

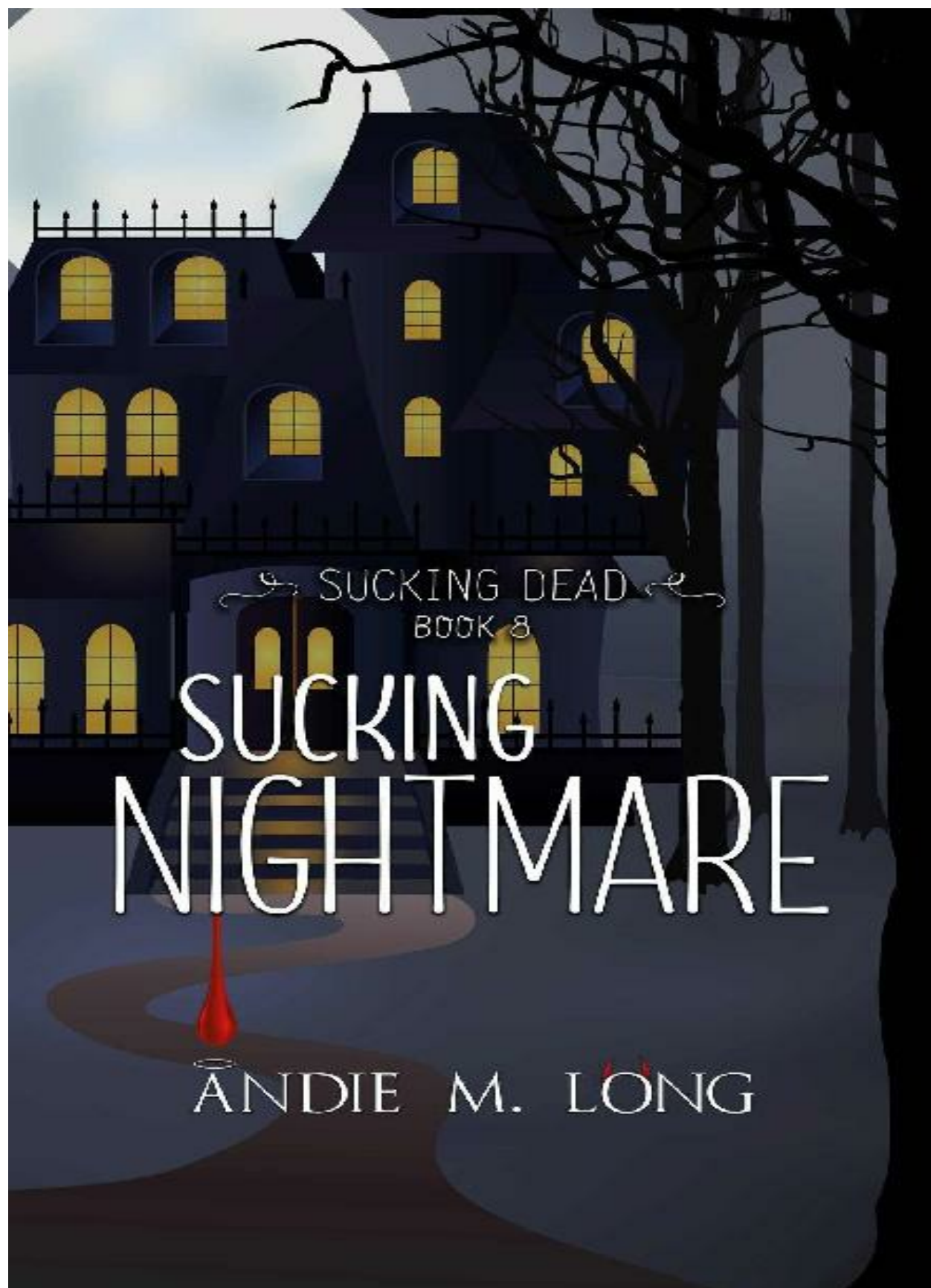
SUCKING DEAD

BOOK 8



SUCKING
NIGHTMARE

ANDIE M. LONG



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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[About Andie](#)

[Paranormal Romance](#)

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CHAPTER

ONE

Tilly

Life was good. No, not good, it was fan-fucking-tastic.

Sitting up in bed, having woken up naturally ten minutes before my alarm, I sighed in satisfaction as the sunshine coming through my thin curtains bathed the room in an amber hue. Summer was here and I had a feeling it might just be the Best. Summer. Ever.

