They were werewolves. I knew there were all kinds of shifters, of course. We in Black Cypress County had known about the supernatural long before the Fae, vampires, and shifters introduced the rest of the world to their existence. But I'd never seen a werewolf in person.

Until now.

Until this vision of Lizzie Underhill's death.

They attacked her in a park at night. Two of them came out of the trees and arrowed straight for Lizzie, who wore a pretty red party dress and was laughing with another woman.

It was horrible. Both women died ... so fast. And then I heard sirens and shouting and realized someone was gripping my hands back in my reality. My non-vision reality.

And the shouting was happening there, too. At Beau's.

Shockingly, it wasn't me doing it. It was somebody outside the restaurant, and I decided I didn't have the bandwidth to worry about it just then.

Lizzie crouched next to me, apologizing over and over, her hands up in the air, being careful not to touch me again. I could have told her I never saw a death vision twice, if I'd been in any condition to be coherent.

Lorraine sat across from me, holding my hands and calling my name. "Tess. Tess, honey. Are you okay?"

“I’m so sorry! I’m so sorry! I knew better,” Lizzie said tearfully. “I was excited, and I didn’t think, and ... oh, Tess. I’m so sorry.”

I tried to smile, to reassure Lorraine and Lizzie both, and gently pulled my hands away. “I’m okay. I’m okay. But, Lizzie, I saw something ... I don’t want to tell you. Nobody should know how they’re going to die, but ... it’s an ethical thing. Can I keep it from you if you really want to know? Maybe you could protect yourself ...”

I realized I was babbling, probably in shock, and I drank half my glass of water.

“Was it wolves?” Lizzie asked quietly, aware of the avidly curious expressions of everyone around us.

“I—yes. How did you—”

Lizzie leaned closer and pulled down the collar on one side of her neck, baring a twisting scar. “Because it already happened. I was clinically dead for almost an entire minute in the ambulance.”

“Are you—” I was whispering.

“No. Not exactly. But I got some awesome, funky powers, just between us, okay?”

I nodded and leaned back, aware that Lorraine was giving me a curious look. She patted my cheek and then frowned at Lizzie. “You should have known better, young lady. And you a deputy. You’re lucky it wasn’t worse than it was, or I’d ban you from Beau’s.”

The deputy gave us a miserable look. “I know. I *knew* better. I’m so sorry—”

“Stop,” I said. This time I reached out to touch Lizzie’s hand, but she flinched away, her eyes widening. “It’s okay. I never see a vision twice. And now I can shake your hand or hug you with no problem. Anyway, it’s not your fault. It’s hard to remember something so ordinary as a hand touch can be so devastating.”

Before she could apologize again—I saw in her expression that she'd been about to—the shouting outside kicked up a notch, and I suddenly realized I knew those voices.

“That’s Susan and Cordelia!” I shot up out of my seat and headed for the door, noting peripherally that everyone in the diner had lost interest in me and was drifting over to the giant front window to see what all the shouting was about.

I ran outside, followed by Lizzie and Lorraine, and almost ran into Ish, who was leaning against the corner of the building, arms crossed, a sardonic smile on his face.

“Exciting around here all the time for such a backwater town,” he drawled, and then he winked at me.

I ignored him and headed for the shouting match between Susan and Cordelia happening right there on the sidewalk in front of Beau’s. This was so not like Susan that I immediately started worrying that the magical items had somehow infected her already.

“He was my father, and that treasure belongs to me!” Cordelia screeched.

“You will never get your hands on that stuff, you greedy old bat! I’ve told you a dozen times. It’s too dangerous!” Susan’s face was almost scarlet with anger, and she had one hand on her gun.

This was not good.

“Susan!” I rushed over to her and grabbed her arm. “*Sheriff!*”

She whirled to look at me, furious, and I pointed my chin toward the window. “Everybody is watching,” I hissed. “Maybe you could calm down and move this discussion to someplace more private?”

“Tess, mind your own business!” She yanked her arm out of my grasp, did a sharp about-face, and marched off down the sidewalk. Lizzie gave me a helpless look and then hurried after her boss.

My stomach instantly felt hollow, and acid burned in the back of my throat. I hadn't felt so hurt and humiliated since the early days of my curse, and all those feelings slammed back into me. Susan was my friend, and she'd just shouted at me right in front of everybody, and ...

And that wasn't right. Something was wrong, and I owed it to her to find out what.

Behind me, Cordelia made a harsh cackling sound. "Guess she told you, you buttinsky. Maybe stay out of everybody's business and go back to your little shop."

Lorraine stepped up beside me, ready to fight, but I shook my head.

"Susan is my friend, so she *is* my business. You heard her. You're not getting any of those dangerous objects. Maybe you should just go home."

She stabbed a sharp-nailed finger at me. "Don't think you can tell me what to do, you sideshow freak. If I had my money, I'd hire somebody to teach you a lesson. I—"

That was a threat, and I wasn't putting up with threats. From Cordelia or anyone else.

"Your money? Sounds like you should have plenty of money, after you stole Henrietta Quirksley's share of the bank job loot."

Cordelia's face went dead white, and she gaped at me. Before she could answer, her son strode over and took her firmly by the arm.

"We'll just be going now, Mother." He gave me a steady look, no sign of the fake flirtation now. "Tess. Always interesting. Let's not make a habit of this, though."

"I couldn't agree more," I said, trying not to flinch. There was something in his eyes that reminded me of that time I'd been face-to-face with an alligator in my kitchen. Flat and cold and reptilian.

Cordelia might be loud, but I was absolutely certain that Aloysius was the more dangerous of the two. I stood there and

watched them until they got in their car and drove off.

“That is a dangerous man,” Lorraine said slowly. “Tess, have a care. I know Jack’s out of town, and although you can take care of yourself, backup couldn’t hurt. Maybe you should stay at Ruby’s tonight?”

“Maybe.” I was still feeling shaky after the double punch of a death vision and then the fight. “Maybe I’ll take the rest of the day off and have a nap.”

“Brilliant idea! Now, I need to get in there and save Dead End from hunger pains. Go home and rest.” She patted my shoulder comfortingly, but her eyes were sharp. “I’m very interested to hear what you saw when Lizzie touched you.”

I inhaled a deep breath and then slowly let it out and shook my head. “You know how I am. If she wants to tell you, she will. I don’t spread this stuff around.”

“Fair enough. Now go home and rest, honey.”

“I will.”

But of course, I didn’t. If I took time off or closed the shop every time I was feeling out of sorts, I’d never be able to pay my bills. I went back to work and finished out the day, politely giving vague replies to everyone who asked me about the scene at the diner. I checked my phone a hundred times, but neither Jack nor Susan texted me.

Just before closing, my phone rang, and I almost ran over the customer standing between me and the counter, but it was only Aunt Ruby.

“I hear you’ve had an interesting day.”

“You have no idea.” I sighed.

“I’ve heard all about it from fifteen different people. Are you okay? Is Susan okay?”

I didn’t know where to begin to answer that, so I just said yes.

“Well, come on over for dinner, okay? Mike and Shelley want to show you all the tricks they’re teaching the puppy.

Bring Jack. I'm making a huge beef roast with all the trimmings. Even your tiger should find enough to eat with that, plus all the side dishes."

"He's not here, and I'm not sure when he'll be back, though."

"What?"

"I have to go, Aunt Ruby. Customers. But, yes, I'd love to come for dinner. I'll stop by and pick up Lou. Do you need me to bring anything?"

"Nope, not this time. Just your appetite."

Since I'd never gotten to eat my lunch, that shouldn't be a problem.

I rang up my last two customers, closed up the shop, and picked a dozen zucchini from the plant—which had definitely grown since just that morning—to take to Aunt Ruby. Then I went home to get my cat. All the way home and all the way to Aunt Ruby and Uncle Mike's, I kept wondering if I'd ever hear from Jack again.

Jack

“I don’t like that we locked our phones in that vault,” I told Quinn, tying a rope around the wrists and ankles of the man I’d already gagged with a sock and duct tape. “I have a bad feeling that Tess needs me.”

She checked the pulse of the unconscious man who’d unfortunately—for him—just tried to stop us and looked at me with wide eyes. “It’s for operational safety, Jack. You know that. So they can’t track us and stop us from rescuing these people.”

“I know that, but it doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

She grinned at me. “You have it bad, my friend.”

Alaric floated down from the ceiling of the abandoned warehouse and gave me a flat look. “Is your Tess capable of protecting herself?”

“Absolutely.”

“Then we go on. You will call her after the hostages are safe. Yes?”

“Yes.”

We started forward.

T*ess*

Lou and I arrived at Uncle Mike and Aunt Ruby's house just in time for the nightly edition of Silly Pug Tricks. We'd given Shelley a puppy for Christmas, an adorable little black pug that she promptly fell madly in love with and named Pickles.

Since then, after the required education in potty training—always outside—and not biting the hands that fed her—puppies were natural nippers, it was a form of play, so they had to learn not to do it with their humans—Shelley had been training Pickles to do a variety of silly but entertaining tricks.

Tonight's show: Look for the Bacon Under the Cup.

It was the old Cups and Balls trick, which you could see on any street corner in New York, I'd heard. It was also one of the oldest tricks in history, dating back to early Roman magicians, I'd read, but I didn't share that. I learned long ago that not everybody is as fascinated by tiny bits of trivia as I am.

The idea, according to the puppy training book, is that some dogs are smart enough to understand a concept called object permanence—that a thing exists even when you can't see it. It's a big deal when kids pick it up, but I hadn't realized dogs could, too.

Lou, curled up on my shoulder and watching the proceedings with haughty cat disdain, was obviously a genius. I didn't need to test her with tricks.

First, with much fanfare, Shelley showed Pickles a small piece of bacon, while Uncle Mike held the bouncy little puppy so she couldn't lunge at it. Then, as Pickles watched eagerly, Shelley put the bacon under the middle of three cups upside down on the floor in front of her.

"Ta da!" Shelley shouted. "Release the hound!"

The hound—also known as a five-pound ball of cuteness—immediately bounced over to the cups, went straight to the one in the middle, knocked it over, and gobbled up the bacon. We all applauded wildly.

"I told you!" Shelley shouted. "I told you she's the smartest pug in the world!"

Uncle Mike met my gaze, and we shared a private grin. The smartest pug in the world? Maybe. Or she just smelled the bacon. Either way, Pickles was the most loved pug in the world, and Shelley was the happiest ten-year-old girl, which made all of us incredibly happy. The kid had gone through a lot before she joined our family, and we loved giving her every moment of joy that we could.

"I heard there was dinner?" I looked up hopefully since the scent of Aunt Ruby's roast beef had been tantalizing me since I'd walked in the door. "Oh! And I have a present for you."

I handed her the bag of zucchini. "Maybe you could make zucchini bread."

Aunt Ruby's eyebrows went up when she hefted the bag. "That's a lot of zuchinis. Are you sure you don't want to keep some?"

"Trust me. I have plenty. And so does half of Dead End."

While I told them the story of the zucchini plant, Aunt Ruby led the way to the kitchen. She thoughtfully placed a small dish of roast beef for Lou on top of the short bookcase where she kept her cookbooks to keep Pickles away from it.

"Better take Pickles outside to do her business, Shelley. Remember what we learned?"

Shelley's little face was serious. "Puppies need to go out after every nap, every meal, and every bit of hard play or excitement. And I praise her when she does her business outside."

"Good job!" Uncle Mike grinned as she skipped out the back door, her little dog gamboling along behind her.

"She's doing a great job with that puppy," Aunt Ruby said, carrying platters and bowls to the table.

I jumped in to help. "Oh, wow. This smells amazing. I didn't get any lunch, and I'm starving."

After Shelley came back, washed her hands, and put Pickles in her crate for her nap, since the puppy had eaten her dinner earlier, we all tucked in. I didn't say much until I was putting second helpings of everything on my plate.

"What exactly happened today?" Uncle Mike looked concerned. "I'm worried about those relatives of Susan's. They are not good people."

"May I be excused? I have homework to do."

Aunt Ruby nodded. "Of course, honey. Put your plate in the dishwasher on your way out. Tess can help me clean up."

"Thanks!" Shelley put her plate away, kissed all three of us, and then bounded off down the hall toward the stairs.

"Don't forget your bookbag," Uncle Mike called after her.

"Oops!" The bookbag, which had been hooked over the back of her chair, surged into the air and floated off down the hall.

I put my fork down and stared wistfully at it. "You know, I could really use a talent like that for so many things."

Uncle Mike laughed. "Couldn't we all? It has been a whole new ballpark raising a baby witch. You and Molly got into your fair share of trouble, but at least Ruby and I didn't have to worry that you'd cast a spell on the couch and make it dance."

Molly had been my best friend and partner in shenanigans since kindergarten. She was off on a tour with her band, and I missed her terribly.

“Did Shelley—”

“No,” he said, chuckling. “Just an example of something I’m afraid she might do. After she levitated those massive rocks last year when the bank blew up, we’ve seen how much power she has.”

“Rose and Alejandro will be coming to visit next month, if she’s still able to travel then. She’s pregnant with twins. Rose promised to help Shelley—and us—navigate this. She has younger sisters who were quite a trial, so she knows what she’s talking about.”

We cleared the table and made coffee, and then we settled back down for a good catch-up session. I checked my phone, but still nothing from Jack or Susan.

“Okay,” Aunt Ruby said, pouring coffee for all of us. “Tell us about everything.”

“Wow. That’s going to take some time.” I drank coffee and ate a piece of cinnamon cake while I told them about the Phleabottoms, Cordelia’s stalker, the dangerous objects, and Susan’s godfather. I didn’t tell them about Lizzie because that was her business.

“That’s concerning,” Uncle Mike said, when I finally finished talking. “You tell Susan that we’re here for her if she needs us.”

“I will, but after today ... She told me to mind my own business. I think she was just blowing off steam, but I’m waiting to hear from her. I might go over and talk to Andy about what to do about Henrieta Quirksley.”

Uncle Mike groaned. “It won’t be great if she robs our new bank.”

“Especially if she’s wearing a Dead End Pawn shirt while she does it,” I said glumly. “I think I need more cake to cope with this day.”

“You said Carlos is out of town? That’s too bad. Sadie is more of a burden than a help to Susan, although she does her best to take care of their grandmother,” Aunt Ruby said, slicing me another piece of cake. “I might just check on Granny G myself tomorrow. Susan is going to face a tough decision about full-time care for her soon.”

“I know. It would be great if you could go see her,” I said sincerely. “I have to work, but maybe I could stop by after.”

“We’ll make sure she’s okay. If Ish was the one who took off with her yesterday, well ... well, I don’t know what. He doesn’t sound like the type to humor an old lady.”

Mrs. Gonzalez was eighty going on a hundred and twenty and frequently believed she was sixteen and would be going to prom with her friends at any minute. She was a sweetheart, but we—pretty much everybody in town—kept an eye out for her, because sometimes she’d wander off. Occasionally she even got Sadie’s car keys, and nobody wanted Granny G to drive after the flamingo incident.

May they rest in peace.

Aunt Ruby drank the last of her coffee and pushed the mug away. “Okay. On to business. After I talked to you, I went along with the town council on the anonymous donation. We’re going to accept it, with the caveats you and I discussed. And we’re thinking, with Susan’s recommendation and if Andy agrees, of offering the job to Deputy Underhill. Do you think she’d be interested?”

I smiled. Finally, some good news. “I am positive she would be interested. She was telling me at lunch that she’d love to work here full time. Oh, I’m thrilled for her.”

And for Jack, who’d surely get fewer calls to help with criminal activity after Lizzie was sworn in as our newest deputy.

“What else is going on in town council land?”

“Not much. Oh, but we gave that nice Connor Murphy permission and the proper zoning to open a pub just past the fire station. It will be nice to have a proper pub in Dead End.”

I raised my eyebrows. “I didn’t know he wanted to open a pub.” Connor was new to Dead End, relatively speaking, not having been born and raised here. He’d moved here after college and worked from home at some kind of internet job, from what I’d heard.

“Well, he’s Irish,” said Michael Callahan, my very Irish uncle, his eyes twinkling. “Of course, he wants to open a pub. Now it just remains to be seen if he can pour a proper Guinness.”

I had to laugh. “It will be fun. I hope it works out for him.”

“He’s planning to have the grand opening on the evening of our annual softball game against Riverton.”

Uncle Mike and I made hissing noises. Riverton, a small town thirty miles from Dead End, was our mortal enemy when it came to softball. Luckily, I was the queen of the softball diamond. “Riverton is going down!”

“What Tess said,” Uncle Mike said. “That’s a smart idea to have the grand opening that day—or an unbelievably bad idea. If we ... the L word—”

“Don’t even think it!” I knocked on the wood of the old farmhouse table. “Anyway, it will be fun to have a pub in town.”

“On a different topic. Where is Jack? When is he coming back? And are we still having the garage-raising party on Thursday? I know he wouldn’t miss Shelley’s dance.” Uncle Mike frowned. “You know I don’t want to interfere—”

I groaned. “Tell that to any boy who ever liked me. Or Owen. Or, especially, Jack.”

“I don’t like to interfere,” he repeated stubbornly. “But I worry about you. We know he had a dangerous past. If his past is going to keep showing up in the present, what does that mean for the future?”

That took me a minute to untangle, but I understood what he meant. I’d thought about it, too, but I loved Jack, and I knew he loved me. That was more important than anything else.

“Well, I think—” My phone buzzed, and I fumbled it out of my pocket as fast as I could in case it was Jack or Susan.

“Why in the world is Andy calling me?”

Uncle Mike and Aunt Ruby shook their heads, and I answered the call.

“Hey, Andy, what’s up? How are you feeling? How are you and Charithra—”

“Tess! You’ve got to get over here. Now!”

“I—what? Andy, what’s wrong? Where are you? Is it your mom?” I heard shouting in the background and Andy said something to someone else. “Who’s shouting? What’s going on?”

Putting the phone on speaker, I held it out so Uncle Mike and Aunt Ruby could hear. “Andy, you’re on speaker. Aunt Ruby and Uncle Mike are here. Tell me—”

“Tess, you’ve got to get over here. To Susan’s house. And if you can call Jack, please do so right now.”

Now I was scared. “Andy, is Susan all right? Please tell me what’s going on?”

“Susan’s fine,” he growled. “But she might be a murder suspect.”

“WHAT?”

“Somebody killed her aunt Cordelia right here in Susan’s house. In the middle of the—”

“Library,” I murmured.

“Library,” he finished. “Wait. How did you know that? Do I need to check your alibi, too?”

“I’m on my way. Should I bring the mayor?”

“Not right now. The crime scene people are on their way from Orlando, but they have to get a magical objects expert from Miami before they’ll agree to go in the room. It’s going to be a long night.”

“Is Susan okay?”

“For now,” he said in a grim voice. “Tess, just get over here. Susan needs a friend right now.”

“Does she need a lawyer?” I knew there was no way she’d killed her aunt, but lawyers were always a good idea in cases like this.

“She refused. Hey! Hey, don’t touch that! Hey! Aloysius Phleabottom, I know you’re grieving, but I will put you in cuffs if you don’t stop interfering with my crime scene.”

“Andy?” I shoved my shoes on my feet and grabbed my purse.

“Yeah. Come *now*, Tess.”

He hung up, and I stared helplessly at my aunt and uncle. “Another dead body in Dead End. What is happening to our peaceful little town?”

Important mission or not, I finally called Jack on my drive to Susan’s house, but the phone went straight to voicemail. Either his phone was dead ... or he was.

No.

I tightened my grip on the steering wheel and headed for Susan’s house. This one I’d have to handle on my own.

T*ess*

The Phleabottoms' car, Andy's car, the moving van, and Susan's car were the only vehicles in the driveway when I sped up to the house. The crime scene people had to come from Orlando, though, so it usually took them a while.

I hurried up to the porch but slowed down and took a deep breath before I rang the doorbell. I was rushing toward, not away from, a dead body.

Another dead body in Dead End.

I was starting to feel like Jessica Fletcher.

Squaring my shoulders, I waited for only a few moments before Susan flung the door open and stared at me. Her face was drained of all expression, and her eyes were stunned.

"Tess?"

"Andy called. He said you might need a friend. I know you said I should stay out of your business, but—"

She pushed the screen door open and threw herself at me. Startled, because Susan had never been the most demonstrative of people. I hugged her and patted her back while she shuddered, taking huge, shaky breaths. Neither of us said anything until she pulled away, her eyes reddened but dry.