This time last year, my twin Milly and I had still been the old us: the strange twins who shared thoughts and finished each other's sentences. However, last June, our friend Chantelle, a witch, had spelled us so that we could function independently of one another. As you could imagine, that had taken some time to get used to—to be comfortable taking action alone and making decisions on our own—whereas this summer we now actually felt free. Milly and I were able to enjoy a little solitude, though the other was never too far away. We were still close, still thick-as-thieves, but not so close that we couldn't now look for love—independently of course.

My tummy got butterflies thinking about it.

The only problem was, *I* hadn't actually met anyone I fancied yet.

But my twin had, and I was going to do everything I could to make sure Milly got a date with the angel who clearly liked her right back.

Swinging my legs out of bed, I got up and walked over to the window,

pulling the curtains apart and letting the sunlight bathe the room. I also opened my windows wide and breathed in the aroma of the gorgeous early summer day. It was going to be a scorcher. I'd already heard Milly get up and set off for the shop, and so I knew I didn't need to rush there myself. I'd enjoy a leisurely shower before making an appearance, so that the two people there could get to know each other better.

I grinned to myself.

Kaf, an angel sent down from Heaven via the attic room at the Home of Wayward Souls, had begun sleeping in beds or on sofas on the ground floor of our shop *Seconds the Best* since his brother had begun dating Mitzi back in January. We didn't mind as in return Kaf helped us move the heavy furniture. Kaf had thought he'd return to Heaven after saving his brother from self-destruction, but those 'upstairs' had told him his work in Gnarly wasn't yet done. While Kaf thought his staying earthbound was connected to a teenager called Billy, I watched him with my sister and wondered if just maybe an angel might be able to stay on earth. Stranger things happened in Gnarly Fell that was for sure.

However, the two of them needed a shove in the right direction because lingering gazes when the other wasn't looking had been going on for months now and neither of them had made a move, other than with furniture.

This morning had been Milly's morning to open the shop and get Kaf a coffee. The shop officially opened in ten minutes, so I decided to leave them a little while longer.



"Morning," I said, walking through the door of the shop and greeting the two of them. Milly was sitting on the edge of the bed Kaf had been sleeping in, and they'd been in rapt conversation. I wanted to shake my head at the both of them, but instead, I walked over to the drink that waited for me in a reusable cup on the counter. Every morning, we took it in turns to fetch coffees from *Books and Buns*, a nearby coffee shop/bakery/bookstore.

"It might not be very hot seeing as I bought it an hour ago," my sister warned me.

"That's fine. I've enjoyed my lazy morning, and the day is hot enough. I might even put some ice in it and make it an iced mocha," I said.

“Ugh, that’s one thing we don’t have in common,” Milly told Kaf. “I like my coffee hot.”

“Whereas I find hot drinks just make me feel hotter on a warm day,” I added.

Kaf stood up. “How about I bring you an ice cream this afternoon?” he asked us both.

“Ooh that would be lovely,” we said in unison. We did sometimes still do that, despite our separation spell.

“In fact, we’ll close for lunch and come with you,” Milly told him. “Call for us at one.”

Kaf left then, telling us he’d see us later. Once the door closed behind him, I turned my gaze on my sister, feeling my mouth curling up at the edges.

“What?” she asked, a flush creeping across her cheeks.

“How much longer are you going to do this with Kaf, the extra friendly banter?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said, avoiding eye contact, and suddenly finding the floor fascinating.

“He likes you too. I can tell,” I encouraged. “You should totally ask him out.”

“It can’t work,” she said, finally looking back up at me, her shoulders slumping. “He’s an angel; he’s not earth-bound. At some point he’ll leave.”

I tilted my head. “Yeah, at some point. So why can’t you date him while he’s still here? Have some fun,” I suggested.

Milly emitted a loud sigh. “Because I’m sure I’m already in love with him,” she confessed. “And it would break my heart when he left.”

I paused for a moment, gathering my thoughts. “If you’re already in love with him, it’s going to break your heart anyway, isn’t it?” I pointed out. “Why not enjoy the time he’s here?”

The bell on the shop door rang then, interrupting our conversation. “I’ll think about it,” Milly said, and then she got up and walked towards the customer.

I wouldn’t push her on the subject any further. If she failed to make a move, I’d talk to Kaf next. One way or another these two needed to get together.



When one pm came around, I had to fight to keep my face straight when Milly, having gone to ‘freshen up’, emerged in tiny denim shorts and a pink cropped t-shirt. As Kaf entered the store wearing sunglasses, I was unable to gauge his entire reaction, but he had stood stock still for a moment, so I could hazard a guess that the guy was too stunned to speak. We walked up to the park, where I tried not to feel like a third wheel. Kaf was now a friend of mine too after all.

“Have you seen much of Connor lately?” I asked him.

“Yeah, we went out for beer a couple of nights ago. He’s so different since he started dating Mitzi, and to be honest so is she.”

“She’s not as blunt now, is she,” I remarked.

“No, and she’s also a lot more relaxed since Lila began helping at Saverstore. Both she and Connor now have decently staffed businesses, which means time together, and much happier individuals.”

“Love does seem to have that effect on people,” I said, looking from him to Milly and back again and hoping he took the hint.

“So how about you two?” he asked. “Any suitors on the horizon?”

I watched his gaze flick to Milly first. She shook her head. “No one has asked me out in months,” she said. It couldn’t have been a bigger tip-off, but instead of taking it, Kaf turned to me.

“What about you, Tilly?”

“I’ve not even met anyone I like here in Gnarly yet unfortunately,” I confessed. “I’m clearly a late bloomer.”

“The people around here must be blind if they haven’t snapped up you two yet,” he said.

“Something like that,” I replied, looking from him to Milly and raising a brow.

I knew he took the hint because he stumbled over his next words.

“S-so, what’s your favourite flavour of ice cream?” he asked, steering us onto safer chat territory.



Having reached the park at last, we walked towards the ice cream van.

“I know I’ve bought ice creams from here before, but I swear I can never remember the face of the person who sells them,” I noted.

“Me neither,” my sister agreed. “It’s clearly a Gnarly thing. There must be a reason why.”

I pondered her words as I reached the front of the queue. My eyes landed on the guy serving and I startled. How the hell did I forget this face. He was absolutely gorgeous. All wavy blonde hair, and blue eyes.

“What can I get you?” he asked.

I was tempted to ask for a chair, so I could sit there and fan myself. The day was already hot, without the ice cream man making me feel even warmer. As embarrassment hit me about my thoughts and I felt my face warm further, I decided I’d better order quickly.

“Two cones, with flakes, raspberry syrup and sprinkles please.”

“Coming up,” the guy said. Gosh, his voice was silky smooth. But then he looked past me at Kaf having realised we were all together. “And you?”

“Same please,” Kaf said.

The ice cream man made the cones and passed them to us. Kaf approached to pay, and I was just about to turn around to my sister and tell her I was going to leave her and Kaf to it—and for her to ask him on a date for God’s sake—when I heard someone yelling.

“You should never have been born,” the grey-haired, middle-aged man spat out, and to my horror he touched Milly. She shrank and turned to wood; her ice cream abandoned on the grass beside her. “An abomination,” he yelled, and this time he launched himself at me.

But somehow, the ice cream man now stood in front of me, blocking my view of the man.

“Be gone, demon,” the ice cream man ordered.

Demon?

“I’m the rightful heir, not them,” he snapped. “And I will be back to take care of *her*.” Peering over the ice cream man’s shoulders, I saw the man point his finger in my direction before he disappeared.

I watched as the ice cream man turned to Kaf. “You have to save them,” he said. “I will try to help, but I can only appear at night in dreams, and when I do it won’t be pleasant. I’ll only be able to appear to Tilly.”

“What do you mean? Who are you?” Kaf demanded.

“My name is Knight,” the man said. “My full name is Knight Mare. I am a cursed man, doomed to forever cause misery in sleep, and then be forgotten. You though, an angel, you will remember me. Help them.”

The ice cream van disappeared, and so did the man in front of me. His

image faded from my mind, as the fact my sister had been turned back to wood became increasingly real.

I screamed, and screamed, and screamed some more. Kaf picked up the small wooden doll that was my sister, and then his wings opened, and he wrapped me inside them.

“We will get her back,” he said. “I promise you, Tilly, we will get her back.”

It was strange because while I was within the embrace of Kaf’s wings, a sense of peace invaded my system. Like an anaesthetic numbing the pain. Then we were gone from the park, and the next thing I knew, Kaf opened his wings, and I was in my bedroom.