"Okay. Okay. Tess, I'm so sorry about what I said to you earlier. I was so overwhelmed by all this. I'm glad you're here. Thanks for coming."

“Of course. Uncle Mike and Aunt Ruby send their love, too. Can you tell me what happened?”

She led the way into the house. I could hear the low rumble of men’s voices coming from the kitchen, one calm and at least two angry. She ducked into the unused formal parlor and beckoned for me to follow.

“Listen, Tess. There is something very weird about this. When I got home, Greg was gone. Cordelia and Ish were also out, or so I thought. I decided to check on the objects and make sure that knife with a mind of its own hadn’t somehow smudged the salt circle.”

She folded her arms across her chest and took a steadying breath. “When I unlocked the door, there she was. Aunt Cordelia. Sitting on the floor in the middle of the room with the dagger.”

“The dagger killed her? On its own?” This was entirely possible and would even be the best answer. Then *nobody* was a killer. It was all the fault of dangerous magic.

“No, Tess. She was *holding* the dagger. I’m no coroner, but I’m pretty sure she died from the gunshot wound.”

I felt my whole body slump.

Here we go again.

I remembered what Andy had said. “Susan, Andy said ... he said you might be a murder suspect? What in the world is going on?”

She laughed, but it wasn’t amusement. “The whole town saw us shouting at each other today in front of Beau’s. Who do you think would be the primary suspect? Especially since I was just driving around all afternoon and have no way to prove I didn’t do it.”

“I don’t care about alibis! Everybody who knows you will know you didn’t do this!”

From behind me, an icy voice interrupted. “On the contrary. Those of us who know Susan well know she is entirely capable of violence.”

I whirled around to see Aloysius staring at Susan, and his expression gave me chills. Here was another person who was entirely capable of violence.

“Where were you when this happened?” I pointed at him. “Susan said she didn’t think you two were here, which means your car wasn’t. Did Cordelia somehow magically transport herself here? Or did you bring her here, kill her, and drive away to establish an alibi?”

“Establish an alibi? Someone is a little too fond of TV,” he said, mocking me. “I brought mom back here after Susan screamed at her at lunchtime. She was shaken from such unprovoked hostility and wanted to lie down and have a nap to recover.”

“Unprovoked hostility? I’ll give you unprovoked hostility, you slimy—”

I grabbed Susan’s arm when she stormed past me and dragged her to a stop. “Maybe now isn’t the time for this. Where’s Andy?”

Ish rolled his eyes. “Your hapless deputy is in the kitchen interrogating Butler. Now, there’s another person who could have done this. He never liked either of us, and I certainly don’t buy his alibi. Maybe I’d better sleep with one eye open.”

“Maybe you should,” Susan said. “And you can do it somewhere else. Consider yourself evicted.”

“I’m not going anywhere while my mother’s *cold, dead body* is in your pathetic excuse for a library.” He switched his poisonous stare to me. “While we’re on the subject, little Tess, where were you this afternoon? Maybe committing a murder instead of just seeing them happen in your visions?”

My mouth fell open. “What? I—what? I was at work all afternoon. Lots of people can tell you ... and then I was at my aunt and uncle’s house, and—”

Aloysius held up one hand. “Please. Nobody really thinks you have the spine to go around killing people. Why don’t you go home and bake something?”

With that, he spun around and headed for the front door. “I need some air.”

Suddenly, I was horrified at myself. The man’s mother was dead. “Aloysius!”

He didn’t turn but looked back at me over his shoulder, eyes narrowed.

“I’m just ... I’m so sorry for your loss.”

For a split-second, surprise and something warmer crossed his expression. But then he scowled and strode out the door, saying nothing.

“If I were going to kill anybody, it would be him,” Susan gritted out.

“Maybe less of the killing talk. Let’s go see what Andy has to say.” I took her hand and squeezed it. Susan was a person I’d touched in the past with, thankfully, no vision attached. If it didn’t happen the first time I touched someone, it never happened.

I should qualify this. That’s the way it has worked so far. You never really knew with magic. There wasn’t a rulebook, or at least not one that I’d ever heard of.

When I walked toward the kitchen, I couldn’t help but glance at the door to the library. It stood open, and I got a quick glimpse of Cordelia when I hurried by. She was slumped over, leaning against one of the boxes. I was glad that I couldn’t see the gunshot wound from where I stood. I’d seen enough awful things that I wasn’t eager to add to the list.

Andy sat stiffly on a stool at the kitchen island, notebook in hand, across from Mr. Butler. Susan’s godfather was leaning against the wall, as far from Andy as he could get and still be in the kitchen. His shoulders were hunched, his arms crossed, and his body language screamed defensiveness.

“Hey, Tess.” Andy sounded tired. His injuries had been healing well, but he still looked tired, too thin, and so pale that his freckles stood out in stark relief on his face.

Andy Kelly, chief and now only deputy in Dead End, wasn't very tall, and he wasn't very big or imposing, physically. With his flaming red hair and freckles, he looked young, so people underestimated him. But I'd come to know him very well as a friend and as a deputy over the past year, and he was one of the bravest people I'd ever met.

"Andy. Thanks for calling me." I glanced back, but Susan hadn't followed me. She was standing in the hallway across from the library, staring bleakly into the room.

"Wait. Susan said the room was locked. She had to unlock it. How did the murderer get in?" I turned and called out to Susan. "It was locked, right?"

She didn't even look up. "Yes."

"Does it lock from the inside and stay locked when you leave the room?"

"No. You can lock it from the inside without a key, or I can lock it from the outside with the key." She pulled her keychain out of her pocket. "This key. There aren't any copies, before you ask. And it was with me the whole time."

I turned to Andy. "So, how did the killer get in there? There was no way for anybody to get in there and kill her, or no way for the killer to escape and lock the door after him- or herself afterward. It's a classic locked-door mystery!"

Andy sighed. "Tess, this isn't TV. And there's no such thing as a locked-door mystery these days. Somebody could use magic to lock the door."

"Or string and magnets," Mr. Butler offered.

"A lock pick," Susan said, walking toward us.

Andy: "Vampire compulsion to make someone lock the door and then shoot herself."

I deflated. "Yeah. I guess. But wait! Was the ring of salt smudged?"

Susan shrugged. "Intact. But, Tess, it only keeps magic in. A killer could just step over it."

This is why I'm a pawnshop owner, not a detective.

"Mr. Butler, did you see or hear anything?"

Susan's godfather glanced at me and smiled a little. "I wasn't here. I got a call that Susan had been in a car accident, and I rushed to the hospital in Orlando. When I got there, they said they'd never called me and had no record of Susan being admitted. Then I called Susan—wish I'd tried that first—and found out she was fine. But bless you for asking me if I heard anything instead of assuming I killed her."

I blinked. It had never occurred to me. But ... what did I really know about the man?

Nothing.

I've been told I have the opposite of a poker face, and it's true. Mr. Butler clearly read the thoughts racing through my mind, and his smile disappeared. "Right. Well, at least your first instinct was that I was innocent."

Before I could stammer out an apology, Andy tapped his notebook on the quartz countertop. "Okay. You said you left after this alleged phone call."

"Alleged?" Butler pulled his phone out of his pocket, opened it to Recent Calls, and handed it to Andy. "There. That 800 number. You can see they called me at three-thirty. By the time I got back here, you and Susan were here, and Aloysius arrived shortly after that."

"You thought an 800 number was a hospital?" I asked.

Susan's godfather gave me a bewildered look. "What do I know about how Florida hospital phones are set up?"

"Where was Aloysius? Where did he go after dropping Cordelia here?"

Susan answered me. "He went to Granny's house to spend some time with her, he claims."

"He claims?" Maybe she didn't believe him? Mother or not, I wouldn't be surprised to learn Ish could kill someone.

“I mean, I checked with Sadie. She says he was there. I just can’t imagine Ish—the most self-involved man in the world—voluntarily spending time with an old woman, let alone one on the borderline of dementia.” Susan grimaced. “We all know how flaky my cousin Sadie is, though. Maybe you should follow up, Andy.”

“Believe me, I will. But for now...” Andy pushed the button on Mr. Butler’s phone to call the 800 number, and we all heard the message. “The number you have called is not in service ...”

“Well. *Somebody* called him,” I pointed out, not wanting to believe he could be a cold-blooded killer. “We can see that. And I bet it’s easy enough to find out from the hospital if he ever arrived. But the murderer wanted Mr. Butler out of the house, so he—or she—could kill Cordelia.”

“Exactly,” Mr. Butler agreed, seeming to breathe easier.

“I can try to track down that phone number,” Susan said. “I have contacts ...”

Andy nodded. “Maybe give me the contacts?”

When Susan shot him a hard look, he shrugged. “You know you can’t investigate the murder of a family member that took place in your house. And for which, no matter how farfetched, we need to consider you a suspect.”

I touched her arm. “Susan, step back from this one.”

Her face hardened, but she gave a grudging nod. “I’ll get you the contacts.”

“Great.” Andy turned back to Mr. Butler. “You also said you don’t have a gun and never have. We need to get people in here to search the house to look for the murder weapon.”

Susan made a tiny sound, but when I looked at her, she shook her head.

“Did you call Lizzie?” I asked.

“I did, but she’s off-duty tonight and went to Jacksonville to visit friends. She wasn’t planning to come back until morning. She didn’t answer her phone, but I left a message.

And we have some help coming in from Orlando. It puts us in an ... awkward position that somebody murdered our town sheriff's cousin in her house. Worse, that we can't prove Susan wasn't here at TOD." Andy looked miserable, but determined. He and Susan were great friends, so nothing about this made him happy.

Susan sighed. "Andy. I know what you need to do. I trained you to do a lot of it. Treat me like any other suspect. And the same goes for Greg, Aloysius, and anybody else who didn't like Cordelia, although I suspect that is a very long list."

"Oh!" I realized I hadn't told either of them about Henrietta Quirksley yet. "I have a name to add to that list. She stopped by the shop today and pointed a gun at my face."

The conversation got interesting after that.

T*ess*

Andy put out an APB—All-Points Bulletin—for Henrietta, statewide. I pointed out that she probably wouldn't be leaving Dead End without her "loot."

"She may have gotten it when she shot Cordelia, Tess," Susan said.

"You think your aunt brought it with her?"

"Doubt it, but I wouldn't put anything past the Phleabottoms. She could have had a key to a bus station locker or a safe deposit box or passcodes to an account, or, really, who knows?" Susan seemed almost numb, and I realized she was probably in shock.

"Okay, well, Ish probably knows, and Andy can get it out of him if he didn't take off when he walked outside. For now, I'm making some hot tea. Susan, sit down, please." I didn't say "before you fall down," but that's what I meant.

Andy held up a set of keys. "When I told him not to leave town, I took some precautions. These are his car keys."

"Hopefully, he doesn't have a second set," Mr. Butler said, scowling. "Those Phleabottoms ... I mean, Aloysius ... is slippery."

Andy jerked up to stand, as if to run outside, but then he flinched and put a hand on his ribs. "If he does, we'll catch him. I can only do what I can do. Jack picked a bad time to be out of town, Tess."

I privately agreed, but that wasn't fair. "Andy, he's not a cop. And he's made it clear, over and over again, that he doesn't want to be a cop or deputy or even FBI agent. I think he put in his time in the war, don't you?"

"Yeah, yeah. I know. He's just awfully handy in dangerous situations. I hope Deputy Underhill calls me back soon."

"I hope she'll still want to take the job, after she finds out her potential new boss is a murder suspect," Susan muttered.

Andy perked up. "Take the job?"

"I didn't have time to tell you. We got some ... unexpected funding, so we can hire another full-time deputy. I was thinking Underhill would be perfect," Susan told him. "I won't hire anyone without your agreement, though. I was going to bring it up tomorrow during our weekly lunch."

Relief shone in Andy's eyes. "That would be great! I like her a lot for the job. She's young, but she has a good head on her shoulders. We saw that at Christmas. And she's good with people, not a blowhard like some of the temp deputies we've had in here."

"Good. You can hire her when I'm in jail for murdering my aunt." Susan put her head in her hands, ending the conversation.

The kettle whistled, and I made tea for everyone and put sugar in it for the shock.

Mr. Butler shook his head. "Thanks, Tess, but I don't care for—"

"I don't care for one of my best friends to have to deal with dangerous magical objects, bespelled godfathers, evil cousins, or murdered aunts, Mr. Butler. Drink your tea!"

He drank his tea.

Susan grinned; the first sign of light in her personal darkness that I'd seen in a while. "You can be a little scary, Tess."

"Thank you. Now, what do we do next?"



Turns out there's not a lot a civilian can do at a murder scene. The crime scene people and the coroner showed up, then the extra deputies showed up. Andy thanked me for coming, but told me to go home.

"Tess, I really appreciate you, but you'd just be in the way now. And, heck, three of the suspects are all staying in this house, so I don't have to worry about tracking them down. I'm going to put deputies to watch the house. I'm also going to turn Dead End upside down to find Henrietta Quirksley. If what she told you was the truth, or even a version of it she believes, she just soared to number one on my suspect list."

Susan broke away from a conversation she'd been having with the coroner and walked over to us. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate you. Or how sorry I am for yelling at you today. I haven't been myself since all this started ..."

An epiphany smacked me in the face. "Susan? Is it possible that the magical objects are emanating some kind of evil brain waves?"

"What?"

The coroner—a man I'd never met before—strolled over. "Couldn't help overhearing. The study of magical artifacts is a hobby of my wife's. I can tell you for a fact that proximity can cause negative effects mentally, emotionally, and even physically."

"Does your wife know of anybody who could help me figure out how to destroy this stuff? Or even neutralize it?"

"Maybe. I'll ask her, but I don't want my wife anywhere near this stuff. One of our crime-scene techs is attuned to magic, and she's outside throwing up in your bushes. There's powerful negative energy in that room, Sheriff. You'd best get rid of it as soon as you can, for your own sake."

"Believe me, I intend to," she said firmly.

“Okay, I guess I’m heading home,” I said, curiously unwilling to leave. I wasn’t sure what I thought I could accomplish that all the official people in the house couldn’t, other than make tea for everyone, but I felt guilty, like I was abandoning Susan when she needed me.

Outside, both of us looked to see if Ish’s car was still there. It was. So, whatever he was up to, he was probably still around. I felt bad for automatically suspecting him. It was his mom, after all. Even though they’d had a tense relationship, from what I’d seen, that didn’t mean it would be easy to kill your own mother.

I pushed all thoughts of Aloysius Phleabottom out of my mind. The people with the professional law-enforcement training would figure this one out.

Susan followed me out to my car and hugged me again. “Thank you so much, Tess. And I meant to ask if Jack’s okay. I know he had to leave town.”

“The crystal ball!” I blurted out. “That thing surely has negative magic or vibes or whatever. I need to get it over here and put it inside the salt circle, too.”

But she was already shaking her head. “You can’t put anything new in the crime scene, Tess. Once they’ve cleared the house, you can bring it over. But for now, would you mind just hanging on to it? Put a salt circle around it in your vault or something?”

I remembered Jack suggesting the vault, too. But so much had happened. I’d never gotten around to it.

“Good idea. I’ll do that first thing in the morning. Right now, I’m heading home. Call me if you need me, though, okay?”

“I will.”

I opened my car door, and Susan stopped me with a hand on my arm. “I’m glad you didn’t let me push you away from being my friend.”

“Me, too. Take care of yourself, and *call me*, okay?”

She nodded, and I backed down the driveway and made a three-point turn to leave. When I checked left for traffic, movement near the tree line made me pause and take a longer look.

It was Ish.

And he was scowling at me.

T_{ess}

When I got home, I tried to call Jack again, but it went straight to voicemail again. I took a shower and cuddled my cat. Uncle Mike had driven Lou home when I was at Susan's because she loves to visit him but gets nervous if she's away from home at night. When Lou curled up on the pillow next to me, I said my prayers and asked that Jack and Susan would be safe, and everything would turn out okay.

Then I flopped face-down on my bed and was out. I slept restlessly; tossing and turning and waking up a lot in between nightmares about giant walking zucchinis that chased me around town.

I needed a *lot* of coffee when I woke up.

And there was still no message from Jack.

Lou meowed at me when I gave her breakfast. Apparently, her cat food was not as good as the special roast beef she'd eaten at Aunt Ruby's.

"Sorry, sweetie. That was a special treat." I crossed to the fridge for cream for my coffee and pulled out a slice of ham. "But here's a little ham to top it off."

Lou, the best cat in the world, weighed exactly what she should, according to my vet in Orlando, so I didn't worry about giving her the occasional treat. Thinking of that reminded me to get my records transferred to Dr. Charitha's new practice in town. I liked my vet, but not so much I'd keep

driving all the way to Orlando when I liked Charithra, too. Plus, her vet tech Phin and I had been friends since school. The new vet's Dr. Doolittle gift didn't hurt, either. I loved the idea she'd have special insights into Lou's health.

She'd already warned us about pugs and their eagerness to eat everything in sight.

"Pugs can gain too much weight too easily, because they're so sweet and adorable everyone gives them treats. Please try to stick to her meals with very few treats, okay? And you can give carrots for treats," she'd told Shelley, who'd brought a notebook to write it all down. My little sister was a very responsible pug owner, and I was proud of her, even though she'd scolded me for sneaking a bit of roast chicken to Pickles once. I'd have to tell her what Otis had said about zucchini, too.

I kissed Lou's head, stuck a piece of ham in a slice of bread, and ran for the door. I wanted to be early to work today because the paperwork was piling up. It was wonderful to be in a relationship, but I needed to find a balance between spending so much time with Jack and getting my administrative work in shape. Even in Black Cypress County, which didn't have nearly the number of rules and regulations as other places, business owners still had to file a lot of paperwork. And special charter or no special charter, the IRS would collect their taxes.

When I opened my door, I let out an embarrassing squeaking sound, because Henrietta Quirksley—bank robber, parole violator, and possible murderer—stood on my WELCOME mat, one hand up to knock.

"I thought we could have breakfast," she said cheerfully.

I blinked, wondering if the IRS would accept "held hostage" as an excuse when my quarterly taxes were late.

"I was just on my way to work ..."

She pulled open the screen door. "Oh, surely the citizens of Dead End can wait an extra hour to pawn their stuff, right? We have a lot to talk about."

When she started forward, it was clear I either needed to step back or she would run me over. I sighed and stepped to the side.

“Welcome to my home. Want some coffee?”

She beamed at me. “That would be lovely.”

I gestured to my kitchen, not willing to have a gun-toting criminal walk behind me. Lou fled into the closet in the guest room when she saw us coming. My cat was not a fan of strangers. In this instance, I had to agree with her.

“Did you already eat?” Henrietta asked, looking around my kitchen.

I showed her the napkin in my hand and my sad little half-sandwich. “Not exactly.”

“Oh, I love ham. Maybe an omelet?”

Since she plopped her giant tote bag on my table, pulled off her jacket and sat down, I was guessing she’d elected me to do the cooking.

I threw up my hands. “Sure. Why not? What do you like in your coffee?”

She wanted cream and sugar, so I made a fresh pot of coffee and brought everything to the table so she could fix her cup how she wanted it.

“Why are you here? I mean, besides wanting breakfast.” I pulled out eggs, butter, milk, cheese, ham, and scallions and started prepping. “Two eggs or three?”

“Oh, three would be wonderful! Do you have any bacon?”

I turned to give her a flat stare. “No. I’m fresh out. Maybe you’d rather go to a restaurant?”

“Oh, no, no, no. This will be lovely.” She unwrapped a bright red scarf from her neck and placed it on top of her coat on the chair next to her. Today, she wore jeans, running shoes, and a plain gray sweatshirt. Knowing my luck, my Dead End Pawn T-shirt was under the sweatshirt, and she’d be wearing only the T-shirt when she robbed a bank or two.

While I sliced scallions and ham, and beat eggs, the skillet warmed up. I tossed a couple of pats of butter in and then started the omelet, still wondering what I could say.

Henrietta broke the silence. “I thought we should talk, Tess.”

“Oh, you’re not just here for the eggs?” I heard the snark in my voice, but couldn’t help myself. This was not a situation covered in the Big Book of Southern Manners.

“Well, it *is* awfully nice of you to cook for me, especially after I pointed a gun at you. I’m sorry about that, by the way.”

“Thank you,” I said automatically.

“I’ve asked around about you, and you’ll be happy to know that your fellow Dead Enders think you’re an entirely honest person. Weird, with the seeing-how-people-will-die thing, but honest.”