“Please tell me I imagined all that. You’ve just come in because I was having a nightmare, right?” I begged Kaf. “I must have fallen asleep.” As I said the words, I knew it was a waste of time because my sister wasn’t with us and Kaf was in our home. In my bedroom! But everything was hazy. We’d gone for ice cream, but... I couldn’t really remember...

Then I looked in Kaf’s hand and saw my ‘sister’.

The wooden doll.

I screamed again.

CHAPTER

TWO

Milly

It had been a lovely day: the sun shining, birds singing, and being a recipient of Kaf's smile which caused my stomach to burst into butterflies in the most exciting of ways. I was sure he liked me too. I just had to let him know somehow that I'd love to go on a date with him, even if he might return to Heaven. My sister was right. Better to try for love and happiness and lose it, than to never have it at all.

Usually, I just saw my angel friend in a morning, after he'd spent the night asleep in our furniture department, but today we were in the park after Kaf had returned to the store to take Tilly and I out for ice cream. *Was that just an act of kindness?* I kept musing. *Or was it a way of spending more time with me?* I kept talking myself out of that being Kaf's reasoning though, as why would he have asked Tilly to come along too? My mind was elsewhere, which was the reason I didn't notice the touch of a stranger's hand on my skin until it was too late. It resulted in a pain so fierce; it was like being lit up from the inside out. Then the world blinked out.

I must have passed out, I thought, as I recalled the pain my body had experienced. As my eyes acclimated and I found myself lying on the floor in a small, dark room, with the barest of light coming from two tiny windows, I realised I didn't know where I was. I swallowed, my mouth dry. Had I been

kidnapped? That was when I remembered the stranger's face and his harsh words, 'You should have never been born'. It was he who had touched me, who had caused the pain, and now, surely, he must be holding me here? And he must know the truth of me because his words had indicated so.

"Milly," a voice whispered. "Are you okay? As well as you can be, that is."

Startled, my eyes followed the sound of the woman's voice. I could barely make out her face, but my ears recognised her voice, though it had been more youthful the last time I'd heard it. She was sitting in one of the dark corners, in a long dress and with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders.

I scrambled up to a sitting position. "R-Rosa?"

"Yes, Milly, it's me," said the woman who'd brought my twin and I to life. She shuffled across the floor, making her way closer to me. Though she'd only been around fourteen years old when we'd last seen her, Rosa's features hadn't changed much from what I could discern. She still had her chestnut-brown, curly hair; and freckled cheeks.

"I don't understand what's happening," I said, looking down at myself and realising I could see the ground through my form. My heart ratcheted up further and I thought I might pass out. I could feel things though, like the ground I sat on.

"Am I dead?" I said shrilly, feeling dizzy. My knees shook and knocked together.

I was asking myself, but I realised I'd said it out loud when Rosa answered. "We're in the abyss. It's where Wilder put me, and where he's now put you too."

"Wilder?" I thought of the man who'd attacked me.

"My uncle."

"That's who it was who appeared in the park?"

"Yes."

I had so many questions and didn't know which to ask first. Looking at Rosa's face it seemed she did too.

"Tell me how you got here," she requested. "We can take it from there."

"Okay." My eyes scanned around the room once more, looking for a way out, until I realised there was none. Sighing, I recounted my story of the park to Rosa, describing the man the best I could, given that I'd only seen him for a split second. "And then I woke up here," I finished.

“From the description you gave and the facts I know, I’d say it almost definitely was my uncle,” Rosa confirmed. I noticed her own body wasn’t solid either, though it wasn’t as translucent as mine. “And the fact that you’re now in the abyss with me. He’ll have banished you here.”

“How long have you been here?” I queried, hoping it wasn’t long.

“I’m not sure,” she told me. “But my circumstances are different to yours.”

“How?” I asked, pausing to examine her body closer so I could try to work out what was different between us.

“Wilder must have turned you back into your original form, and no doubt, he’s going to try to come after Tilly too. The essence of you that I created with my spell is what he’s trapped here with me now. Your soul. At least you have a chance at a way back.”

My mind whirled. My original state? Was I a wooden doll again?

Whereas...” Rosa continued talking, then paused. “He murdered me.”

My eyes shot to hers. “M-murdered?”

“Yes. I’m a ghost. Where you are currently just separated from your form due to his magic; I am no longer alive. Wilder is holding my spirit trapped and not allowing me to move on because he thinks I could still prove useful. He wants to get his hands on the magic in the store. It will have returned to the cellar upon my death.”

“Of course.”

“You remember about the hidden stone circle?”

“Yes, I remember what you told us when you were younger, and also your mother reminded us of it when she came to visit us.”

“Wh-what?” Rosa shook her head. “You must be mistaken. My mother never mentioned going back to Gnarly.”

I took a moment to process her words and to recollect Augusta’s visit.

“It was after you confessed to her that you’d made us,” I explained. “She came to check we were okay as many years had passed. We’d been left to our own devices for all that time. She was worried what you might have done. She also left us the deeds to the store to make it officially ours.”

“I-I never knew. I’m so sorry I never came back,” Rosa said, a tremble to her voice. “I thought I’d made it up in my mind. That you were imaginary.” She put her head in her hands.

“The past doesn’t matter right now, does it?” I said firmly, because my priority was to find a way out of here and back to my form, not to reminisce.

I needed to save my sister, even if I lost my own self in the process.

“That’s true,” Rosa accepted. “We need to focus on the present. Okay, so you know then that the building you live in is situated on a seat of incredible power, located in the cellar. It’s a power that the eldest of the Whitlam line has always carried within them. Even though we moved away from Gnarly, I carried that power within me. I called it to myself after my mother’s death.”

“Without returning to Gnarly?”

“Yes. I’m an extremely strong witch. The seventh generation of the Whitlam witches. When my mother passed, I just felt the power as if it was nipping at me to accept it. I called it to me and it answered. However, now Wilder has killed me, the power will have returned to the stone circle in the cellar. He’s tried to call it to himself as I did, but he doesn’t have my strength. That really pissed him off. He’s determined to get it, which is why he’ll have been in Gnarly.”

My brows drew together as I considered all I’d been told. “Then why does he need to try to destroy Tilly and me? Surely, he just has to get into the cellar and the circle will appear to him?”

“I don’t know,” Rosa said, quiet for a moment, while no doubt trying to work out the answer.

My features went still as I suddenly had a moment of clarity. “Is there a chance it could be connected to the blood your mother mixed in a drink for us?” I queried, remembering the strange fruit concoction Augusta had made us take for our health, and her hopes it would protect us in some way. I pictured her disappointment when it seemed to do nothing at all.

“She gave you blood?”

“Yes, a small amount of her own. She hoped it would give us some of her powers, but it did nothing unfortunately.”

“It did nothing back then.” Rosa became more animated, drumming the fingers of her right hand on her right knee. “But it may have now, due to the fact I’m dead.” She stood up and began pacing around. “If you and Tilly have the Whitlam blood within you then just maybe you are now the next descendants, and the circle is waiting for the two of *you*.”

“But if that were the case, it would have revealed itself, wouldn’t it?” I queried.

“Maybe not, because I’ve yet to move on,” Rosa stated. She punched the wall. “Goddamn it. Bloody Wilder,” she ranted. “He’s managed to fool us all over the years. I thought him supportive, but really, he was just working out

how to take our power. He delighted in telling me he now had demonic powers and I had no chance against him.”

“D-demonic powers?” I shivered. How would my sister be able to survive against a demon?

“Yes, he gloated about how he’d made a deal with a demon, and I had no chance of stopping him,” Rosa explained. “Wilder is an idiot if he thinks a demon is going to let him keep that power for himself though.”

That was even worse. There was no knowing what would happen if the power ended up in demon hands. “So what can we do?” I asked.

“Nothing. We’re in the abyss, undetectable to all, Milly,” Rosa said softly.

Dread crept through my bones, as I listened closely to her tone. “You mean there’s no way out?”

“Not unless Wilder frees us, or someone else does,” she said. “As I see it, our only chance is from Tilly, and that’s dependent on if she works out how to access the power before Wilder gets to her.”

“And if he does?”

“We’ll be trapped here forever, or he’ll do us a favour and completely destroy us,” Rosa said.

That was the point where my current reality hit. Standing up, I screamed in frustration before bursting into tears. I pounded the walls until I ran out of energy and sagged back down to the floor exhausted. For the first time in our lives, my sister and I were truly separated, and the only way for us to be reunited was if she conquered a demon and found out where he was keeping us. It seemed far more likely that Tilly would end up here. But what did that mean for the fell if a demon took on the Whitlam’s powers?