“Great. That’s just lovely. Everybody likes to be called weird by their neighbors,” I muttered, flipping the omelet.

“To be fair—this coffee is great, thank you—only one person said weird. The others said honest and lovely and all nice things.”

“So, you just went around town interrogating people about me?” I slid the omelet onto a plate, placed it on the table in front of her, and then handed her a fork.

She laughed a big, booming laugh. “No, of course not. I’m a criminal, Tess. I can be *subtle*.”

I sighed, giving in to the inevitable, grabbed a mug and poured myself yet another cup of coffee. Then I sat down across from her.

“Okay, Henrietta. What do you want?”

She forked up a big bite of omelet and then chewed, a blissful expression on her face. After she swallowed, she put her fork down and leaned forward. “Tess. This is one of the best omelets I’ve ever eaten. The eggs are so fluffy!”

“Mixing them with milk is the secret. Again, what do you want?”

“I wanted to ask you to stay out of my way. I hear you’re sort of always around when trouble happens. You and that tiger boyfriend, but he’s out of town, right?”

“You hear a lot,” I said flatly, not answering her question about Jack.

“Oh, don’t get prickly.” She ate another bite of omelet. “I don’t have anything against you. I respect you, in fact. Young woman running a business on your own. But I need you to stay out of my way.”

“Out of your way while you do what?” I asked, as politely as I could manage, given the circumstances.

She put her fork down with some regret and steepled her fingers. “It’s like this, Tess. I spent years in prison plotting my revenge on Cordelia Back-Stabbing Phleabottom. I’m going to force her to give me not just my share of the loot, but her share, too. I won’t just defeat her, I’ll destroy her. I’ll take *all* her money, and then I’ll taunt her about it for the rest of her miserable life.”

I slumped back in my chair. “You ... you haven’t heard, then? I mean, I’m surprised, since you seem to know everything else going on in town.”

“Heard what?” She scooped up the last bite of omelet and popped it into her mouth.

“Henrietta. I’m not sure how to break this to you in any delicate way, so I’ll just tell you straight out. Cordelia is dead.”

“What!” She shoved her plate away and stared at me, her face going a dangerous shade of red. “Is this a joke? What are you saying?”

“No, I’m not joking. You said yourself everyone told you I’m honest, and I certainly wouldn’t lie about something like this. Cordelia died last night.”

“How?” She slammed her fist on the table, making the dishes jump. “Tell me right now.”

Suddenly, I realized that blurting out this revelation might not have been the smartest move. This woman was unbalanced, at best, and dangerous or even deadly, at worst. In fact, all of this might be an act.

She might be the murderer.

I grabbed her empty plate and hopped up to put it in the sink, moving closer to the wooden block that held my kitchen knives under the guise of cleaning up.

Just in case.

Henrietta shoved her chair back and stood, breathing hard, her face still red. “You tell me right now!”

I slid the butcher knife out of the block and held it out in front of me, moving to the other side of the table. “No offense, and I certainly don’t plan to stab you, but I’m afraid of you and afraid of how you might react when I tell you this.”

She put one hand on her purse, but then shook her head and put her hands behind her back. “I won’t hurt you, Tess. Just tell me.”

“Somebody murdered her. The killer shot her in Susan’s house, inside a locked room, and then somehow disappeared with the murder weapon. The entire sheriff’s department is on the case, so if you know anything ...” I left it hanging in case my smooth hint convinced her to confess.

She stumbled back a couple of steps, looking dazed. “Murdered? But ... that can’t be true. Now I’ll never get my revenge,” she wailed. “I can’t believe I was at Disney when my arch-nemesis was getting herself killed!”

“Disney? You have an alibi?” I didn’t know what to say about the arch-nemesis stuff.

She blinked hard several times, and I realized to my utter shock that there were tears in her eyes.

“It’s the weirdest thing,” she said, so quietly that I didn’t know if she meant for me to hear it. “I’ve spent so long

focused on Cordelia and revenge that now I have a giant hole inside me. What will I live for now?"

"Well—"

"I wasn't asking you," she snapped, but then she blew out a breath. "Okay. Okay. Thank you again for the breakfast, Tess. And for the news, unwelcome though it was. I'll be on my way, and I doubt you'll see me again."

"The sheriff may want to talk to you about all this," I ventured.

She barked out a laugh. "I just bet she does. Tell her good luck with that. And you can tell Cordelia's awful son that I'll be coming for my money. If he didn't have it before, I'm sure he will now. Or at least know how to get it. I need to talk to Donald."

"Maybe you could just call Aloysius. I'm not planning to talk to him again, if I can help it. And who is Donald?"

But she didn't hear me. She was muttering to herself and gathering her things. She started down the hall and then stopped and looked back at me.

"Thanks again, Tess. It has been a long time since anybody cooked me a homemade breakfast. No matter what else happens, I'll remember and appreciate this." She smiled—a genuine smile—and I could see that she must have been a lovely woman before everything made her so nuts.

"You're welcome." I stayed in the kitchen and watched her walk down the hall and out the door. Then I raced over and locked it behind her, looking out my window while she drove away before I picked up my phone.

When Susan answered, I realized I didn't really know what to say.

"Tess?"

"Good morning. You'll never guess who came to breakfast."

T^{ess}

Susan and Andy were on top of things, but it was all too confusing for straightforward answers. Ish had an alibi. Mr. Butler had an alibi, albeit a strange one. Susan, of course, didn't do it, and Andy was looking for people who'd seen her out and about just to cross the Ts and dot the Is of *her* alibi. It almost had to be Henrietta. Except she claimed to have been at Disney, and I'd been positive that she was shocked to hear that Cordelia was dead.

After I coaxed Lou out of the closet, I rushed to work. Eleanor was off for the morning, and I would make it there just in time to open the shop at nine. I hated to be late. If an early customer came by and we weren't open, it made a poor impression. Maybe they wouldn't come back. I worried about things like this on days when I didn't encounter dangerous artifacts, murderers, and criminally inclined breakfast guests.

Luckily, I was the first one there. When I unlocked the door to the shop, a strong leafy smell wafted out at me.

"What in the world?"

It was the zucchini plant. The thing had grown again. Now it was as big as a full-sized refrigerator, and it was glossy green and bursting with full-grown zucchinis. So many zucchinis.

"This doesn't work for me," I grumbled, pulling out my phone. I called the nursery and got voicemail.

“Ollie? This is Tess Callahan. Please call me back as soon as possible. This zucchini plant you dumped on me, er ... so nicely gave me, is out of control. I need you to come over and take it back. Preferably today. This morning, even. Call me. Thanks.”

I sighed, put my purse in the drawer behind the counter, picked up a pair of hedge clippers from the gardening section, and set to work. Twenty minutes later, I put a pile of cut-up plant outside the back door in the trash bins and then went back in and sorted the hundred or so zucchinis I'd harvested into several tote bags to give away. Free zucchini with purchase sounded about right.

Ollie had better call me back quickly. I'd tried to move the whole plant outside, but it was way too heavy for me to lift or even drag. After closing time, I'd cut up some more and see what I could do if Ollie didn't stop by.

The morning flew by. Lots of people stopped in just because they were being nosy and wanted to hear about Cordelia. I shrugged and said vague things like “how terrible it must be for Susan,” and “I'm sure Andy and Susan will discover what happened,” and “free zucchinis with any purchase!”

After a while, I started giving away the zucchinis, whether people made a purchase or not.

When I had a temporary lull at ten-thirty, I put on a pair of rubber gloves and then a pair of gardening gloves over that and took the crystal ball down off the shelf where it had sat, hidden beneath a cloth, since Monday. I started to take it to the vault, but my steps slowed as I thought about it.

I stored everything valuable that still belonged to pawn customers in that vault. At least a few of the objects were magic-infused. Did I really want to put this Eeyore ball with its negative energy and, possibly, actual dark magic in the same vault? Would it infect the other items?

I decided not to take the chance. I didn't want the thing out front in the shop, either, though, where it could broadcast its unpleasant predictions. I put it on the counter next to the sink

in the back room, pulled an old saltshaker out of the cupboard, and poured an unbroken line of salt around the ball.

When I started pouring the salt, the mist inside the ball started frantically swirling, as if the crystal ball didn't want to be caged.

“Too bad, buddy,” I said, and then felt silly for talking to a lump of quartz. “You brought this on yourself. I'll take you to Susan's as soon as I can.”

When I finished the circle and then went around a second time, just to be safe, I was hoping the ball would go inert and the mist would vanish. No such luck. Instead, letters started forming on the inside of the ball. I snatched a dish towel from the drawer and tossed it over the ball before it got any further than YOU WILL ...

I didn't want to know what the Eeyore ball thought I would do. Not now, not ever. And I really needed to get rid of the thing before it made me dislike Winnie the Pooh, one of my favorite characters from childhood. Humming the Pooh bear theme song, I headed back out to the shop just in time for more gossips, er, customers, to arrive.

“I'm sure Susan and Andy will discover the truth,” I said for the dozenth time an hour later, wrapping up a purchase. “Enjoy your zucchini!”

I checked my phone and saw I'd missed a call. It was from Susan, not Jack. I told myself he'd call me as soon as he could, and then I called the sheriff back, since the shop was temporarily empty.

“What's up?”

“Hey, Tess. I wanted you to know that we have no sign of Henrietta yet, but we'll find her. Especially since she plans to hang out and come after Ish. Are you absolutely sure she didn't know about Cordelia? She could have been pretending, so you'd think she was innocent.”

“I thought about that. But she was truly shocked, or she's in the wrong business and should be an actress.”

“Well—”

“Right. Sociopaths are brilliant liars. I don’t know, Susan. I just don’t know. I thought she was telling the truth, but I tend to believe people. I wish I knew. If she was really at Disney, she should be able to prove it, right? Cameras and such?”

“If she really went to Disney, she’d be giving me details and receipts,” Susan said, skepticism sharp in her voice. “We’ll find her. It has to be her, doesn’t it? Who else would have wanted to kill my poor aunt?”

I didn’t say that there could be quite a few people who wanted to hurt Cordelia, given her life of crime and, if Henrietta was to be believed, her habit of betraying people. But imaginary suspects didn’t help the situation. Susan and Andy had to work with what they had in front of them, and all signs led to Henrietta Quirksley.

A tiny part of my mind wondered about that odd phone call. Who would have known to call Mr. Butler with a fake report of Susan being in an accident, just to get him out of the way? In a way, though, that thought led back to Henrietta. She clearly knew everything about everybody and knew how to do her research. How hard could it be to set up a fake phone call from a fake 800 number?

I sighed and pushed it all out of my mind, glad that I wasn’t the one who had to figure it out. “I don’t know, Susan. I’m just sorry you have to deal with this.”

“Thanks, Tess.” She told me that the expert another sheriff had recommended had been and gone early that morning. He’d cast a temporary neutralizing spell on the artifacts that should protect Susan and anybody else in the house from their negative energy for at least a little while until she could find a more permanent way to get rid of them.

“He was especially interested in the dagger. Said it seemed to be the only thing in the trove that *didn’t* give off an evil vibe. When I told him how it had chased me around the room, he said that he got the oddest feeling that it was trying to escape!”

I had no idea how to respond to that. To be honest, I was sick to death of magic daggers. If I never heard of another

magical dagger in my life, I'd be perfectly happy.

“When the medical examiner releases Cordelia's ... remains, we'll arrange a cremation. Aloysius says that's what she wanted. I would have expected her to demand a huge funeral with all the ritual and ceremony she always believed she deserved in life, but he says no.”

“Maybe it's just that he can't bear the idea of going through all that,” I ventured.

She sighed. “Maybe. It's his call, though. And, frankly, she has no other family or friends, from what I can tell. Maybe it's better this way.”

We chatted for another minute about nothing important, and I told her I'd be there for her, no matter what she needed.

Then I thought of something I wanted to ask. “Did they ever, pardon me if this is insensitive, Susan, but did they ever find the murder weapon?”

“No. Nobody has found the gun yet. Henrietta must have taken it with her.”

When we hung up, I felt vaguely dissatisfied with the entire conversation. Susan was so sure Henrietta was the killer, but the woman who'd sat at my table eating an omelet had seemed to be truly shocked by the news.

The chimes over the door sounded, and I looked up to see tiny Mrs. Frost totter in, her white curls piled high on her head. She must have just come from the beauty salon. Ninety years old or not, she'd never miss her weekly appointment.

“Hello, Mrs. Frost.” I rushed over to her in case I needed to take her arm, not worried about touching her because she'd always been a hugger, and I'd had many, many hugs from Mrs. Frost when I was a child. She'd never triggered my visions, which only kicked in on the first time touching someone. Even if I'd touched them before my “gift” had kicked in, there seemed to be an inoculation effect.

“Hello, Tess.” She thrust her cane at me to hold and dug around in her enormous bag. After several moments, she

pulled out her miniature crossbow and thrust it at me. “I want to sell my bow.”

This was as shocking as having a felon show up on my doorstep and demand breakfast. Mrs. Frost was a legend with that bow. She took top prizes at archery competitions every time she entered one.

“But why? You love that bow! Oh, did you get another one?”

She shook her head, but I saw her lips tremble. “No more bows for me.”

“But why not?”

She peered up at me, and I was surprised to see how cloudy her eyes were. Had they been that way for a long time? I couldn’t remember. “Because I can’t see to shoot it anymore. Tess, I’m going blind.”

T^{ess}

Mrs. Frost was not going blind.

She told me, after I flipped the shop sign to CLOSED, that her doctor had diagnosed her with cataracts and said she needed surgery. What she didn't say, but was clear as day, was that the idea of surgery terrified her.

"Let's go sit down in the back, Mrs. Frost. I'll get you some tea."

She took my arm and carefully walked next to me. "I've never had surgery, Tess. Not once in all my years. I'm not going to start letting somebody cut me up now," she declared.

"Never?"

How was that possible? Most people had at least tonsils out or something. Never in ninety years? I helped her to a chair next to the tiny table and went to make her tea. "Sugar? I don't have lemon or cream, but I have milk."

"Just sugar, please. And no, never. I never will, either. What if they mess up? What if the doctor skipped that day in med school? Or was hungover and fell asleep, so they don't know how to do the cataract surgery? What then?" She scowled. "I watch *60 Minutes*. I know what's what."

"Well, I understand your concern, but I'm sure they don't let just anybody perform the surgery. Your eye doctor must know experts in this kind of thing ..."

She stubbornly shook her head. “No. You’re young and healthy, Tess. You just don’t understand. Mr. Frost gets back from the rehab from his hip surgery this week, and I’m going to hire someone to come in and take care of things. Since I won’t be able to see.”

I gave her a cup of tea with extra sugar and then sat down and took her fragile, trembling hand. I was ashamed to realize that I’d never really thought of what she might be going through these days. I’d taken over a casserole and a pie for her when Mr. Frost first went into the hospital, and I’d sent him a card and some car magazines—he loved classic cars. But I’d never checked up on her after that. Too caught up in my life, I guess.

“Mrs. Frost. How about if I go with you to the doctor? Eleanor will be in after lunch, and she can take the shop for the rest of the day. You and I can talk to the doctor and ask a million questions, so we can get every answer you want.”

“I don’t want any answers.” She sipped some tea and then carefully put the cup down. “Do you want to buy my crossbow or not?”

A flash of dazzling opalescent light suddenly shone around the edges of the door to the shop, and I jumped up.

“Now what?” I muttered, hurrying over to see what was going on. “I’ll be right back, Mrs. Frost.”

“I’ll be here.”

I opened the door just in time to see Jack walk through a magical portal into the shop, followed by a small, dark-haired woman and a tall, muscular, dark-haired man who had a distinct resemblance to Ven and his brother Conlan, the king of Atlantis.

Jack’s smile was brilliant, and he dropped his duffel bag on the floor and swept me up into an almost-crushing embrace.

“Jack? What ... where ...”

“Honey, I’m home!”

T*ess*

I wrapped my arms around him, so glad that he was safe that everything else flew out of my mind. But when he tried to kiss me, I stepped out of his hug.

“I’m glad you’re back. Boy, did you miss a lot. Are you going to introduce me to your friends?”

The woman had such an air of fierce competence that I was pretty sure I already knew who she was. She wore all black—shirt, jeans, jacket, and boots—and studied me intently. Her hair was choppy, but suited her. Either she went to a very expensive, trendy stylist or she cut it herself. If this was really Quinn Dawson, former co-leader of the rebel army, I bet she’d never been in a hair salon in her life.

The man was ... terrifying. His face looked like it had been carved in stone, and his silver eyes flashed with the same keen intelligence I’d seen in the woman with him. His long, black hair framed that forbidding face; his long, black coat covered similar black clothing to hers, and the complete package added to the overall impression that this was a truly dangerous man.

And possibly one who had never smiled in his life.

“Tess, meet Quinn Dawson and Alaric. I’ve told you about them. Quinn, Alaric, this is my Tess.”

I glanced up at Jack at the “my Tess,” surprised, but his smile lit up the room. The wonderful thing about Jack is that

he was completely unafraid to show his feelings. And now that he was in love with me, he was happy for everybody to know.

Even Uncle Mike. But that had been a different story, involving threats of tiger-skin rugs.

“It’s very nice to meet you,” I told them. “I’ve heard so much about you from Jack. And I’ve read a lot of the news accounts.”

I took a deep breath and looked at the woman I’d been afraid Jack would always love. “Quinn, thank you for keeping Jack safe during the rebellion. I’d hug you if I could.”

Her wary expression softened into a smile. “He kept me safe, too. We had each other’s backs, for sure. It was a long ten years.”

“And now I keep you safe,” Alaric said, his voice deep and slightly rough.

Quinn rolled her eyes and elbowed him. “And?”

He sighed. “And you keep me safe. Is there food? Jack said there would be food.”

“Alaric!” Quinn glared at him.

His silver gaze focused on me. “I’m told that centuries as high priest of Atlantis have made civilized discussion and small talk difficult for me. It is good to meet the woman who brought happiness to Shepherd, so I no longer must worry he’ll try to take Quinn from me.”

“Um ...”

Quinn dropped her head into her hands and sighed, then looked at me. “Sorry, Tess. He’s a work in progress. But also, Jack said there would be food. We haven’t eaten since ... yesterday morning?”

I stared up at Jack. “You? *You* haven’t eaten since yesterday morning?”

His smile faded. “It’s a long story, and one I’ll tell you all about later. But yes, we could really use some food. Any chance you can get out of here for lunch?”

“Tess?” Mrs. Frost called out, and I winced. I’d forgotten about her for a minute.

“I’m coming, Mrs. Frost.”

“Is that Jack? Tell that nice boy to come in here and help me up.”

Jack tilted his head. “Is she okay? Why does she need help up?”

“Excuse us for a moment, Quinn, Alaric,” I said. “A friend needs some help.”

I said, quietly, to Jack: “She has cataracts and is afraid of surgery, so she’s terrified she’d going blind.”

Alaric, who’d been looking around the store with interest, whipped his head around to stare at me. “Your friend is losing her vision? This is no problem. I can fix that.”

With that, he strode past me and shoved the door to the back room open. “I am Alaric of Atlantis, respected elder. I will repair your eyes.”

I gasped and pushed past Jack to follow Alaric into the back room. Mrs. Frost would be scared to death of this imposing stranger making grandiose claims of being able to cure blindness.

“Wait! Alaric! Mrs. Frost, I’m sorry! Don’t be afraid. He’s from Atlantis, he doesn’t understand—”

But she was peering up at Alaric. “Well, get to it, young man. I’m ninety years old. I don’t have all day to wait around.”

Shockingly, he smiled. Alaric, one of the most dangerous men in the world, according to Jack’s stories, smiled. And then he bowed. “I have over five centuries, my lady. I understand impatience.”

With that, he reached out and touched her face, his hands on her temples. A glowing silver light appeared and surrounded Mrs. Frost’s head in a nimbus of radiance, and Mrs. Frost gasped. I took a step toward her, but Jack’s hand on my arm held me back.

“He’s very good at this,” Jack said quietly. “Give him a minute.”

But it didn’t take that long. In only a few more seconds, Alaric removed his hands, and the glow faded.

Mrs. Frost stayed entirely still for a long moment after that, and then her eyes snapped open.

“Wow,” I murmured. Her eyes sparkled up at Alaric—and they were completely clear. Not a hint of cloudiness. But did it work? Could she see?

Mrs. Frost’s mouth fell open. “Oh, boy, howdy! It worked! You fixed me, young man. And gosh, you’re pretty. If I’d been able to pick the first thing I saw when I could see clearly again, your pretty face would be right up there! You’re almost as handsome as my husband.”