Rosa let my outpouring of emotion fall before scutching up closer and putting her arm around me. “All we can have is hope,” she whispered to me. “And I’m thankful we have each other, although I’d gladly stay here alone if it meant you were safe.”

I nodded, though how much she could see in the dismal light I didn’t know. Wondering if there was any means of escape, I leapt up and dashed to the windows.

“Noooooo, don’t look,” Rosa warned, but it was too late. I stared out, straight into my sister’s bedroom.

‘Please tell me I imagined all that. You’ve just come in because I was having a nightmare, right?’ I heard Tilly beg Kaf. *‘I must have fallen*

asleep'. Then she looked at Kaf's hand and she screamed, and as she realised what was in his hand, I did too.

It was me.

Back in the form of the wooden doll Rosa had spelled to life. I already knew it was the case but seeing it for myself cemented it in my mind.

Along with the fact that currently there was nothing I could do to help my sister.

Nothing at all.



Rosa dragged me back from the windows.

"What did it show you?" she asked, and I told her.

"I guessed as much," she said softly.

"I'm angry that I'm here, but I'm even angrier that my sister is left in Gnarly, in danger. I have to hope that Kaf is still on earth to help," I ground out.

"That is a possibility and that's where we have to have hope, Milly, because though Wilder has demon energy, you both do have an angel on your side. Someone with the genuine power to stop him."

"I feel so helpless," I wailed.

"Then you need a distraction. I'll tell you about my family, shall I? And more about the magic you would take on. Then when we get you out of here, you'll know exactly how to receive your heritage."

"You mean, *if* I get out of here."

"We can't speak like that. It has to be when. We have to keep positive. I believe the more negative we are, the stronger it will make Wilder."

I closed my eyes in thought. "Which means my sister is currently at a disadvantage."

"She has Kaf."

It was crazy then because I thought of Kaf and my sister, and I actually felt a pathetic pang of jealousy. They'd be spending lots of time together and I was trapped here. I mean, I'd just seen them in Tilly's bedroom. What if *they* fell in love? I wished my sister every happiness in life, but that would hurt.

"Does the window always show what's happening in the real world?" I

asked.

“It does for me. It showed me my home after the fire that killed my mother when I looked out the first time. It showed me you twins being brought to life, and it showed me my death. I’ve not looked out again since. But it’s possible it could show us lies too. I wouldn’t believe everything you might see.”

“Your mother died in a fire? I’m so sorry, Rosa.”

“I thought it was an accident at first, but Wilder did it. I know that now.”

“Oh, Rosa, no.” I reached over and squeezed her hand.

I understood why Rosa had shouted for me not to look. It seemed the window wasn’t ever going to show us anything good, but I knew that I’d still keep looking through it regardless.

Because it was my only link to Tilly right now, and despite the space between us, I felt her loss so keenly it was like I’d lost a limb and yet thought I could still feel it attached.

CHAPTER

THREE

Kaf

The Heavens had set me some challenges. Bodyguarding expectant vampire twin births, for example. But as I held a screaming Tilly, I felt out of my depth, because I just didn't know what to do to help her at this time. I'd been closer to her sister and was internally dealing with the shock of the fact the woman I'd been so attracted to was currently clutched in my hand and now a wooden doll.

Guiding Tilly to the sofa, I got her to sit down, sitting beside her and stroking the top of her arm until she was calm enough to speak.

"What am I going to do, Kaf? How will I get my sister back?" Tilly's voice was choked with emotion.

I replied honestly. "I don't know, Tilly, but I do know that right now you're in danger. We need to get you and your sister," I looked at the doll, "to a place of safety before the demon returns to take you out too."

"But where would I go?" she asked.

"I'll make a call while I stand in your doorway as you pack. Take everything you need for maybe a week away? We can get more if needed," I instructed. My voice sounded calm to the woman in the room, but inside I was anything but. The demon could turn up here at any time, so we needed to move fast. I called Mya.

“Yes?”

“Has the Book of the Dead shown anything regarding Milly and Tilly Wood?” I asked.

“No... why?” Mya’s voice had lost her usual sassy tone.

I explained what had happened and then a male voice came onto the line. Death himself.

“Milly and Tilly weren’t born, Kaf. They were crafted and spelled to be alive. Therefore, they can’t die and won’t appear in The Book of the Dead,” he explained.