Jack and I glanced at each other. Mr. Frost was a short, round man with a face a bit like a bloodhound. But he loved his wife with a deep, pure love, and that made him beautiful to her.

Alaric’s eyes widened. He probably didn’t have much experience with being told he was pretty by nonagenarians. I tried not to laugh, but Quinn had no such reservations.

I glanced over my shoulder.

She grinned. “Well, he *is* pretty. I tell him that all the time.”

“Help me up, young man,” Mrs. Frost demanded, holding out a hand.

Alaric, still looking slightly befuddled, bowed again and then held out a hand to take hers. She rose and smiled at all of us and then patted his arm.

“Are you ... really cured, Mrs. Frost?” I didn’t want to insult Alaric, but she was my friend, and I was worried.

“I haven’t seen this well in fifty years! I can even read the small print on that poster over there on your wall!” Her smile was enormous. “I won’t be selling you my crossbow after all.”

“Crossbow?” Alaric asked.

“We’ll tell you later,” Jack said.

“Will it last?” I directed the question to Alaric. “Is it a temporary fix, or is she really cured?”

His eyes narrowed, but then he nodded. “You do not know me, Tess Callahan, so naturally you have doubts. Yes, she is cured. She will have perfect vision for the entirety of her life.”

Mrs. Frost broke out into a chortle. “Perfect vision at my age. Wait till I tell the girls. Well, I really picked the right day to visit you, Tess. Thank you so much ...”

“Alaric,” I supplied. “Former high priest of Atlantis.”

“Ohhh.” She nodded in understanding. “My late father’s best friend was a priest up in Georgia. He was a fine man, too. Raised champion milk cows in his spare time. When he wasn’t preaching and taking confessions and what not. Do you raise cows? Any other animals?”

“I ... no.”

Behind me, Quinn was fighting an attack of the giggles. The idea of this dangerous and magically powerful man raising cows was causing me to have to bite my lip against laughing, too.

Mrs. Frost patted his arm again. “Well, that’s okay. If you ever want to get into it, you just call me. I know a woman who can get you into hogs. Champions, too, mind you. I figure I owe you at least that.”

I’d never seen a man so obviously and completely at a loss for words, and I decided it was time to step in.

“Mrs. Frost, I’m thrilled that you can see again! And you won’t need surgery at all. It’s a modern miracle! Your doctor will be so surprised. Now, how did you get here today? Is your nephew waiting outside?”

Her nephew often drove the Frosts to do shopping and to their appointments, but he rarely came in, preferring to wait in the car and get work done on his laptop.

“Oh, yes! He brought me to the door, but I wanted to come in by myself, so he wouldn’t argue with me about selling the bow. Wait till he hears about this!”

Jack held out his hand. “Mrs. Frost, I would be honored to walk you out to your car.”

“Thank you, young man. And don’t you feel bad. You’re quite pretty, yourself. I just always preferred the tall, dark, and handsome fellows.”

Jack grinned at her. “I’m proud just to be called pretty by such a lovely woman.”

“Oh, you charmer!”

We all walked back out into the shop, and she stopped to give me a hug. “Tess, I don’t know how to thank you.”

“No thanks needed. This was all Alaric. I’m just so glad your eyes are back to normal.”

“Normal? This is better than normal! I won’t even have to wear my reading glasses anymore!”

Jack walked her outside, and I smiled and waved when she turned back to smile at us. The minute the door closed behind them, I clapped my hand over my mouth, horribly afraid I was going to burst out laughing and offend Alaric, which would probably cause damage to international relations between the U.S. and Atlantis, knowing my luck.

“Hogs,” Quinn gasped. “She wanted to set you up with ... prize ... hogs!”

When she doubled over, howling with laughter, I was done for. All the stress and anxiety of the past couple of days probably figured in, too, but I completely lost it. I laughed so hard that tears streamed down my face.

When Jack came back inside, he was confronted with the sight of two women bent over with laughter and a very puzzled Alaric. “What’s so funny?”

“I have no idea.” The former high priest raised an eyebrow. “Why would that woman think I’d want to raise

hogs? Is this animal idea a tradition peculiar to Florida? Or to Dead End?”

Jack shrugged. “Yes, actually. All native Floridians are issued a pair of piglets when they turn five.”

Alaric looked suspicious. “When the Floridians turn five or when the pigs turn five?”

That was it. I was done. I plopped down on the floor, clutching my stomach, and Quinn collapsed right next to me. It took almost five minutes before we could stop laughing.

When we finally sputtered to a stop, gasping, Jack and Alaric were both staring at us.

“I’m so sorry, Alaric,” I managed, breathing hard. “We weren’t laughing *at* you—”

“I kinda was,” Quinn said.

He folded his arms and stared down at us. “After all this time, I still don’t understand humans. All I want to know is this: where can we find food?”

The man had cured my friend and saved her from tremendous stress, worry, and fear. The least I could do was feed him. Quinn stood and held a hand out to me, but I gently shook my head and got up on my own. A strange expression crossed her face, and she apologized. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think.”

“It’s fine. Yes, there will be food. Let’s go to my house, and I’ll cook you an amazing lunch. I’ve already had an unexpected guest for breakfast, but she was a criminal. This will be a nice change.”

“Tess?” Jack, looking worried, put a hand on my arm.

“Oh. Yeah. I have a *lot* to tell you. Oh!” I looked at Alaric. “You don’t know how to whammy a zucchini plant, do you? Or a crystal ball?”

Turned out, after a bit of explanation, that he did.

I texted Eleanor that I was leaving the shop closed until she got there after lunch, and we headed out. Me, two former

rebel leaders, and the former high priest of Atlantis, who was more than five hundred years old.

Just another ordinary day in Dead End.

Sometimes it was hard to believe that my last boyfriend had been a dentist.

T^{ess}

Alaric finished his second hamburger and shook his head. “Why would I spend eternity with a dangerous wizard?”

The Eeyore ball got in a few jabs before Alaric neutralized it—a temporary fix, he’d warned me. It was wrapped in an old feed sack in the trunk of my car for now.

Quinn leaned her head against his shoulder. “I think that one was meant for me.”

“Wizard? I am no wizard!” He said with so much haughty indignation I was afraid I’d start laughing again.

“I’m not sure a lump of quartz can make value judgments like that,” I said. “Sorry. But thanks again for what you did. Between the zucchini and the crystal ball, things have been hectic in there. I was afraid that plant would go all *Little Shop of Horrors* on me any minute.”

The two men looked puzzled, but Quinn grinned.

“*Feed me, Seymour,*” she sang, and I joined in.

“*So, I can grow up big and strong.*”

Alaric leaned back and studied the two of us. “This has been a strange day.”

“Hey! My friend is dealing with an entire trove of dangerous magical objects someone dumped in her house. Probably a lot of them were used for evil things. Can you whammy the lot the way you did the crystal ball?”

“What?” Jack gave me a *look*.

“Later.”

Alaric thought about it. “Perhaps. However, human magical artifacts often respond to Atlantean magic in unexpected ways. I might be able to neutralize at least part of the trove, or the reaction could cause an explosion that would destroy her house and anything or anyone within a half-mile radius. There is no way to tell. However, I’d be willing to try. We can buy her a new house if this one blows up. When do we go?”

I smiled sweetly at him and held up the serving dish. “Maybe we’ll table that idea. More ham and cheese casserole?”

“Definitely.”

When he and Jack started on their third or fourth portions of everything—Jack had grilled burgers, and I’d pulled out the casserole, made a salad, and sliced bread—I pushed back from the table.

“Quinn, I’m going to go out and get some air. Want to join me? I’ll serve pie in a little while.”

She gently lifted my cat off her lap and down to the floor. Lou had made a beeline right for Quinn and jumped into her lap as soon as we sat down, surprising me. Maybe Quinn was just a cat magnet? First Jack and now Lou ...

“I’d love to. We’ll be back in a few, guys. Try not to eat Tess out of house and home.”

Jack raised a hand and waved, because his mouth was full, and I headed for the back door.

“It’s beautiful here,” Quinn said, pausing on the porch to look around.

“Yeah. I can see how you’d think that.” I looked around, and it was true. It *was* peaceful. The sparkling pool with comfortable seats arranged around it. The swing. The fields and woods.

Not a hint of the stress and chaos of the past year.

I sighed and sat on the swing. “I get the feeling you have questions for me.”

She gave me a wry look. “Am I that obvious?”

“Not at all. But my best friend and I talked about boys almost incessantly from the time we were twelve years old. Ex-girlfriends wanting to know all about the current girlfriend was a biggie.”

She laughed and sat down on a lounge chair and swung her feet up, leaning back. “Ah. This is so restful. I could sit here all day. You know that Jack and I weren’t like that, right?”

“I know.” I realized I was touching the tiger’s eye pendant he’d given me and put my hand on my lap. “I also know you were the most important person in his life for a very long time.”

“And he was mine, except for my sister. I’m sure, from the little Jack mentioned to us, that you know all about how close you can get to someone when you survive dangerous times with them.”

“I do know.” We sat in silence for a minute or two, while I idly pushed the swing into motion with one foot. “And then there was Alaric.”

“And then there was Alaric.” She sighed. “I don’t know if anything would have ever happened between me and Jack, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“I’m not—”

“I would be.”

I nodded. She wasn’t wrong.

“But I don’t think so. Jack thought he felt something romantic for me, but I believe it was more the danger thing, not to discount his feelings. And I loved him and always will, but not in a relationship way. More like a brother.” She gave me a direct look. “I know you know the difference. There was what I felt and still feel for Jack, and then there was what I feel for Alaric. A steady fire burning in the homestead compared to a raging conflagration.”

“Or a typhoon,” I said ruefully. “A tsunami.”

She grinned. “I know. Jack feels the same way about you. He told us he loves you. Jack, one of the most deadly and stoic warriors I’ve ever fought with, stood there grinning and told us he loves you and you love him back. And that he’s never been happier in his life.”

A wave of warmth swept through me. “I feel the same way about him.”

“I know.”

“You know?”

“Did Jack mention that I’m an empath?”

I sat straight up on the swing. “You’re *what?*”

“Guess not,” she said ruefully.

I fumed for a moment or two and then relaxed back into the seat. There wasn’t anything in my emotions that I’d be ashamed to tell anyone about, except ...

“Hey. If you felt that bit where Alaric scared me, I just—”

“Relax. He terrifies everyone. He doesn’t even realize he’s doing it. Parents used to warn their children to be good, or he’d come get them, like some kind of boogeyman, because he was the most powerful high priest in the history of Atlantis. It hurt him, so I put a stop to it when I found out.” Her face hardened, and I had no doubt at all that this small woman could easily cow an entire continent into submission.

“What’s it like, being an empath?” I really wanted to ask what she felt from me, but I was embarrassed to ask.

“Horrible, most of the time. Exhausting. Emotions barrage me from all sides, everywhere I go. I learned early on to build a mental wall against it, but that’s tiring, too. See, right now I’m too worn out from the past couple of days to shield, so I just felt the sympathy and understanding you felt when I said that.” She said it so matter-of-factly that it didn’t embarrass me at all.

“Well, I don’t know if it’s sympathy so much as empathy. It’s exhausting having to protect myself from any possibility that someone might touch me. And ...”

“Isolating?”

“Exactly.”

“I don’t want to know if you saw Jack’s death.” She tightened her lips. “I’d rather believe he’s going to live forever.”

“I did, though. Soon after he came back to Dead End.”

She stared at me but didn’t ask, so I told her anyway. “He kind of forced the issue. But I saw his *first* death in the vampire battle. And I saw you.”

“Not his ... permanent death?”

“No, and I doubt I ever will. My ... ability works with consistent rules, so far. I don’t always see someone’s death when I touch them. If I could touch them when I was a kid, before the ability kicked in, I can still touch them now and see nothing. Once I see the vision, I never see it again. And if I see a death that happened already, like Jack’s or like a new friend, who was ... well. Something happened to her, and she was clinically dead for a minute in the ambulance. I saw that, so I won’t see anything else for her. Or for Jack, thank goodness.”

I could tell she was fascinated, and I appreciated she didn’t try to pump me for more information.

She swung around to face me, putting her feet down. “Tess, I want to tell you this. I hope we will become good friends, because I never want to lose Jack’s friendship, and I know he loves you. I have never seen him so happy.”

She paused and shook her head. “No. That’s not it. I’ve never seen him happy at all. I’ve seen him laugh and joke and banter. I’ve seen him deadly, in action. I’ve seen him passionate about protecting his friends, his team, and innocents. But I’ve never seen him happy, truly happy, until now. Thank you for that.”

My eyes burned, just a little, and I felt a lump in my throat. “I’ve been happy in my life. I have a wonderful family and good friends. I enjoy my work. But I can honestly tell you I have never been as happy as I am now, and it’s all because of Jack. You’re already my friend, because you love him, and he loves you.”

Her eyes got suspiciously shiny, and it might have turned into a weepy hug fest, except I couldn’t hug people. Luckily, the door banged open.

“I heard there was pie,” Alaric announced. “We do not have pie in Atlantis, and Jack tells me you are the queen of baking.”

Quinn and I started laughing.

“Yep,” I said, looking up at him with a straight face. “The state issued me my first rolling pin at five years old.”

“When you were five or the rolling pin?” Quinn asked.

Alaric rolled his eyes up to the sky, as if asking a higher power for patience, and I stood up from the swing. “Alaric, how do you feel about pecans?”

“They are nuts, correct? I do not have feelings about nuts.”

“Oh, give it five minutes. I am about to blow your magical mind.”

After he finished his third piece of pecan pie, Alaric looked at me, his eyes wide. “You *are* the queen of baking. I may be developing romantic feelings for you.”

Jack: “Hey ...”

Quinn grinned. “You should have seen him the first time he had pizza.”

“Can you stay for a while? I have a guest room.” I looked at Jack and bit my lip. “It’s kind of a strange time right now, though. There are some things I need to tell you.”

“We cannot,” Alaric said, rising to his feet and bowing. “Thank you for the wonderful lunch and pie. Be sure that we will return as often as we can for the pleasure of your

company and for the baking. Even though Jack will be here, too.”

He gave Jack a side-eyed glance that I could have sworn held suppressed laughter.

“Keep it up, magic boy,” Jack said lazily, standing and clearing the plates.

“Magic *man*,” Alaric corrected him, smirking.

Quinn raised her eyebrows, probably at Jack doing such a domestic task.

“He likes to wash dishes,” I confided.

“Wonders may never cease,” she said. “We should be on our way, though I hate to eat and run. We have an urgent date with a blood-magic practitioner who thinks he’s going to take over the southern half of France.”

“We will help him understand his mistake,” Alaric said gravely.

“I bet you will.” Impulsively, I added: “I wish I could hug you. I feel like we’re all going to be great friends.”

“We feel the same way,” Quinn said.

A thought struck me. “Alaric ... I ... never mind.”

Quinn’s gaze turned intent. “No, ask. I think I feel ... ask him.”

“I just ... you’re the most powerful high priest, and—”

“Former,” he corrected.

“Former, and I wondered ... you healed Mrs. Frost and neutralized the plant and the crystal ball ...” I took a deep breath. “Is there any chance you could cure me of this ability? Make it so I never again have to watch someone die?”

Jack

My heart turned over in my chest. I could physically feel the wrench.

“Oh, Tess.” I pulled her into my arms. She’d looked so hopeful, and so afraid to hope, when she’d asked. I knew her gift had been an enormous burden on her, but it had never occurred to me to try to find a way to relieve her of it. I wasn’t sure why. I guess it just felt like part of her, like the tiger was part of me. Not something that could be separated.

Alaric tilted his head and studied her with cool interest. “I don’t know. The crystal ball and the plant—that was different. And the woman’s eyes were merely afflicted by a common ailment of age in humans. But this ability ... it’s part of you. I have never attempted such a thing.”

“Would you be willing to try?” Her voice was a bare whisper, but we all heard it.

Alaric looked at me, at Quinn, and then back at Tess. “Of course.”

I reluctantly let Tess step toward him but held onto her hand. When Alaric raised his, she gasped.

“No! I mean, I’m sorry, but you can’t touch me. I don’t want to know how you’ll die, and I don’t know ... you’re Atlantean. I’m not sure my mind could handle it. I just, no. I’m sorry, but no. Never mind.” Her shoulders slumped.

The former high priest shrugged. “I don’t need to touch you. Remain still and I will touch your aura.”

“It always sounds so woo-woo when he says stuff like that,” Quinn said, obviously trying to relieve some of the tension in the room.

Tess nodded and let go of my hand after squeezing it. Then she stood perfectly still and closed her eyes.

Alaric shaped the air around her head and then her upper body with his hands, and the familiar glow of his magic surrounded her for one long minute.

And then a second minute.

I could feel my hands clenching into fists from nerves. Finally, after what felt like an hour, Alaric sighed and shook his head. Then he waved one hand and murmured something in ancient Atlantean—I recognized the language but didn’t understand it.

Tess flinched and her head fell back. Then she stumbled, and I caught her before she fell. She opened her eyes, and the hope was almost painful to see. I’d known Alaric a long time, though, and I recognized his expression.

He hadn’t been able to remove the ability. I knew it even before he spoke.

“I’m sorry, Tess. This ability is intrinsic to your being. It’s not a disease or injury. I cannot heal it.”

Tears welled up in her beautiful blue eyes, and she blinked hard to fight them back. “But ... I felt something! Like I was zapped with electricity. Wasn’t that you?”

“Yes. My magic sensed an injury. A scar from a gunshot, perhaps? I healed that.”

Tess gasped. “Really?” She pulled at the neck of her sweatshirt, yanking it down to show ... nothing. Nothing but pale, unmarked skin on her shoulder where the scar had been. A crazed toy maker with delusions of grandeur had been kidnapping banshees when Tess and I shut him down, but he’d shot her first.

It had been one of the most terrifying experiences of my life.

She took a deep breath and smiled up at Alaric. “Thank you. That was kind of you. I’m sorry I asked—”

He bowed. “Do not be sorry. I can only regret that I could not fulfill your request.”

Quinn touched my arm. “Jack. We’re traveling all the time now. We’ll spread the word, if it’s okay with you, Tess. We might hear something, somewhere, about a way to cure you of this ... ability.”

Tess’s eyes shone. “Yes. Please. When it’s convenient. I know you’re out there saving lives, so this isn’t that important.

This time, Alaric answered her. “Friends are always important. In my more than half a millennium of existence, this is one lesson I have learned very well.”

Tess grinned at him, her lashes damp with the tears she wouldn’t let fall. “Alaric, I have to tell you something. You would fit in perfectly around here. Anytime you want to move to Dead End, let me know. I’m friends with the mayor.”

Quinn hugged me. I shook hands with Alaric, and Tess waved goodbye to them. And then we walked out to the pool, and Alaric called to the portal.

“To France,” Quinn said. “But we’ll visit as soon as we can.”

“I’d love that,” Tess said, and something passed between the two women that convinced me they were already friends. A tightness in my chest eased to see it. I hadn’t been sure how to approach the conversation with Tess about Quinn, so I’d figured I’d just introduce them. Women have a mysterious way of figuring out emotional stuff long before most guys ever can.

After they were gone and the portal vanished, I caught Tess’s hand and pulled her onto my lap on the swing.

“I’m so sorry, sweetheart. I know you hoped ...”

She buried her face against my chest and shook her head. “It’s okay. I’ve survived it this long. But maybe it’s time to

find more and better ways to cope with this ability. I'm tired of feeling trapped and isolated. I'd like to travel. I know you can't take me on your missions, or even tell me about them, but—"

I touched her cheek and waited for her to look up at me. "Tess. That's over. I told Quinn and Alaric, and I'll be telling everyone, that I won't ever keep a secret from you again."

"Really?"

"You're my life."

After that, we didn't talk for quite a while until I finally lifted her up into my arms and carried her into the house. I'd missed her *very* much.

She pushed the back door shut, giggling, and I kissed her again.

"I think we need a nap."

"I love naps," she agreed, just before she kissed my neck.

I made it all the way to the doorway to the bedroom before I heard the sheriff's car, sirens blaring, turn onto the gravel road that led to Carlos's and then Tess's house.

"Oh, no," I groaned.

"What?"

"You know how I have Superior Tiger Hearing?"

"Yeah?"

"The cops are coming."

"Oh." She blew out a long breath. "Put me down. I've got a lot to tell you."

"I was only gone for two days!"

"Yeah. A *lot* to tell you."

"I'm not going to like this, am I?" I put her down, and she headed for the front door, where the sheriff's car was now barreling up to the house.

"Nope. Not even a little."

T^{ess}

I was right. Jack didn't like it. But he didn't have room to talk after I poked a finger into the hole in his jacket.

"Knife? Bullet wound?"

"Sword," he said sheepishly. "Some guy who believed he was the reincarnation of Lancelot was kidnapping people to serve in his 'court.' He challenged me to a duel."

"A duel? A *duel*? Tell me you didn't—"

"I shifted into tiger, and he peed his pants."

"Ah."

"But first, we had to fight through his thugs. That wasn't nearly as entertaining." From the grimace on his face, it hadn't been, and I wouldn't enjoy hearing about his adventures, either.

First, though, we walked outside to meet Susan. She was back in uniform, her hair neat and her clothes pressed, but her eyes were hollow, and it looked like she'd lost ten pounds since Monday.

"Jack. I'm very glad to see you."

"Hey, Sheriff," Jack called, and then he muttered to me, putting an arm around my waist: "Can't say the same, considering."

I hushed him. "Back on the job, I see?"

“Yeah. Enough people saw me driving around when Aunt Cordelia was ... at time of death. And Mrs. Quindlen had stopped me to complain at pretty much exactly TOD. Bubba McKee got a new boa constrictor, just when she was starting to feel safe letting her cat out at night again.”

“You lost your aunt? I’m so sorry, Susan,” Jack said. “Why don’t you come in and have some iced tea?”

She shook her head. “No. Thanks, but no. I just needed to tell Tess the news.”

“What news?” Dread snaked through my stomach. Things had been going from bad to worse.

“My dear cousin,” she said grimly. “He disappeared. Isn’t answering his phone. In fact, his phone has vanished, too, according to the phone company. And we still haven’t found a hint of Henrietta.”

“Do you think he’d hurt her?”

An odd expression crossed her face. “I hadn’t thought of that, Tess. I was more worried that the crazed woman with a *gun* had made good on her threats to you that she was going after Ish, to be honest.”

I wasn’t sure why my first instinct had been “Ish is a danger to Henrietta,” instead of “Henrietta, the threatening, gun-toting, self-confessed bank robber is a danger to Ish.” Something about him ...

“Ish? Crazed woman with a gun who threatened Tess?” Jack’s voice was a low rumble, and I didn’t have to see them to know that amber sparks would be shining in his green eyes. “We really have a lot to talk about, don’t we?”

“Tess cooked breakfast for her,” Susan said dryly. “The parole-violating stalker. Today.”

“Nice, Susan.” I glared at her. “Remind me why we’re friends, when you just threw me under the bus?”

“Breakfast?”

I turned to Jack and poked him in the chest. “Sword? Thugs?”

“Oh. Yeah.”

“Anyway, be careful. This Henrietta Quirksley seems to be unhealthily fixated on you and Ish was paying an odd amount of attention to you, too. Whatever is going on now, I really don’t want you to get caught in the middle of it and get hurt.” Her dark eyes softened. “You’ve been hurt enough, Tess.”

She wasn’t wrong.

“Hey! I’m at least a little less hurt now than I was this morning. An Atlantean high priest just healed my gunshot scar!”

Susan rolled her eyes. “If you don’t want to talk to me, you can just say so, Tess. You don’t have to make up wild stories.”

“But—”

“If you see or hear anything, let me know immediately, okay? Or call Andy or even Lizzie.”

“She’s back?”

“Yes. And she’s happy about the job offer, despite all this chaos.” Susan shook her head. “She’ll fit in here just fine.”

More than Susan knew. But shifter status wasn’t something you had to disclose on a job application, and Lizzie wasn’t even a full shifter.

“Okay. You do the same. Have you let Aunt Ruby know what’s going on?”

Susan sighed. “Yes, I’ve been filling *the mayor* in on everything. I swear she’s going to fire me when this is all over.”

“Never! She thinks you’re a great sheriff!”

“Maybe she did before this,” Susan said grimly. Then she tapped the roof of her car twice. “Right. I’m out of here. Take care. Jack, glad to see you. Let’s catch up soon.”

She hopped in her car and sped off before I remembered to give her the crystal ball. Oh, well. It couldn’t hurt anyone from inside my trunk, even if Alaric’s neutralization wore off.

“Tess. We have a lot to talk about.”

“I know. But I’m feeling guilty about leaving Eleanor alone at the shop, with all this going on.” I hesitated. “Maybe I should head back to work.”

Jack answered by lifting me up off my feet and carrying me back into the house. “Talk first. No, wait. Kiss me first. Then we’ll go to the shop.”

I texted Eleanor.

We never made it back to the shop.

T*ess*

I lay in bed and stretched, unable to stop smiling. Sure, everything that had been wrong and awful and dangerous yesterday still was today, but it didn't matter as much. Because Jack was home.

And my tiger was making coffee.

Lou, currently washing her paw, sniffed and turned away from me. She'd spent most of the night in the guest room. She didn't approve of people who didn't sleep when it was bedtime.

"I'm sorry, baby girl. How about tuna for breakfast?"

Her ear flicked, but she still didn't look at me.

"Okay, okay, I'm getting up. Let's go get tuna."

She meowed and hopped gracefully off the bed and led the way to the kitchen. I followed, less gracefully since I was still half asleep. Jack, gorgeous in jeans and a green sweater I'd given him for Christmas, handed me a mug of coffee and kissed me.

"Drink your coffee. I'm toasting you a bagel, too. I'll get Lou's breakfast."

"I promised her tuna."

"I heard." He flashed that unfairly sexy smile at me. "You know the way to a cat's heart."

“I have to go to work, so don’t give me that smile. I’m immune.”

“No, you’re not.”

“No, I’m not,” I admitted, laughing. Even the early morning sunshine seemed brighter when Jack was here.

Wow. I *did* have it bad.

“Okay. I’m taking my coffee and going to get dressed. I need to hit the road in fifteen.”

“I’m going with you. We should stick together until all bank robbers and felonious Phleabottoms are accounted for.”

“Not a bad idea.”

I dressed up a little for a change and put on a soft blue sweater that matched my eyes with a nice pair of jeans and my favorite boots. I took a little extra care with my makeup, too, humming.

Jack walked into the bedroom and leaned against the bathroom doorway, holding a travel mug of coffee. I glanced at his reflection in the mirror, and he smiled at me.

“I really missed you, Tess. Before you, I thought it was ridiculous that anybody could miss someone in such a short time. But now I get it.”

“I missed you, too.” I put my makeup brush down and turned around to hug him. “We’re hopeless.”

“That’s what Alaric said. I told them about you, and he looked at Quinn and then back at me and said, in that inimical Alaric way: ‘You’re doomed. From the moment I met Quinn, I knew she was my destiny. Now you’ve found yours.’”

I whistled, but my heart was pounding in my chest. “Your destiny? Doesn’t sound like something a scary high priest would say.”

“Atlanteans don’t have this contemporary idea of men needing to be macho or cool. They express their emotions, sometimes beautifully. One of Poseidon’s newest warriors is an actual poet.”

“Wow. But ... the destiny thing. Do you feel that way?”

He put his mug down and wrapped me up in his arms. “I’ve felt that way since I came back to Dead End last year, walked into the shop, and looked into your blue, blue eyes.”

“That was just after you insulted Otis,” I recalled.

“And just before Granny G called me an axe murderer.” He kissed me. “Ah, the good old days.”

I kissed him back, with interest, and wished not for the first time that I had more than one day off each week. I really needed to look into hiring somebody.

“We should go.”

Jack bent to touch his forehead to mine. “Okay, Destiny. Let’s hit it.”

“Don’t call me Destiny.”

“Honey Bunny?”

“No.”

“Punkin Tater?”

“Stop.”

We drove separately in case he needed to go out during the day. He could have borrowed my new Mustang, but he said he might go out and see “the boys” out at their Swamp Commando Airboat Rides to see what they’d heard or seen about Henrietta or Aloysius, and he’d rather have his old truck for the swamp.

Then he’d said: “There’s a name for you. Aloysius. No wonder he turned into a villain.”

I couldn’t disagree.

Since I was by myself in the car now, I sang along with the radio all the way to work. My singing had an unfairly bad rep with everyone I knew, so I usually confined it to times I was alone. Jack and I had come close to never having a relationship at all after the time he burst into my house to “rescue me” since he heard me “screaming in pain.”

I'd been singing.

On the way to work, I called and checked in with Aunt Ruby at her office and Uncle Mike at home, glad to have hands-free phone capability in the new car, and updated them both on what Susan had told us.

Uncle Mike was more interested in other matters. "Are we still having the garage-raising party this afternoon?"

"Ohhh." I'd forgotten all about it. He'd asked me earlier in the week, but we'd gotten distracted by other things. "I'll ask Jack and have him call you."

"He's back? Is he okay?" Uncle Mike pretended to have an adversarial relationship with Jack, which fooled nobody.

"He's good. Listen, I'm pulling into the parking lot. I'll ask him to call you. Love you, Uncle Mike."

"I love you, too, kiddo. Hopefully, I'll see you later. I have all my garage-building tools ready to go."

We should probably put it off, but if we put off important stuff every time there was a murder in town ...

Maybe it was better not to think about that.

Jack

“*What is that?*”

“Oh. That’s Audrey.”

“Who?”

Tess laughed, which was strange considering an enormous zucchini plant was taking over her shop.

“When did you get that? No, strike that. Which horrible customer dumped their man-eating plant on you?”

“It wasn’t a customer, it was Ollie, and he’s not horrible. Jack, you were there when he gave it to me. And remember, Alaric put a whammy on it yesterday to keep it from growing out of control.” She frowned. “Although it was half this size yesterday. Guess his whammy doesn’t work on zucchini plants, either.”

I looked at her in disbelief. “Tess. It’s Thursday morning. Are you telling me that the tiny plant Ollie left on your counter Monday morning has become ... *that* in three days?”

“Sadly, yes. Luckily, I have pruning shears around here somewhere. I’ve been running a ‘free zucchini with every purchase’ promotion all week. But now that you’re here, maybe you could help me take this out and put it somewhere that’s not here. Maybe in the woods? Deer and rabbits eat zucchini, right?”

“They love zucchini.” I remembered Uncle Jed swearing a blue streak whenever the deer, rabbits, and other creatures got into our garden. I’d loved it when they went after the zucchini, though. I hated zucchini.

My phone rang when Tess went off to get the gardening shears. It was Deputy Andy Kelly, formerly the bane of my existence, and now a good friend. We’d been trapped together by some very bad people back in December. I’d gotten us out, but he’d been in bad shape by the time we got free. I still felt guilty enough about that to answer the phone, even though I was pretty sure I knew why he was calling, after the long and tangled story Tess had told me the night before about what was going on in Dead End.

I sighed. I’d donated that money to the town, so they didn’t feel like they needed to call on me as a spare deputy every time something went wrong. I’d had enough of being the one on tap when the world went to heck in a handbasket. Now, I just wanted to relax and enjoy life.

Well. Maybe not when Tess was in danger.

I answered the phone. “Andy. How are you doing, man? How are the ribs?”

Broken ribs are the worst. I’ve been there and done that far too many times. At least I had shifter healing to help me along. Andy was a plain-vanilla human.

“Ribs are okay. I’m good. Hey, I heard you were home. We’ve had a bit of trouble.”

“Tess told me. Susan stopped by this morning, too.”

“Listen. I know it’s asking too much, and you don’t want to be an honorary deputy, but if you could help look for Aloysius Phleabottom and keep an eye out for Henrietta Quirksley, it would be an enormous help. It’s like they’ve both dropped off the face of the earth.”

I looked across the shop at Tess, who was humming and harvesting what had to be at least a hundred zucchinis.

“Hey, man. It’s okay if you don’t want to—”

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“But I have one condition.”

“Name it.”

“You have to take a couple dozen zucchinis off our hands.”

He laughed. “I heard about that. More to the point, my mom heard, and she loves to make zucchini bread. I’ll take as many as you want to give me. She can freeze them or give them to neighbors or something.”

“I’ll drop a basket off for your mom on my way out to visit the boys. Maybe they’ve heard something.”

“Thanks so much!”

The guys that Tess had christened the swamp commandos were all former soldiers, mostly special forces. Most of them had been through some tough times while serving and now they lived out at the shop and ran a small company that gave airboat rides to tourists. They’d helped me more than once, and I trusted every single one of them.

Except maybe Mickey Young. The guy was dating a clown. An actual red-nose, funny-shoes clown. It was just weird.

“I’ll let you know what I find out.”

I hung up before he could thank me again and went to help Tess. “Success! I’ve got a taker for as many zucchinis as we can give them.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Andy says his mom—”

“Oh, no.” Tess frowned. “I’ve already sent some to her with one of her neighbors.”

“He said she really loves them.”

“Okay,” she said doubtfully. “I guess she can give them away if she decides she doesn’t want them.”

“Exactly!”

“Oh! Is the garage raising still on? Uncle Mike wants you to call him. He’s got his tools packed up and ready to go.”

I’d given Tess a garage for Christmas. Actually, I gave her the plans for a garage, so she could approve them before we built it. She’d asked for some minor changes, and we’d planned tonight for the garage raising party.

The building would be bigger than I’d originally envisioned. Two full bays for cars, a smaller one for my motorcycle, and a medium-sized one for a workshop. Uncle Mike had taught her quite a lot about carpentry, motors, and the like when she was growing up, and she wanted a space for projects.

“Definitely still on. Everybody’s looking forward to it, and I’ve got a slew of texts to prove it. If Henrietta or Ish show up, we’ll put them to work hammering nails.”

She laughed and hugged me, and then she handed me the larger pair of garden shears and put *me* to work. We spent a good twenty minutes on zucchini duty, and then some customers came in that she needed to help. I took Andy’s mom’s zucchinis and headed for the door.

“Call me if you find out anything,” Tess called out from behind the counter, where she was ringing up a sale and pushing zucchini on the bewildered tourists.

Mutant zucchini plants, escaped bank robbers, and murder: typical life in a small town. It was good to be home.

T*ess* Other than the zucchini problem, it was a perfectly ordinary day at Dead End Pawn.

Thank goodness.

Sometimes, a woman just wanted a peaceful day.

I got a lot of texts, though.

Susan: no sign of either Ish or Henrietta.

Me: darn.

Lizzie: thanks for keeping the story of her werewolf attack to myself.

Me: of course.

Jack: he ordered and paid for thirty pizzas. Could I pick them up?

Me: sure.

Andy: he'd be at the garage party, but he'd bring pizzas since he couldn't do much in the way of building.

Me: we had the food covered but would appreciate if he'd pick up the thirty pizzas Jack had already ordered and paid for.

Aunt Ruby: try not to let Shelley get out of control "helping" the construction with her magic, since there had been a few ISSUES

Me: understood.

Uncle Mike: the freezer I'd ordered for Jack's Christmas present would be delivered tonight, as scheduled.

Me: awesome

Jack: neither he nor any of the guys had any idea where Henrietta had gone. Maybe she wasn't in town anymore? No luck finding Ish, either.

Me: that's too bad.

Jack: Ish is a stupid name.

(I didn't answer that one.)

Shelley: could she bring Pickles?

Me: only if she kept the puppy on her leash so she didn't get hurt in the general construction chaos.

In between what felt like thousands of texts, I ran my business. Bought, sold, and took items in pawn; cleaned and polished shelves and counters; and even got started on the taxes. When I looked at the clock after ringing up a large sale, it was already almost four o'clock. I'd had a note on the door for a couple of weeks that we'd be closing early today, so I had no guilt about closing the shop and going home. Especially after the productive day I'd had.

Just as I was about to walk out the door, I remembered I'd wanted to ask Jack to help me drag the now significantly smaller plant out the door. It was still too heavy for me to lift or drag by myself, even after we'd pruned it and harvested all those zucchinis, though.

I pointed at it. "You behave! If you take over my shop, I'll fire up one of the chainsaws in the lawn equipment section, and you'll be sorry."

Fancifully, I half expected the leaves to tremble, but nothing happened. It was just a plant. A ridiculously fast-growing plant, but still a plant. That reminded me that Ollie had never called me back. I'd try him again on my way home.

After all, it was just a plant.



The garage-raising party was a tremendous success. Twenty-four of our friends and family members showed up to build a garage for me. I felt like crying more than once from pure gratitude. And, for a delightful change, nothing went horribly wrong.

The electrician knew what she was doing. The concrete guys had shown up at three, Jack said, but it was fine. Concrete usually took at least twenty-four and up to forty-eight hours to dry properly, but the concrete guys had an earth witch in the family. The witch put a special spell on the concrete—patent pending, they'd told Jack more than once—so the stuff was fully dry and set within sixty minutes. When I got home at four-thirty, Jack was already hauling construction materials onto the concrete slab, which was fully hardened.

The freezer arrived on time, and Jack loved it. He was already making a list of all the meat he wanted to buy to fill it up. We tipped the delivery guys and invited them to stay for pizza, which they did.

I thanked everybody about a million times and sent each helper home with a jar of homemade strawberry jam and a half-dozen zucchinis.

“When did you start making homemade jam?” Uncle Mike asked. He stuck a finger in the jar and tasted it. “This is delicious.”

“Oh, I'm glad you like it. Frazzle. Remember the pixie from the Great Thanksgiving Disaster? She was disappointed when I didn't have homemade jam for her, so I learned how to make it. It's easy.”

“Well, it's great. Don't tell your aunt, but I'm taking two jars. She has me on a new low-sugar, low-carb diet, and I thought I'd faint from hunger before the pizza arrived. A man can only survive for so long on grilled chicken and broccoli. I only get real food when company comes over.” He gave me a desperate look. “You need to come over a *lot*.”

He'd eaten half an extra-large pizza all by himself, so I wasn't too worried about him fainting from hunger. Maybe from indigestion, but that was another story.

I hugged him. "Thank you, Uncle Mike. For everything. For giving me such a wonderful life."

"Now, now. Enough of that. You were a gift to us in our old age, Tess. We couldn't have loved you more if you'd been our daughter. I hope you know that."

I sniffled. "I know that. This thing with Susan's aunt just has me feeling melancholy. I don't tell you often enough how much I appreciate you. I'll be sure to take Aunt Ruby out to lunch next week and tell her, too."

"She'll be afraid you're coming down with something."

We both started laughing. That's exactly what she'd say. She hadn't come to the garage raising because she was neck-deep in the town budget, she'd said, and she'd be no help in building something, anyway. Shelley hadn't come either; she'd decided to work on her film with Zane instead. They were doing a documentary about the history of Dead End.

Fair enough. I wouldn't have wanted to go watch adults build something when I was ten years old, either.

After my beautiful new garage was finished and christened with a bottle of sparkling apple juice, everybody started packing up tools to go home. The freezer delivery guys were the last to go, because of where they'd parked, and their truck was really, really loud.

That's the only reason I can think of for why Jack, with his tiger ears, didn't hear Aloysius Phleabottom sneaking through the woods behind my house, didn't hear him walk around the new garage, and didn't hear him approach at all until Ish dashed out from the side of the garage and grabbed me.

He was careful to grab my arm, which was covered by my jacket sleeve, and not touch my bare skin, but I didn't try to pull away from him.

Because he was pointing a gun at my head.

Jack

I heard Tess gasp and spun around just in time to see a wild-eyed, ragged, blond man point a gun at her head.

It had to be Susan's cousin Ish.

"Don't come any closer! I have a gun!" he shouted.

Tess's face drained of color, but she stood very still.

Ish bared his very white teeth and screamed at me when I took an involuntary step toward them.

"I said stay back! Unless you want me to kill her."

I snapped my calm, in-control, rebel-leader expression on my face and held up my hands. "Hey. I hear you. I'm staying back. I'm guessing you want something, and I want to give you whatever that is. Let's handle this peacefully. Am I right?"

"Only if somebody *listens* to me!"

I held a hand up to my ear like I was having trouble hearing him. I was clear across the yard, since I'd been picking up tools, and he almost certainly didn't know about tiger hearing.

"Is it okay if I walk over to that picnic table so I can hear you better? It's still fifteen or more feet from you."

The man wavered, but then nodded. "Okay. But slowly."

When I started walking toward them, he tightened his grip on Tess's arm and shook her. "Slower!"

I slowed and then stopped just in front of the table. I could make a standing leap of fifteen feet easily, and I was fast. I could shift instantaneously into my tiger form. But I wasn't faster than he would be with his finger already on the trigger. I tried hostage negotiator tactics and used my calmest voice.