“Of course,” I replied. It made perfect sense when he’d clarified it.

“Give me the phone back. He didn’t call you,” I heard Mya complain.

“I’m just trying to help,” Death snapped back.

“If you want to help, go and open the windows in one of the guest rooms,” Mya told him. “We’re getting a guest shortly.”

She came back on the line. “Read your mind, Kaf. It’s the best idea. Tilly should be safe here. Certainly safer than in the store. Can you lock the place up and put a note on the front saying closed for sickness or something?”

“I’ll stay here, and keep the place open,” I declared, right as the idea came to me. “The demon is bound to come here first to seek Tilly out.”

“True. We need to know who this person is. I’m guessing it’s a family member due to what they said at the park. I now know what they look like from seeing them through your eyes, but that’s not enough. If he does come to *Seconds the Best* let me know and I’ll be straight over to help.”

“No, you won’t,” Death said. “This is not a dead demon whose soul we need to collect, this is a very much alive demon. You know, badass, works for Satan, mega evil.”

“If I can handle his daddy, I can handle him,” Mya retorted.

“You cannot handle Satan. He merely tolerates you because you blackmail him, and he has no choice.”

“Potato, pot-ar-to.”

“God help me,” Death said.

“Oooh, good idea, I can chat with him too,” Mya replied. She returned to talking to me. “Bring Tilly over as soon as she’s ready. We’ll make a plan.”

“Will do,” I answered, and then I waited until Tilly zipped up her case.

“I’m staying at Mya’s, right?” she checked.

“Yes. I know Mya is powerful enough to protect you. More than anyone else.”

“More than an angel?” she queried.

“I’m not sure,” I answered truthfully. “But I know that if I’m to help you, I can’t be by your side twenty-four-seven. I have to find the demon and a way to get your sister back. Mya has access to Heaven and Hell. She’s the best I can think of for you to stay with right now.”

Tilly nodded. “Thank you for all you’re doing for me. I feel like I’m in a dream, but it’s not. It’s a real-life nightmare.”

Her words brought Knight to the forefront of my mind. The strange ice cream guy. Was it true that he faded from people’s thoughts immediately? I decided to check.

“Tilly, do you remember the man who sold us the ice creams in the park?”

She was quiet for a moment and then she shook her head. “It’s weird. I never do. I feel like I did remember and now I don’t. As if he’s in my peripheral vision or something. I always just put it down to Gnarly. Like how we never saw the other side of the boulevard until Saint was given the building to relocate *Pizza the Action*.” She startled. “Is he the demon? The ice cream guy?”

“No. It’s the result of a spell or a curse, I believe. But listen, his name is Knight and he told me he can only appear in bad dreams. He may try to communicate with you when you’re asleep, so you need to find a way to remember, maybe a notepad and pen by your bed, because you’ll forget otherwise.”

“His name is Knight, and he causes nightmares? Is his surname Mare?” Tilly joked, forgetting her reality for a split second.

“Yes,” I said, watching the smile slide off her face. “Which makes me think he’s the origin of the name we give bad dreams, but I don’t know anything more. He said I could see him and remember him because I was an angel. Which makes me believe Knight is also a demon.”

“So he’s bad?”

“He’s cursed. Not all demons are inherently evil. Some were forced to be how they are. He has to torment and torture people in their sleep. Doesn’t mean he wants to or enjoys it.”

“Let me get this straight. The ice cream guy gets forgotten because he’s the original Knight Mare, and he might appear in my own dreams. To help my sister, or to get to me?”

“I think to help,” I said. “But you must always remember he’s a demon.”

“Let’s go to Mya’s,” she said, grabbing her case. “I need some time to think, and I need the angel cuddle I’ll get while we’re travelling.”

I opened my wings wide, and as she stepped inside and I folded them, she gave a sigh of relief.

“My wings are always available to you,” I whispered. “Whenever you need them.”

“Thank you,” she said, and then I flew us to the Home of Wayward Souls.



I stared at the huge imposing mansion, and tried to imagine what it must look like to Tilly, who was biting her top lip as she appraised the building.

“You okay?” I asked.

“Not really.”

“Sorry, stupidly formed question. Of course you’re not okay. You are far from okay.” I could have slapped myself in the face for my idiocy. “I meant, are you okay with staying here.” I pointed at the building.