"Aloysius," Tess said, her voice warm and quiet. "I know you're distraught over your mother's death. I'm so sorry that happened to you. Can we just talk? Maybe you could tell me how I can help?"

He sneered at her. "Oh, Saint Tess. Everybody told us all about you and what a busybody you are. Can't stay out of anybody's business. All we wanted was the treasure. That's all. Now mom is dead, the murderer is running around loose, and I still don't have my hands on the treasure!"

His voice had gotten steadily louder as he spoke until he was screaming in her face by the end.

Tess flinched and shot me a desperate look. I knew that expression. It meant she was probably planning something way, way out of the box. This crazy man with a gun scared me, but Tess planning to do something out of the box while he held a gun on her scared me more.

"Stop," I called out. He thought I was talking to him, but Tess knew better. She nodded slightly, so I knew she'd hold on while I figured this out. Since I wasn't the one with the gun pointed at my head, it was a good call.

"Okay, Mr. Phleabottom, you want the treasure? I know Susan does *not* want it, so I'm sure we can work something out. Do you have a truck or van to transport it?"

He blinked. "I—what?"

Old negotiator tactic: get the bad guy to focus on the answers to a series of practical, nuts-and-bolts questions. When they're focused on the mundane, it's harder for them to think about whatever horrible thing they were planning to do.

"A van or truck? We can go over to Susan's right now and load up that stuff. You can take it with you and leave town tonight. All we need is your transport."

“Ah ...” His gun hand wavered while he thought about it, and I deliberately did not look at either his hand or the weapon. I just kept an expression of calm interest on my face.

“No,” he finally said. “No. I just have the sedan. If I can get a truck—”

I held my hands out to my sides, slowly. No big movements. “I have a truck. It’s not new, but it runs perfectly. I’d be happy to lend it to you or even give it to you, if it helps you get what you want and me to get what I want.”

He looked at me with interest. “What do you want?”

I nodded at Tess. “I want her. Unharmed. I’m more than happy to give you my truck to get her.”

I saw the faintest hint of humor in Tess’s eyes, and I knew I’d hear later about how she was worth at least an old truck to me.

Please, let there be a later.

His eyes widened suddenly, and then he shook Tess again. “You’re Jack Shepherd! The fighter. The tiger guy. Argh! I heard you were out of town. *Great, Ish.* Just great. You’ve messed this up royally.”

He muttered to himself for a minute. He was clearly having a complete mental or emotional breakdown. Maybe from the stress of losing his mom; maybe from the scheme about magical objects. I didn’t know and didn’t care. I just wanted him to snap back into rationality.

Irrational people were the most dangerous opponents because there was no way to predict what they’d do next.

When he finally wound his rant down, he stared at me. His gun hand still didn’t waver, though, so I stayed where I was, silent, until he spoke to me again.

“You’re not going to give me your truck. You’re going to kill me and eat me or something horrible.”

I shook my head, still projecting calm. “I’m not much for cannibalism. I prefer a good beefsteak. And I don’t have a horse in this race. You can have every magical object in Dead

End, for all I care. I just want to facilitate that, so you give me Tess unharmed.”

He considered it, but I saw in his eyes the exact moment he rejected the idea.

“No. I don’t trust you. I’m taking your truck, and I’m taking Tess with me. I’ll set her free after I load the treasure into the truck and leave Dead End. I can drop her at the beach or something.”

Tess’s shoulders slumped a fraction of an inch. I knew she’d been hoping against hope that he’d be reasonable. When she looked up at me, I saw we were back at *out of the box*, and I braced myself to lunge.

“Aloysius, I have a question,” she said calmly.

“Who doesn’t?” he sneered. “Whatever. What’s your question?”

She turned her head to look him fully in the face, ignoring the gun. “Why did you kill your mother?”

Shock shone in his eyes. “What? What? I DIDN’T KILL MY MOTHER!”

She jerked away from the gun he was waving in her face, pulling her arm out of his grasp. He lunged at her and grabbed her by the neck, still screaming about how he didn’t kill his mother.

But the instant he touched the skin of her neck, Tess *shrieked*. Nobody who heard her would have ever doubted her banshee heritage. She threw her head back and shrieked, long and loud, and then she snapped her head down to stare at Ish.

“I see your death, Aloysius Phleabottom,” she snarled, her face twisted in a hideous grimace.

He flinched and let her go, then scrambled back and away from her, the gun forgotten in his hand when she shrieked again.

“What? No! No, I don’t want to know! Please don’t tell me. Please, please,” he sniveled, huddling in on himself.

I didn't wait for him to come back to his senses. The second he let his gun hand fall, I shifted and leaped. He'd barely gotten his last "please" out when I landed in front of him and slapped the gun out of his hand with one giant paw.

Then I knocked him down and sat on him.

When a five-hundred-pound tiger sits on you, you're not moving until he says so.

Tess quit shrieking mid-yell and pointed at me, her voice as calm as if she was talking about the weather. "Don't suffocate him, Jack. I'm calling Susan and Andy to come get him and take him to jail."

I narrowed my eyes at her and swished my tail, but I moved over slightly so I was only holding him down by the legs and wouldn't accidentally suffocate him.

She grinned and absently patted my furry head. "I know. Pretty believable, wasn't it?"

Ish started choking and coughing, completely exaggerating his need for air. Finally, when he stopped coughing, he stared up at Tess. "Are you saying that you *didn't* see my death?"

"Not even the slightest glimmer," she said cheerfully. "I've never seen Susan's death, either, and I've noticed that immunity seems to run in families. Maybe that's it. Maybe I could even touch Carlos!"

I growled at her, and she laughed.

Ish started sputtering. "You faked that? That's horrible!"

Tess rolled her eyes. "Says the man who held a *gun to my head*. I'm getting awfully tired of people pointing guns at me this week."

He started to say something else, so I opened my mouth and showed him my fangs.

He immediately shrank back and shut up.

Good call.

"Jack. Don't put his head in your mouth like you did with that other guy," Tess pretend-chided me. "It's so unhygienic."

I made a chuffing sound that only she would realize was tiger laughter. Ish must have thought it was a growl, or that I was getting ready to eat him, because he closed his eyes and moaned.

It took Susan less than ten minutes to arrive, speeding up the driveway with sirens blaring and lights blazing.

Tess sighed. “That’s a little overkill. I told her we had him contained.”

I agreed, but didn’t mind if it scared Aloysius.

I didn’t mind that at all.

When Susan put handcuffs on her cousin, yelling at him the entire time, I prowled off a few steps and shifted back to human. Since the magic of my shift allows me to bring clothes into the change of form, I don’t ever have to worry about being embarrassed by showing up buck naked to any situation. (Tess had asked me where all the jeans and T-shirts came from, but I honestly had no idea.)

The sheriff secured Ish in the back seat of the patrol car, and then walked back over to us. “Tess, I can’t tell you how sorry I am about this. But, hey. Great garage.”

Tess waved a hand. “Thanks. But nothing about this is your fault.”

We told Susan everything that had happened, and what Ish had said and done.

“I really don’t think he killed his mother, at least,” Tess said.

Susan shrugged. “I never thought he did, after Sadie told us he’d been there with her and Granny all afternoon. We’re still looking for Henrietta, but I’m starting to believe she came to her senses and got out of town. Maybe moved to a nice, warm, nonextradition country and is drinking margaritas on the beach.”

Tess shook her head. “You didn’t talk to her, Susan. She’s not going anywhere until she gets what she thinks she’s owed. You need to be careful. And please get that trove out of your

house as soon as possible. You're in danger as long as you have it."

"I know." Susan tightened her lips. "Lizzie is working the overnight shift, so she and I will get Ish in a cell, and we'll keep him there until I figure out what to do about him. I'm assuming you want to press charges."

"Yes," I said.

"No," Tess said.

"We can talk about it tomorrow," Susan said hastily. "I'll call you. Good night, Tess. Jack."

I asked Tess to go inside and make us some tea while I took care of anything that absolutely needed to be put away. I figured we could argue about pressing charges after a good night's sleep. After that, we sat on the couch with Lou and watched a mindless TV show for a while until Tess, curled up in my arms, finally relaxed and dozed off.

I must have fallen asleep, too. Because we were still on the couch at two in the morning when the phone rang and woke us up. It was Andy, calling to warn us.

Ish had knocked Lizzie out and escaped.

T*ess*

Jack went out patrolling the grounds around my house after the phone call, and then we locked the doors and tried to get some rest for what little remained of the night. I kept jerking awake, shaking, when the memory of Ish holding that gun to my head kept flashing back into my mind. I was proud of how calm I'd been while everything was happening, but I'd fallen apart pretty hard after it was all over.

Jack, familiar with deadly situations, said it was a reaction to the adrenaline that had flooded my body. I didn't doubt it, because it took me almost an hour and a huge glass of wine before I stopped shaking. We watched TV, but I had no idea what show. My brain hadn't been working on a normal basis.

Now, it was morning, and we were having an argument disguised as a calm discussion about what to do next.

"I don't have to press charges," I said for about the third time. "He didn't hurt me, but he knocked Lizzie out. They have plenty to go on to arrest him now. He's an escaped fugitive, for Pete's sake."

Jack had his stubborn face on, though. I'd seen that expression more than once, and it was almost always when someone or something put me in danger.

He handed me a cup of coffee and sighed. "Fine. It's your choice, of course. I'm going to stay close to you until Susan and Andy capture all the dangerous criminals in town, though."

I kissed his cheek. “Thanks for the coffee, and thanks for always wanting to protect me. I think I did a pretty good job of protecting myself last night, though.”

“You certainly did. I’m not sure if I’m more impressed at how calm you were in a terrifying situation or sorry that you’ve had to learn how to deal with stuff like this during all the crises over the past year.”

His face clouded. “I still wonder if me coming home to Dead End somehow precipitated some of this violence.”

“Jack. This has nothing to do with you. Quit trying to take on all the burdens of the world. Susan’s awful old power-mad grandfather would have died whether or not you were here, and that’s what unleashed all this chaos. That, and that Cordelia allegedly robbed banks with an unstable woman, left Henrietta holding the bag, and then stole her share of the loot.”

“We really, *really* need to find that woman,” Jack said, pouring coffee into the travel cup I’d gotten him.

I narrowed my eyes. “I see that you have your travel mug, but you’ve poured my coffee in a regular cup. Was that on purpose?”

He avoided my gaze. “I thought you might want to rest this morning after the scare we got last night. Maybe stay home for the day?”

I sighed and transferred my coffee into my own travel mug. “I have a business to run. And even if I didn’t, I’m not the type to hide out at home. You knew that when you met me, and I’m not going to change now.”

“Hiding out is a perfectly rational way to react to somebody pointing a gun at your head,” he muttered, but then he put an arm around my shoulders and hugged me. “If I didn’t already love you, seeing how brave you are would do the trick.”

“Do the trick?” I grinned. “Ah, the romance in your soul.”

“Hey! I made the coffee and fed your cat.” He pretended to look offended, but I saw the grin he was trying to hide.

“And my cat and I love you for it. Now let’s get dressed and head to work.”

The weather said it would be a clear, cold day, back down to the fifties, so I wore a thick, cream-colored cotton sweater with jeans to work. Jack, whose tiger side meant he almost never felt the cold, wore a blue flannel shirt over a T-shirt and jeans. We both pulled on boots. I kissed my cat and Jack scratched her ears, and then we headed to the shop in Jack’s truck.

“Can we at least pick up donuts on the way?”

I patted his leg. “I never turn down donuts.”

But when we were only a mile down the road, I jerked to attention and stared at the occupants of the truck coming toward us. “Jack! Quick! Stop that truck!”

“What?” Like any normal person, he wanted to know what was going on before he tried to block an oncoming vehicle, but I had no time for that. They sped past; the two of them chatting and paying no attention to us.

“That was Henrietta Quirksley! And she was in a car with Duck Grimes! Quick! Do a U-turn and go after them before they get away!”

He didn’t waste time asking any more questions. He slammed on the brakes and yanked the steering wheel to the left, making a sharp U-turn in the middle of the road, and then sped after the new-looking red truck hurtling down the road on its way out of town.

I called Susan, but the call went to voicemail. Poor woman was probably trying to get a few hours of sleep. It had been a horribly stressful week for her. I quickly sent a text to both her and Andy, letting them know we were trying to apprehend the major suspect in Cordelia’s murder.

When I looked up from my phone, we were right up on the truck’s rear bumper. Ahead of us, Duck put an arm out the window and waved us on, like he thought we were randomly impatient people who wanted to pass him on the narrow road.

Jack pulled out into the other lane, passed Duck, and then immediately slowed to a stop, so Duck was forced to slam on his brakes behind us. As soon as the other truck squealed to a stop, Jack snapped on his flashers and jumped out. I followed right behind him.

“Stay back. We know she has a gun,” I said, but Jack was running so fast he was a bronze-haired blur. Almost before I could blink, he was at Henrietta’s side of the truck, yanking the door open and pulling her out of the vehicle.

“What? Who are you? Why are you ...” She caught sight of me then. “Tess! What is happening?”

“Stop talking,” Jack growled. “The sheriff is on the way.”

Duck, the manager of the Dead End motel, was in his fifties and had always been slow to act. But he climbed out of the truck and came around to where we stood on the side of the road.

“Hey, Tess.” He started to put his hands in his pockets, but Jack snarled at him.

“Show me what’s in your pockets. Slowly and carefully,” Jack demanded.

Duck looked baffled, but obediently pulled the linings out of his jacket pockets, showing us they were empty. “What’s going on? Who are you? Wait! You’re Jack Shepherd! Tess, what in the world is happening?”

I could tell from his confused expression that he had no idea what he’d somehow stepped into the middle of. Henrietta had gathered her composure and put her hands on her hips.

“Tess Callahan. This is no way to treat a visitor to your fair city. Why, I—”

Jack threw back his head and roared.

If you’ve ever heard a tiger roar, you’re familiar with the immediate, visceral reaction it causes. Animals and humans alike recognized, somewhere deep in our ancestral memory, that we were in the presence of an apex predator.

Jack's roar, even when it came out of his human throat, always had that effect.

Henrietta, her criminal past, present, and possibly future aside, was no match for the sound. She cringed away from Jack, and Duck stumbled back against the hood of his truck.

"Shut up. You threatened Tess with a gun," Jack growled. "You'll be lucky if you survive long enough to be arrested."

Cowed but in no way defeated, Henrietta's head shot up at the word "arrested." "What do you mean? Arrested for what? Tess, I thought we were all good on that little misunderstanding with the gun."

"What?" Poor Duck's face was a study in shock. "What gun? Henny, what are they talking about?"

Henny? Oh, no.

I took a closer look at his expression. That wasn't entirely shock on his face. Duck was in love. With Henrietta Quirksley, a self-professed bank robber and stalker.

I closed my eyes and counted to three. Not that it ever helped. Maybe I'd start counting to three thousand when I had time to spare.

"Duck," I said. "I don't know if *Henny* told you, but she's a bank robber. And she's violating her parole, just by being in Florida, for one thing, and for having a gun, for another."

He nodded, beginning to smile. "Oh, that. That was just a misunderstanding. She didn't really rob no banks."

Henrietta sighed. "Well, sweetheart, I may have slightly exaggerated my innocence. But all my crimes were long ago ___"

"Monday," I interjected grimly. "When you threatened me with your gun in my shop."

"They were all long ago, except for that one little slip," she blithely continued.

"And when you showed up at my house and warned me to stay away while you stole Susan's property," I pointed out.

“Well, that was just ...” she trailed off, at a loss.

Duck hurried to chime in, though. “That’s not her fault! She was under the influence of those dangerous magical things!”

Henrietta beamed. “Right! That!”

Jack narrowed his eyes, and she backed away from him. “Um, I mean ...”

“We just want to know why you killed Cordelia,” I said, watching intently for her reaction.

The fake sincerity she’d shown just minutes before disappeared, replaced by what looked like sincere indignation. “I told you I did not kill Cordelia! I wanted to take back the money she stole from me, and I was willing to steal those artifacts if there was no other way to get it, but I’m no killer!”

“You just wave guns around for fun?” Jack’s voice was pure ice.

“I ... That was wrong of me. I admit it. But I didn’t kill anybody! I wasn’t even in town Tuesday!”

“She’s telling the truth,” Duck shouted. “She was with me in Orlando. We went to Disney all day and stayed in town that night at the Wee Duck Inn, just west of there. We have photos and receipts and everything from the trip! And I bet the motel people can tell you they saw us, too.” He started to turn around, but then shot Jack an anxious look. “Is it okay if I open the truck door to get something to show you?”

“Tess, please watch him. If he looks like he’s going for a weapon, Henrietta will be very sorry.”

“No weapon, I promise.” As I watched him carefully, Duck opened the truck door and reached for an envelope lying in the middle of the bench seat. He turned and handed it to me. “See? We have proof.”

I pulled out the large, glossy photo inside the envelope. It showed Duck and Henrietta, arms in the air and mouths open in screams, on one of the park’s many roller coasters. The photo was date- and time-stamped Tuesday at three p.m. There

was no way that Henrietta could have been in town to kill Cordelia unless the picture was fake.

I showed it to Jack. “It’s probably true. They were at the park.”

“See? I told you,” Henrietta began, equal parts relief and indignation in her voice. “I can send all the receipts and the photos and everything to the sheriff for proof, too.”

“Send it to her? Why not just give it to her?”

Her eyes shifted away. “Well. There is that technical parole violation ...”

Just then, the sound of sirens reached us.

“You called the cops on us?” Henrietta was outraged. “But I just told you—”

“Yeah. You told us now. But when you came to my house, you wouldn’t give me any evidence that you’d been out of town,” I pointed out. “Also, as you say, there’s that minor matter of the parole violation.”

She suddenly looked scared, for the first time since I’d met her. “Are you going to press charges? About the gun and all.”

“Yes,” Jack said.

“No,” I said. I looked at him and shook my head. “She’s in enough trouble. I don’t need to add to it. Besides, I made the woman an omelet.”

Jack closed his eyes, probably praying for patience. I admit the omelet thing made no sense, but I was tired and ready to be done with Henrietta, Ish, Cordelia, dangerous artifacts, and everything else. Pressing charges would just drag me into it further.

“Henrietta and I fell in love,” Duck said with dignity, braving Jack’s glare to go stand next to her and put his arm around her waist. “We’re going to go on a trip around America and visit all the best roller coasters.”

“But what about the motel?”

He grinned. “I sold that to some out-of-town guy just last week. Signed all the papers yesterday and already have the money in my bank account. I’m rich, Tess!”

I had to smile at his enthusiasm. I’d always liked Duck. He stopped by the shop a few times a year to look for decorative items for the motel, and he always asked after Uncle Mike and Aunt Ruby.

“I hope you know what you’re getting into with her, Duck,” I said, shaking my head. “Are you sure you want to be involved with someone with this kind of past?”

He thought about that for a moment and then nodded. “Well, Tess, the thing is, people have a right to second chances. Your young fella had a violent past, too. And you love him anyway, right?”

I nodded. It wasn’t the same at all—Jack hadn’t been a criminal, but a soldier—but I saw what he was getting at.

“Well, there you go,” he said.

Henrietta leaned her head on his shoulder and said something, but I didn’t hear it, because that’s when Andy drove up.

After that, matters were out of our hands, and I was happy about that. Andy drove off with Henrietta in cuffs in the back seat, Duck followed them in his truck, and Jack and I turned around and headed for the bakery.

“We don’t really have time for donuts now,” I protested.

“Tess. There is always time for donuts.”

And it’s a good thing Jack was always hungry, because within the next thirty minutes we busted a murder suspect’s alibi wide open right there in the donut shop.

T*ess*

Two of the McKee kids were in the donut shop, and this surprised me for a couple of reasons: first, they should have been in school, and second, they ran straight to Jack and pulled on his sleeves, excited chatter spilling out as they told him an incomprehensible story about a lizard. Or maybe about a frog? I was too distracted to pay much attention at first.

“Shouldn’t you be in school?” Jack asked sternly as we got in line for donuts. Behind the counter, Mellie looked up and smiled at me, and I waved.

The kids grinned at Jack. It was Lily and ... the one with the unusual name. Everybody called him Bug.

“Nope. We got the morning off because of the disaster,” Lily said. “We’re using our allowance to buy donuts.”

“What disaster?” I couldn’t handle any more disasters. I was full up on disaster for the week.

“The new chemistry teacher,” Bug chimed in.

“*Another* one?”

Lily gave me a serious look. “Yes, Miss Tess. The last one left after she caused the gargoyle disaster.”

I’d meant another disaster caused by chemistry teachers, but I let it go. The high school chemistry teacher shuffle was starting to feel like Harry Potter’s problem with the Defense Against the Dark Arts professors.

“What happened?”

We reached the counter, and Mellie grinned at us, eyes sparkling. “It was great. Turns out the new guy was losing his hair, and since he was in Dead End, he decided he’d add a little magic to his chemistry.”

“Oh, no,” I said.

“Oh, yes,” Lily piped up. “He assigned the class to make a potion to grow hair.”

Jack was already laughing. “This can’t be good.”

“It kinda backfired,” Bug said gleefully. “When we went to recess yesterday, a bunch of big kids were running out of the school, but we didn’t recognize them!”

“Because they looked like baby Sasquatches!” Lily said.

“Oh, *no*,” I repeated, but everybody else in the bakery was laughing.

“Took almost three hours for the potion to wear off,” the guy behind us in line confided. “The teacher was last seen fleeing the scene.”

“I heard he quit over voicemail,” Mellie said. “I can’t believe you didn’t hear about it!”

I sighed. “We were a little busy. Garage raising and stuff.”

We bought our donuts and some for Lily and Bug, too, and headed back out to the truck. When we reached the sidewalk, Bug looked at a car pulling up and made fake barfing noises.

Lily looked at where he was pointing and groaned. “Not her again.”

It was Sadie Gonzalez, parking her car a few spaces down.

Bug started making loud, obnoxious kissing noises. “*Ooh, Sadie, kiss me some more.*”

I shushed them. “Hush. You’ll embarrass her.”

“Embarrass *her*? We like to died of mortification! She was over at our house all afternoon Tuesday, kissing Frog like there was no tomorrow,” Bug said indignantly.

“You’ll be singing a different tune about kissing in a few years, my friend,” Jack said, ruffling Bug’s hair.

Bug started up with the fake barfing noises again.

“I’m sorry you were embarrassed, but it wasn’t Tuesday afternoon,” I said absently.

“Yes, it was,” Lily insisted. “I remember, because she was there when we got home from school, and then I had tap dance class, and when I got home from that, she was still there!”

“It was disgusting,” Bug put in, clutching his stomach.

Horrified realization flooded me, and I walked down the sidewalk to intercept Sadie before she could go into the bakery.

“Hey, Tess,” she said cheerfully. “How’s it going?”

“It’s going fine, Sadie. I hear you were at Frog McKee’s house on Tuesday afternoon.”

She looked at me blankly.

“*All* afternoon. So, you really couldn’t have been at home with your granny and Ish Phleabottom at the same time you were at Frog’s, could you?”

Fear widened her eyes. “Oh, Tess, please don’t tell Susan. She gets so cranky! Granny was safe with Ish. He comes down to visit her several times a year. She loves him!”

She clapped a hand over her mouth.

“Oh, no. I wasn’t supposed to tell anybody about his visits. He doesn’t want anybody to get upset. He doesn’t stay long, just pops in to see Granny and me, you know,” she said, blushing.

I knew all right. The movie-star-handsome Ish would have found easy prey in gullible Sadie.

“There’s not a problem, though, right? You don’t have to tell Susan?”

“I’m sorry, but I have to tell Susan. Because there’s a *big* problem. You gave Ish an alibi for the exact time of his

mother's murder.”

Sadie burst into tears, but I called Susan, who sounded completely exhausted and extremely angry at her cousin. Andy had already told her about Henrietta. She promised to let me know if they found Ish, and we hung up.

After all that—catching Henrietta fleeing town and busting Ish's alibi—I was sure the rest of the day would be peaceful and calm.

But then we got to my shop and discovered that the zucchini plant had eaten the building.

Jack

We sat in the truck and stared at the front window of the pawnshop. Yesterday, anybody who looked in the window would have seen a tasteful display of objects for sale.

Today, all we could see was green.

Green leaves. Green zucchinis. Green vines.

So. Much. Green.

“Oh, no, she didn’t,” Tess snapped.

“She?”

“Audrey III.”

“I don’t understand—”

But she was already jumping out of the truck and storming up to the front door.

“Tess!”

“I am not having it! Do you hear me? I am not having it. Murderers and bank robbers and evil magic stuff and now, this ... this ... *plant* thinks it can take over my shop.”

She shoved her key in the lock and pushed open the door. It took some work, and I had to help push, because thick vines lay on the floor, blocking entry. I had doubts about the wisdom of facing down the jungle without backup—preferably armed with blowtorches—but Tess slipped past me and climbed over an enormous bunch of zucchinis, shouting.

“I warned you! This is *my* shop, you overgrown pile of weeds! You’re in trouble now!” She made her way straight to the lawn section. I realized she was heading for the chainsaws just before one of the thick, serpent-like tendrils raised up off the floor, grabbed Tess around the waist, and starting whipping her back and forth through the air over the top of the shelving units.

“Jack! Help!”

It took only a split-second to realize that I had to run out to the truck. Even if I reached the chainsaws before the plant got to me, too, there’d be no point. In the heat of the moment, Tess may have forgotten that she always made sure all the gas-powered equipment was completely drained of gas and oil before she put it out on display.

All it would take was one careless customer and a functioning chainsaw, and she’d have a Halloween movie come to life right there in the shop.

By the time I got what I needed out of the truck and raced back into the store, Tess was tearing into the vine holding her with her fingernails.

“I will turn you into *salad*,” she shouted. “Let. Me. Go! Jack!”

“I’m back,” I called out, and then I held up my axe. “Hey, plant. Meet Mr. Salad Maker.”

With that, the battle was on. I hacked and slashed my way through the room to Tess, who was tearing at the vine, ripping leaves and fruit off and throwing them at the main body of the plant where it hulked against the far wall like a green and leafy Grim Reaper.

Zucchini flew like missiles, and merchandise smashed down off shelves all around me. Tess was still being shaken back and forth up near the ceiling, and I was wielding the axe and yelling some weird battle cry I’d probably heard on a Vikings TV show.

And the plant was fighting back.

It kept smacking me in the face with thick vines and zucchini-laden tendrils, hard enough to knock me off my feet again and again.

Finally, a good three minutes later, I'd done enough damage that the vines flinched back and away from me and my trusty axe. With a final lunge, I reached the thick vine wrapped around Tess's waist, and I chopped it in half in one tiger-strength-powered stroke.

Tess plummeted down, about to crash into a shelf of books and toys, and I dropped the axe, leaped into the air, and caught her, avoiding the books, the toys, and the shelving unit when I landed.

The killer bush effectively waved the white flag at that point. Still holding Tess, whose face was bleeding from a bunch of scrapes and scratches, I turned to look at the plant that had tried its best to eat Dead End Pawn.

"You are so dead," I told it. And then I carried Tess to the back room, so she could wash and treat her cuts, punched a number on my phone, and marched back out to the shop to begin systematically taking apart the killer zucchini plant.

Two hours later, Lucky, the Fox twins, and I looked around in satisfaction. The plant was no more. We'd chopped it up and bagged the pieces and then stashed the bags in the back of Lucky's truck. He'd promised to take the whole mess to the dump and burn it. Tess and the guys and I had made a good start on cleaning up the damage to the shop, too.

Tess had gone outside to talk to the editor of the *Dead End Gazette*, who'd heard about Cordelia, Ish, and Henrietta, and only accidentally was on the scene to take pictures and video of the mutant plant.

Me? I called Lauren's Deli and put in an order for lunch for all of us. Lots and lots of lunch.

Battling killer zucchinis was hungry work.

T^{ess}

After Lucky, Dallas, Austin, and the *Gazette* guy left, I sat on the front porch steps, exhausted. My cuts and scrapes stung, too, but I would have felt like a wimp complaining about that to Jack and the ex-special forces guys who'd been helping me clean out my shop.

"They didn't want to wait for lunch?" I called out.

"No, they needed to get back to work. A busload of tourists is on the way to the swamp to ride the airboats. I told them I'd catch them another time. I owe them at *least* a lunch for all this hard work."

My phone rang, and I pulled it out of my pocket, glanced down at it, and scowled.

Ollie.

"*Now* you call? Now, after your zucchinis attacked me and practically destroyed my shop?" I was shouting, but I didn't care.

"Tess, I'm so sorry. I only learned about the bizarre properties of that plant when a friend from Arkansas called me last night. He's the one who gave me the cuttings. He didn't know, either, until his plant tried to eat his dog."

I instantly forgot my anger. "Oh, no! Is the dog okay?"

"Yes, thankfully. He's a goofy Labrador retriever who thought it was a game. By the time my friend realized what

was going on, the dog was standing happily over a pile of shredded zucchini.”

It was hard to blame Ollie for something he hadn’t known about. “Well ...”

“All I knew was that it was a good producer. And Prism was so upset, and I know your aunt and uncle have a big garden ... I wasn’t really thinking when I left it there.”

“Fine. But why did you bring it into the shop in the first place?”

“Oh! I was planning to look for a new pot for it in your garden stuff, since it was outgrowing the one it was in.”

The utter ridiculousness of the entire situation suddenly struck me, and I started laughing.

“Listen, I’ll pay for any damage. I’m so sorry. I was out of town helping a different friend who works at a museum. He needed to neutralize some dark magic objects, and I—”

I stood up and yelled for Jack.

“Ollie, hold on. Jack is coming to hear this. I’m putting you on speaker.”

When Jack stepped out onto the porch, scanning the area for more danger, I beckoned him over. “It’s Ollie. He’s sorry about the plant—”

“He’d better be,” Jack growled.

“But here’s the important part,” I said, over Ollie’s renewed apologies. “He knows how to neutralize magical objects.”

“What?”

We quickly filled Ollie in on Susan’s trove, and he promised to come look at it first thing when he got back into town the next day, Saturday. After we hung up, I hugged Jack.

“Wow. Maybe a great thing will come out of an awful thing.”

“You should make him pay for the damages,” Jack grumbled.

“Hey. If he can make all that stuff in Susan’s house safe, that will be payment enough. And, speaking of Susan ...” I pointed at the van turning into the parking lot. “That’s her godfather’s van. I wonder what he’s doing here.”

Mr. Butler parked and carried several bags from Lauren’s Deli over to us. “Good morning. I was picking up some lunch, and Lauren said she was packing up an order for you. I offered to bring it out here, so I could see the famous pawnshop.”

“Thank you so much! Let me get you some cash.”

“No need. Lauren said she put it on your tab.”

I introduced Jack and Susan’s godfather to each other, and we took the sandwiches inside to eat. Then, of course, I had to explain about the plant monster.

“Oh, no.” He looked around, shaking his head. “If you need more trash bags, I have a roll of mover-strength bags in the van.”

“Thank you so much. That would help. I can go grab them while you finish your sandwich. I need to call my Aunt Ruby, anyway, before she reads about this in the online edition of the paper.”

“They’re in the front, tucked under the passenger seat,” he said.

“Thanks again!”

I wandered out to the parking lot, leaving a message on Aunt Ruby’s voicemail, and then opened the passenger door of the van. Glancing at the back, I saw it was filled with empty boxes, probably ones that Susan had already unpacked.

Then I bent down to reach for the trash bags. I didn’t feel them right away, and my shoulder hit the dash when I leaned in further. Then the glove box door fell open and hit my already-aching head.

I may have growled. It had been quite a day.

When I stood to close the glove box, some stuff inside it fell out, so I had to grab those and shove them back in. It was a bunch of the usual detritus: insurance folder, tissues, window scraper, vehicle registration ...

Vehicle registration?

I glanced out the window guiltily to see if Mr. Butler was coming and then looked back down at the piece of paper.

It *was* a vehicle registration. And it was in the name of *Greg Butler, owner*. Not U-MOVE-IT.

Not a leasing agreement at all.

Why did Susan's godfather own a U-MOVE-IT van? Or, probably more accurately, why was he pretending that his personal van was a commercial vehicle? Did that even make sense?

Every minute of this week had brought more questions than answers, and I was so sick of it I almost went marching into the shop to confront him with the registration form.

But then I thought ... why?

What really was the crime here? He was an odd old guy who liked to pretend he drove U-MOVE-IT vans. So what? Or maybe he'd bought a used one from the company and hadn't had time to paint over the logo yet.

I sighed. The events of the day had left me on edge, as anybody would be who'd battled a killer zucchini plant. I shoved the papers, including the registration, back in the glove box, retrieved the roll of trash bags, and headed into the shop.

Just as I rounded the front of the van, though, I had a thought. About moving vans and missing murder weapons. There were lots of nooks and crannies in the back of a box-filled, moving van. And I doubted Susan would have searched her own godfather's vehicle. She'd verified his alibi that he'd been at the Orlando hospital, although they'd never figured out the origin of the fake phone call that had sent him racing over there. So, his van hadn't even been at her house at the time of the murder.

But if Ish held on to the gun and then just happened to hide it in the van when Butler got back...

I didn't want to ask about it, though, and open up a whole can of worms. I wasn't a detective. Susan had probably thought about all of this.

Maybe I could ask Jack to sniff the van? A recently fired gun might have a strong enough scent that he could pick it up. But no. As Jack always said, he didn't have any special sense of smell. He was a tiger, not a wolf.

I stopped walking. But maybe I knew somebody who was *almost* a wolf ...

I texted Lizzie.

I know this is going to sound very odd, and please keep it between us, but would you be willing to go with me to Susan's this afternoon and smell the woods around her house? And, maybe, a van, too?

She texted back almost immediately.

This town is so weird. I love it. Let's do it.

T*ess*

I closed the shop for the rest of the day and put a CLOSED FOR REPAIRS sign on the door. On the way home to shower off plant detritus, I explained my missing-murder-weapon theory to Jack and filled him in about Lizzie and her almost-werewolf powers (she'd given me permission to tell him).

He gave me a thoughtful look and said, "Hmm."

"Hmm?"

"I almost hate to admit it, but it makes sense to me."

"Then why do you hate to admit it?"

He sighed and turned into my lane. "Because it means we have to spend part of our afternoon prowling around Susan's woods and snooping in her godfather's van, instead of hanging out at home, cooking an excellent dinner, and leaving our phones out in the truck, so nobody can reach us."

But when we met Lizzie two hours later when Susan was tied up at work dealing with Henrietta, we wound up spending an hour accomplishing nothing at all.

First off, Mr. Butler was out, so we couldn't snoop in or around his van. Second, we walked all over the woods, but Lizzie didn't smell anything that gave off the aroma of "fired gun."

We spent almost an hour searching (with our eyes, for me and Jack) and scenting (Lizzie) but came up with nothing.

“I’m sorry, Lizzie,” I said, dejected. “It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

She shrugged. “It’s still a good idea. I’ll try to find a way to get near his van. I’m not sure I could smell the gun, anyway, after three days, but these wolf senses are pretty keen. I can’t imagine how intense it must be for a werewolf who can actually shift into a wolf.”

“You can’t shift?” Jack’s question was curious, not judgmental, and Lizzie recognized the difference.

“No. Or maybe I should say ‘not yet’?”

“If you ever want to talk about it, I’m here,” he said quietly, and I didn’t miss the look of relief that crossed her face.

“Okay. I’m out of here. Need to get back on patrol. Somebody named Bubba McKee has a snake that’s eating cats.”

“Welcome to Dead End,” I told her, grinning.

On the way back to my place, though, I thought about the McKees and lost any sense of amusement. “Ish *must* be the killer, Jack. His alibi was completely fake. We could ask Granny G if he was really there, and she’d be as likely to say yes as she would be to tell us aliens dropped by for tea.”

“Which puts the memory of him holding that gun to your head in an entirely different light,” Jack said, face grim.

I hadn’t thought of that. If he’d already shot one woman with a gun, and she was his *mother*, then he could have shot me with no qualms at all.

Suddenly, I was hyperventilating.

Jack gently touched my shoulder. “Put your head between your knees and take deep, slow breaths until you get it under control.”

So, I did. And I breathed like that all the way home. After that, we barricaded ourselves in the house, safe from murderers and bank robbers and mutant plant monsters.

It was a lovely evening.

J *ack* On Friday evening, no criminal activity of any kind occurred. And nothing else that happened belongs in a case file. — *Jack*

T^{ess}

Saturday dawned overcast, but it was supposed to clear up later, just in time for the father-daughter dance. Shelley was so excited she'd texted me and Jack a dozen times about our plans. We were meeting her at the school—Jack was her date, and I was helping with refreshments. At Shelley's age, we didn't have to worry about anybody spiking the punch, at least.

I'd made the executive decision to leave the shop closed for the weekend. We still had a lot of cleanup and repair to do, and with that, the dance, and the missing murderous Phleabottom, I needed a break. I was always closed on Sundays, of course, but a day off on Saturday was so rare I wasn't sure what I wanted to do first.

Jack brought me coffee in bed, a rare luxury, and I sat up to drink it, still yawning.

"I can't believe I slept in till nine! I can't remember the last time I got to sleep in on a Saturday." I sipped the coffee and smiled. Maybe I'd just stay in bed all day with Lou and a book, and Jack could bring me food and coffee.

"That was a nice smile." He sat on the edge of the bed with his own coffee. "What were you thinking about?"

"Just about how wonderful it is to have you here. And about maybe spending the entire day in bed."

His eyes lit up. "I like that idea."

“Jack! Not like that.” I could feel my face heat. Even after we’d been together for a while, I was still shy about some things. “I meant to read and nap.”

“That’s what I meant, too. Tess,” he said sadly, shaking his head. “You have such a dirty mind.”

I put my coffee down and whacked him on the head with my pillow. He put his cup on the nightstand and pounced on me. Then Lou climbed on his head and started kneading his scalp with her paws, claws half-extended, and I couldn’t stop giggling every time he said “ouch.”

If only more days could be filled with simple pleasures like this, instead of magic and mayhem.

Naturally, that’s when my phone rang.

“Don’t answer it,” Jack said. “Let’s pretend we lost our phones. Down a deep well. In Siberia.”

“It might be Shelley, though.” I reached for the phone. “No, but it’s Lizzie. I feel like I have to answer it.”

He sighed but nodded, carefully lifting Lou off his head and sitting up.

“Lizzie, you’re on speaker. Jack’s here.”

“Hey, Tess. Jack. I know it’s early, but I heard you were closed today, and I wondered if you wanted me to stop by Susan’s and try to sniff her godfather’s van this morning.” She paused and then laughed. “Wow. I just heard myself say that and I still can’t believe those words came out of my mouth. I’m turning into a real Dead Ender, and I’m not even official until Monday.”

“You accepted the job?”

“I did! I’m so excited.”

“Congratulations! We’re thrilled to have you. Let me know if you need any help with finding a place or moving in or anything. We’ll throw you a housewarming party.”

“I’m going to stay with Andy’s mom, still, while I look for a place, but thanks! I’ll take you up on it. Now, about the van.

Go over there now, or no?”

I glanced up at Jack, who nodded.

“Yes, we may as well. Thanks, Lizzie. We’ll see you there in half an hour?”

“Perfect.”

When we arrived at Susan’s in my car, though, the van was gone. Lizzie was leaning against her car, so we got out of the truck to talk to her.

“I texted Susan and said I wanted to ask her about the case, not that I’m going to make a habit of lying to my new boss. She said they’re out at Super Target buying groceries and should be back in half an hour.”

“Should we wait, or—”

“Shh!” Jack held up a hand for silence, his head whipping around to face the house. “Do you hear that?”

“Nope,” Lizzie said.

“Hear what?” I asked.

Jack started running. “It’s hard to tell with the screaming, but I think that’s Aloysius Phleabottom calling for help from inside the house!”

Lizzie and I ran after him. Once we opened the front door, we could hear Ish screaming, too. We caught up to Jack just outside the library, where he’d skidded to a stop and stood, staring in disbelief at something in the room.

I bumped into Jack’s shoulder when I stopped running, and Lizzie bumped into me from behind, and then all three of us said some variation of:

“*Whoa.*”

It was Ish, all right. And he was yelling at us to help him. He must have been trying to steal the treasure, or at least part of it, while Susan was out of the house, because we could see stuff piled haphazardly into open boxes around the room.

But that wasn’t the surprising part.

What was surprising—shocking, even—was that he was holding onto the dagger with both hands while it *pulled him around the room*.

“Help me, Tess!” he shouted, and the knife jerked him forward and made him trip over a box. But he didn’t fall; the knife wouldn’t let him. Of its own volition, the knife appeared to be flying around the room and dragging Aloysius along behind it.

“This is déjà vu all over again,” I said. “The dagger version of the plant monster.”

“I love this town,” Lizzie said.

“We should let it have him,” Jack said.

“No! No, please! I don’t understand—*ACK! OUCH!*—what’s even happening?” Ish howled as the dagger dragged him up the side of the wall, smacking his head into every shelf of the built-in bookcase. “Ouch! Ouch! Ouch! Help!”

Jack started laughing. “I’ve never seen Karma kick in so quickly and obviously. I feel like we should make a video for one of those funny video shows. We could title it Dead End’s Stupidest Criminals.”

“Jack.” I tried to sound stern but couldn’t quite manage it.

Lizzie was openly laughing, clutching her stomach, and Jack was smiling his scary, too-many-teeth smile.

Ish was beyond being afraid of Jack, though, tiger or no tiger. He just wanted to get away from the dagger. “Help me!”

I ran to the kitchen and grabbed Susan’s big blue canister with the little girl in the yellow raincoat on it. Then I ran back to the library, dashed inside, and tossed salt into the air, aiming at the dagger.

The enchanted item faltered and then dropped to the ground, falling out of Ish’s hands. I quickly poured a ring of salt around the knife and stepped back.

Ish curled up on the floor where he’d collapsed when the knife released its hold on him. Then he burst into tears. “I want my mother! I’m tired of all this magic, and I just want

my mother. I know she could be awful, but she loved me, and now I'm all alone, and I want to go *hooome*."

That's when Susan showed up behind Jack, her godfather right behind her. Both of them stared at Ish, crying on the floor, and at me, and at the dagger in the salt ring.

Susan turned to Jack, her hands on her hips. "What in the *world* is going on?"

"That's a really brilliant question to ask your cousin," I said. "I'm going out to the car to get my coffee. I can't face another minute of this day without more caffeine."

I marched off down the hall, ignoring Susan's questions and her godfather's curious look. Behind me, Jack explained, and Lizzie said something about checking her radio and followed me.

"I was hoping today would be calmer after the plant monster attack yesterday," I told our newest deputy after we closed the door behind us.

"I can't *wait* to hear that story," she said.

"I promise I'll tell you the whole thing. But first, let's check out both Ish's car and Mr. Butler's van."

We did.

And, sadly, we found exactly what I'd expected.

T*ess*

When we returned to the house, Susan was sitting on the floor next to her cousin, patting his shoulder, a grimace on her face. Jack leaned against the wall just inside the library, and Mr. Butler sat in a chair outside the large salt circle that still ringed the trove.

“Where have you been hiding?” Susan asked, her voice level.

“In the RV park,” he said, his voice thick with tears. “Somebody was leaving town for the week. I heard them talking about it at the gas station, so I snuck out there and broke into their RV the night I ran away.”

Lizzie pulled out her notebook. “Should we add criminal trespass to the charges, Sheriff?”

Susan sighed. “Calm down, Deputy. You’re not officially on duty until Monday. Let’s see how this plays out, shall we?”

Lizzie nodded. “Right. I get carried away sometimes.”

“Enthusiasm is a good thing,” Susan said. “Just maybe not so much at this very moment.”

“What I want to know is why have you been sneaking down to Dead End and visiting Granny G over the past couple of years? Why didn’t you just visit openly?” I asked.

“What?” Susan asked me. Then she turned to him. “What?”

Ish sat up and wiped his eyes with his sleeve. “Okay. I may as well tell you all of it. We knew for a while that Grandfather was planning to leave you everything. Mother and I thought if we could convince Granny to help us, we might ... *acquire* ... some of the treasure.”

He drew in a shaky breath. “Once I started visiting and discovered how far she’d flown from reality, we changed the plan. I pretended to be her late husband and wheedled all the information about you I could get.”

“That’s despicable,” Susan’s godfather said in an oddly hollow voice.

A bitter look crossed Ish’s face. “Do you think I don’t know that? Almost everything my mother ever involved me in for my entire life was despicable.”

“You’re a grown man,” Jack said sharply. “*My mommy was mean to me*, doesn’t fly as an excuse.”

“I know. I *know*. For what it’s worth, I’m sorry, Susan.”

She sat back and looked at him frankly. “I’ve gotta tell you, it’s not worth much.”

I cleared my throat. “Susan, I know now isn’t really the time, but next week let’s have lunch and talk about Granny. She’s really to where it’s not fair to expect Sadie to handle her.”

“I know.” Susan shoved her hair out of her face and sighed. “I know, Tess. Yeah. Let’s talk next week. I need to find live-in professional help or move her to an assisted-care facility.”

“I have a list of resources,” Lizzie said, raising her hand. “I’ll print it out and leave it on your desk.”

A hint of a smile crossed Susan’s face. “Thank you, Lizzie. But you don’t have to raise your hand.” She glanced at me, and I caught a hint of “were we ever that young” in her eyes.

I smiled at her and shook my head. It sure didn’t feel like it just then. In fact, I felt like I was a hundred years old, weighed

down by knowledge I wished I didn't have. And ... weighed down by something else.

"Whatever you need, whatever Granny needs," Jack said. "You know we'll be there for you."

Suddenly, Ish grabbed Susan by the hand. "But listen. You have to believe me. *I did not kill my mother.*"

I couldn't have scripted a better cue, so I took a deep breath and stepped forward. "We know you didn't, Aloysius. Don't we, Mr. Butler?"

Susan's godfather jerkily stood up from his chair and frowned. "I don't know what you're talking about."

I took the plastic bag out from inside my jacket. "You do, though. We found the murder weapon hidden in your van. And we know—" I glanced at Lizzie; I wasn't going to say she'd smelled that nobody but him had touched it. "We have proof that you were the one who fired it."

"I had to protect you," he told Susan in an almost-robotic voice. "Cordelia wanted to steal these horrible artifacts, and she didn't care if she had to kill you to get them."

"I was against the murder part of the plan, by the way," Ish muttered, but we all ignored him.

"When I caught her, she said she'd kill me," Butler continued. "She grabbed the dagger, so I shot her."

Susan jumped up off the floor, staring at her godfather in horror. "I'm so stupid. I *knew* something was wrong when you told Andy you didn't have guns. You've always had guns. You were the one who taught me how to shoot and took me hunting. I just figured you thought it would make you look bad..."

I remembered her reaction at the time. It made sense now, unfortunately.

Ish scrambled to his feet, his face a study in rage, and started toward Mr. Butler. "I'm going to kill you! You murdered my mother!"

Jack intercepted him and held him back while he raged and struggled, until he finally gave up and hung limp, sobbing.

Mr. Butler, oddly enough, seemed unmoved by the entire scene, which confirmed my second suspicion.

“Mr. Butler. I wonder why you just happened to be carrying a gun?”

He took a jerky step toward Susan and spoke in a monotone. “Knew they were dangerous. Had to protect you. Had to protect you. Sworn to protect you.”

“Jack! Stop him,” I shouted.

Jack dropped Ish and lunged at Butler, who snarled and fought but was no match for a tiger shifter.

Susan stared at her godfather in shock. “What is going on?”

I ran over to him and dropped to the floor. “Pardon me for this.” I yanked up his pants leg. Nothing.

Then I yanked up the other pants leg, and there it was. The twin to the copper manacle that had broken when he’d finished unloading the bespelled items into Susan’s house.

“Salt!” I shouted.

Lizzie rushed forward and put the salt canister in my hand. I didn’t bother sprinkling. I just dumped all the remaining salt on his ankle right on top of the manacle.

Mr. Butler screamed, throwing back his head, and every muscle in his body strained.

And then the manacle shattered, and he passed out.

T^{ess}

We put Mr. Butler on the couch in the front parlor. Lizzie checked his vitals and pronounced him fine. We left her to watch over him, and the rest of us gathered in the library, except for Ish, who grabbed a bottle of Scotch and headed for the guest room.

“He might climb out the window and escape again,” Jack said.

“I don’t even care,” Susan said. “Good riddance. If Tess isn’t going to press charges—”

“I’m not,” I said.

“Then I’m just going to send him home with Cordelia’s ashes. I think he’s suffered enough. He never really had anybody else in his life but her after his dad abandoned them. My grandfather treated Cordelia as badly as he treated my mom.”

“What about Henrietta?”

“Again, if you’re not going to press charges, I’ll just let her go. She didn’t really do anything here in Dead End. Nothing criminal except when she threatened you.”

“I’m not pressing charges.”

“She *did* violate her parole,” Jack pointed out.

Susan threw her hands in the air. “I know, but if I’m going to let my cousin go free, and let my godfather, the *murderer*,

go free—”

“What?” Jack said.

“Of course, you can’t put him in jail,” I said. “He wasn’t the murderer. Not really. He was just the weapon your awful grandfather aimed at Cordelia.”

Jack sighed. “Okay. I can go along with that. I’ve seen worse and more twisted, but not by much.”

Susan nodded. “Right. If I’m going to let my family go free, I’d feel like a giant hypocrite for going after Henrietta for a little parole violation.”

I started laughing. “So, she gets to go free with her new true love, Duck Grimes, and visit roller coasters all over the country.”

Jack held up a hand. “I have a question. Why is he called Duck?”

Susan and I both looked at him.

“Because his name is Donald. Duh,” she said.

Jack muttered something like “only in Dead End,” but we both ignored him.

Susan started to say something else, but my phone buzzed.

“Hang on? This might be Ollie, and he owes me a big favor. *Huge.*”

T*ess*

It turned out the experts we needed lived right here in Dead End. Ollie and a few of his family members showed up soon after he called, and they brought his special kit. A large plastic tub, a hundred pounds of rock salt, and a case filled with special minerals and herbs.

While we watched, fascinated, the goblins filled the tub with Susan's outdoor garden hose and then prepared the neutralizing bath right there on Susan's driveway while we explained what had happened. Before Ollie dipped the magical items in the tub, though, he suggested we start with Mr. Butler.

Susan and Lizzie helped him out to the tub, and then we all helped him step into the tub, clothes and all. He abruptly sat down, submerging all the way to his nose, and his entire body relaxed. Sooner than I would have thought possible, Ollie pronounced him cured, and Susan helped him inside and up to bed.

When she came back down, we already had a human conveyor belt in action carrying the objects from the library to the driveway, and all of wore gloves. Ollie dumped each item in, one at a time, muttering the same incantation over and over, and then we put them all out on a large tarp to dry off.

Prism, who'd arrived with Ollie, confided in me she wasn't going to travel to Iowa after all. "I never liked my brother much, anyway."

From the way Ollie looked at her, I had a feeling Prism would soon become a permanent resident of Dead End. I was happy for them and even willing to forgive Ollie for the zucchini monster, now that he'd come through for Susan.

“Oh! Iowa! Wait!” I rushed over to my car and opened the trunk. Then I carried the Eeyore crystal ball in its wrappings over to Jack, who was nearest the tub. He unwrapped it to hand to Ollie. And wouldn't you know the thing had to get in one last negative fortune?

Mist swirled, and the familiar letters formed. Everybody crowded around to look, because how could we resist? We all watched as the ball spelled out:

YOU

WILL

SOON

WEAR

SEQUINS

“What?” Ollie looked at us. “What kind of fortune is that?”

Jack glanced at his watch. “Whoops! I need to go home and get my tuxedo for the dance!”

Before we left, we made sure everything was under control. I hugged Susan and Lizzie, and I thanked Ollie and his brothers and Prism. Just before I ducked into my car, I flashed them all a huge, relieved sigh.

“His tuxedo. It's sequined.”

And then we drove off, mysteries solved, mayhem managed, and magical objects neutralized. Not bad for a rare Saturday morning off.

I could get used to this.

Jack

The school auditorium was decorated to look like a winter wonderland, complete with fake snow. Shelley, who hadn't let go of my hand for one moment since we'd arrived, was beaming, her face lit up like a super bright tactical flashlight.

Or, you know, something girly that's also bright. Candles or something.

She had on the most adorable pink dress I'd ever seen, completely covered in sequins. I grinned, thinking of the Eeyore ball's final prediction.

"Let's go to the selfie station, Jack," she urged, pulling me along.

When I caught sight of our reflection in the large mirror, I burst out laughing.

"What's funny?"

"If my old soldier buddies could see me now ..."

Shelley looked me up and down, and then she started to giggle and couldn't stop. I'd pulled out all the stops for this dance because I'd been unbelievably touched when Shelley had invited me to go with her as a stand-in dad. Not even Tess had seen me in my sparkly finery.

Shelley's best friend Zane wandered by and then did a double take, staring at me with his mouth open.

“I look great, right?”

Zane caught the attack of the giggles from Shelley, and they laughed until they were gasping.

“Jack?” Shelley finally said.

“Yes, honey.”

“I think you’re the best stand-in dad that anybody ever had.” She threw her arms around me and squeezed tight, and my throat tightened around the lump in it.

“You’re the best stand-in daughter that anybody ever had, too,” I told her, hugging her back. “But I’m worried you just love me for my fashion sense.”

Shelley giggled and ran off with Zane, saying something about lemonade, but I didn’t really catch it, because Tess showed up just then. She’d wanted to drive separately, so she could do her makeup and whatnot while I picked up Shelley, so she hadn’t seen my tux, but I hadn’t seen her dress, either.

She started laughing so hard she clutched her stomach. I waited for her to calm down and then I pulled her into the selfie station with me and wrapped my arms around her from behind. She wore a dark green dress—no sequins—that was exactly the color of my eyes, and her fiery red hair, left down and loose like I loved, glowed against the emerald fabric.

“Tess Callahan, you take my breath away,” I told her. “You are the most beautiful and bravest and most brilliant person I’ve ever known. Will you dance with me?”

She said yes.

I danced with her, and with Shelley, and then I danced with Zane and Shelley’s teacher and even the principal. I nodded at Rick Peabody when I saw him dancing with one of the teachers, and he sent me a grin and mouthed the word “pig.”

Everybody laughed when they saw me, but I didn’t care. I was exactly where I wanted to be.

About halfway through the dance, I caught sight of Lily standing on the edge of the dance floor, her little face dark

with unhappiness. I strolled over there and stopped next to her, looking out at the dancers instead of down at her.

“Cousins?”

“Cousins,” she muttered.

“Okay. Why don’t you dance with me and point them out when we go by?”

Her face lit up. “Really?”

“Absolutely.”

I heard, a few days later, that a rumor circled that some of the McKee boys saw an actual tiger at the dance and were scared into good behavior for a long time afterward. When people asked me about it, I just smiled and said, “no comment.”

But Lily pinky promised me we’re now friends for life.

Just before the dance ended, when they called the last song, I looked for Shelley, but she was deep in conversation with Zane and some of her other friends. I held my hand out to Tess.

“Dance with me?”

She smiled and walked into my arms. We danced, not talking, just enjoying the moment, until the song ended. Then Tess suddenly stiffened and looked up at me.

“I can’t believe I missed the perfect opportunity! And me, a die-hard mystery reader.”

“The perfect opportunity to do what?”

Her beautiful blue eyes sparkled. “To say, ‘The Butler did it.’”

EPILOGUE

T*ess*

Sunday afternoon, after church and Sunday lunch at Aunt Ruby and Uncle Mike's house, Jack and I changed into warm clothes, coats, and gloves and headed to Daytona to catch a ride with some friends of his in the Coast Guard. They'd served with him in the rebellion, so it was like old home week, with a lot of joking and banter and catching up while we loaded boxes onto the boat.

One of his friends told me that anytime I wanted to "dump the kitten," he'd be waiting, which made Jack growl and made me laugh.

"Are you sure this is safe?" I'd asked Ollie a dozen times.

Each time, he'd patiently replied that the ocean was a giant salt bath. And that the process he'd put the artifacts through would keep them neutralized forever and ever under those conditions.

That's why we headed out to the deepest part of the ocean we could reach in a couple of hours, and then we unloaded the wooden crates of objects, each weighed down with bricks, into the sea and watched them sink down to a place from which they couldn't harm anyone ever again.

Susan had kept the dagger, though. Ollie had told her it was the only item in the lot with positive energy instead of negative. She'd said, "Well, if you look at it in a certain way, it may have saved my life."

She planned to hang it over her fireplace in a place of honor.

She'd also found out from her godfather that the call from the hospital that set up his alibi had been him. He'd used an app to make it look like the hospital called him and then sped there and back to establish that he couldn't have been there to kill Cordelia. He'd also admitted to faking the U-MOVE-IT logo on the van.

When she asked him why he'd done all that for a shaky alibi at best, he'd looked at her blankly and said he had no idea. His brain had been fuzzed over, and it had all seemed like a good idea at the time.

Sometimes, I was discovering, you never found out every detail.

After we'd dumped all the crates and we were headed back to shore, I shot Jack a mischievous grin and turned to his friends. "Do you want to see a picture of the tuxedo Jack wore to a dance yesterday?"

Jack groaned and tried to get my phone, but I danced away from him and held it out to show his friends. The photo was of Jack and Lily, just before they'd seen me arrive. She was beaming, and so was he.

He was also wearing a baby-blue, ruffled tuxedo, and every single inch of it shone with baby blue sequins.

His friends roared with laughter, and I felt so happy I almost couldn't stand it. Then we headed home and enjoyed the rest of our Sunday. No criminals in sight.

For weeks afterward, life was absolutely wonderful, except for one day when I got a call from Andy's mom:

"Tess. You know those zucchinis you gave me? I planted one of them, and it's growing at a strange and incredible rate..."

I buried my face in my hands. "Not again."

When I told Jack, he said, "Audrey Four?" and started laughing when I nodded.

Luckily, though, other than mutant zucchini plants, everything was peaceful in Dead End until February, when a pregnant witch discovered a dead body on the diamond at our annual softball game.

Respectfully submitted,

Tiger's Eye Investigations



Are you dying to know what happens when a pregnant witch finds a dead body on the field at Dead End's official annual softball game? Preorder **EYE ON THE BALL** now!!



Note from Alyssa Day:

I have loved Jack's character since he first showed up in my brain in 2006, surly and snarling, in the first book of my Warriors of Poseidon paranormal romances. When he was left alone and lonely at the end of that series, he kept asking me when I was going to give him a story.

I did one better: I gave him his own series! And Jack needed to find a new job, and a new life, so when he went home to the craziest town in Florida, he found both... and he found Tess.

I'm thrilled to announce that the Tiger's Eye Mysteries will continue for at least twenty books, and you'll be able to read the continuing adventures of Jack, Tess, and the gang for years to come!

If you want the scoop on all the new releases, behind-the-scenes details, and the chance to win prizes, please sign up for my newsletter at www.alyssaday.com/newsletter I promise never to sell, fold, spindle, or mutilate your information so you will get no spam—ever—from me.

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Thanks again for reading—you rock!

Hugs, Alyssa

THANK YOU!

Thanks so much for reading my book! I hope you had as much fun reading it as I did writing it!

Review it. My family hides the chocolate if I don't mention that reviews help other readers find new books, so if you have the time, please consider leaving one. I appreciate all reviews and thank you for your time.

Try my other books! You can find links to all my books at <http://alyssaday.com>.

Thanks again for reading—I appreciate you!

Alyssa

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alyssa Day is the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of more than fifty novels filled with kissing, laughter, mystery, and magic. Alyssa's paranormal series include the Poseidon's Warriors, Vampire Motorcycle Club, and Cardinal Witches paranormal romances and the Tiger's Eye Mysteries paranormal mysteries. In an Alyssa Day book, good always wins and happily ever after always prevails!

Alyssa's many awards include the RT Reviewer's Choice Award for Best Paranormal Romance novel of 2012 and Romance Writers of America's RITA award for outstanding romance novella. She's a recovering trial lawyer who loves life outside of a courtroom. Her books have been translated into a zillion languages, but she's still holding out for Klingon.

Go to <https://alyssaday.com/newsletter/> to sign up for the newsletter and get release day news, behind-the-scenes scoop, notice of contests, news about where Alyssa will make personal appearances, and more!

Q: "What is the reading order of your books?"

A: [Here!](#)

You can hang out with her on Facebook (www.facebook.com/AuthorAlyssaDay) and Instagram (<https://www.instagram.com/authoralyssaday/>), where she talks about her rescue dogs and her future pug ranch, and her blog, where she talks books, movies, and mental health (www.alyssaday.com/blog). Love talking about books? Be a DayDreamer! Join Alyssa's VERY SPECIAL group for superfans for fun chatting, sneak peeks, prizes, and more: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/DayDreamersAlyssaDay>.

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