“I’ve to stay in a house where wayward spirits float around, and with Mya and Death, who I love, but who aren’t, shall we say, the most relaxing of couples. My thoughts are full of my sister and the horrendousness of what’s happened, along with the fact a demon wants to get me, and another demon is going to appear in my dreams to maybe help, except he can only appear in nightmares, so that’s what I can look forward to when my eyes close.” Tilly gave me a half-smile. “But if it gets my sister back, I’ll endure anything. If I could swap places with her I would,” she said. “So if that’s the only option, I will do it. Know that.”

“I know. But it won’t ever be an option, Tilly. That demon said you should have never been born. He’s not going to make a deal to save one of you.”

Mya opened the door then. “The demon is clearly an arsehole because as we know the twins weren’t ‘born’. Come in, Tilly.” Mya gestured inside. “Please don’t be frightened. I keep the wayward under control, and Jenny and Spence have said they’re available if you need them too.

We walked through into the hallway.

“Are you staying?” Tilly asked me. Her eyes were wide, and she was moving slowly. The hallway was a little unnerving with its gothic, black-

painted woodwork, and checkerboard flooring.

“Yes, until you feel okay for me to leave,” I reassured her, and I threaded my arm through hers, knowing the contact would settle her somewhat.

“Your room is next door to ours for your utmost safety,” Mya stated, as she reached a doorway. “I’ve told Death that we won’t be having sex while you’re around. I can afford no dickstractions when keeping you safe.”

“Erm, thanks,” Tilly said, walking into the room. “Thank you for letting me stay here, Mya. I’m truly grateful.”

Mya surprised us both then by coming up and hugging Tilly. “You are my friend. Milly is my friend. Of course I’m going to let you stay here and try to help.”

Tilly’s shoulders sagged in relief, and I realised then she knew she was with friends who would help her. That her surroundings might be unfamiliar, but her friend wasn’t.

“Put your belongings down and then let’s go into the living room and talk about what’s happening, shall we? We need a plan of action,” Mya said.

Tilly did just that and we followed Mya into her living room.

“Excuse the décor.” Mya raised her hand in the air in a sweeping motion. “I’ve got used to it. When I first moved here, I wanted all new things, but I quickly realised the village liked to re-use, re-cycle etc and so I’ve just cleaned and accepted it.”

I watched as Tilly’s eyes took in the dark furniture, the thick dusky-pink carpets, and the thick black curtains.

“I could help you redecorate while I’m here. It will keep my mind occupied and I know how to source different pieces of furniture. It would also make me feel better about accepting your hospitality if I can be useful in return.”

“I’d love that,” Mya said, giving Tilly a beaming smile.

We took a seat on the sofa and then came the familiar footsteps of Spence the ghost pirate. Footstep, tap, footstep, tap. He had a wooden leg.

“I thought I smelled myself a new lassie. I saw you at Saint’s place, didn’t I? One of the twins.”

“Leave her alone, Spence. She’s going through things,” Mya warned.

“Well, course she is. Tis the Gnarly way. We all go through tough times before the good stuff is revealed to us.” He came over and made me move up, sitting right next to Tilly. “Which one are you, lass?”

“Can you stop calling her lass. Her name is Tilly,” Mya scolded.

“I call everyone lass cos I can’t remember names. You try being my age, wench, and see what you remember.”

“I’ll remember to hide the rum, shall I?” Mya warned him.

He ignored her and turned to Tilly. “I know she makes out like I’m a stupid old man, but me and my lover Jenny, we’re the custodians of this place. Jenny has an affinity to the village too. I just wanted to pop by and say that the house is good with you staying. We’ll look after you the best we can.”

Mya’s mouth fell open. “Spence, that actually sounded quite profound. Who knew you were capable of such things.”

He stuck his tongue out at her, before returning his attention to Tilly. “By the way, can’t help but notice you’ve a cracking rack. Someone’s in for a treat when you get your present shitstorm sorted,” he said.

“And there he is. Get out.” Mya pointed to the doorway.

Spence just laughed. “Sorry, lassie, I didn’t mean it. I just like winding Mya up. You have got a cracking rack, a man can’t help but notice these things, but I wouldn’t have pointed it out if it didn’t annoy Mya. I’d have just assessed the situation quietly, kept it in my head.”

“Out.”

“Arrright, arrright, I’m going. You come find me and Jenny, love, especially Jenny. She knows the books in the library. Mya too, but not yet as much as Jenny. We can help.”

“Thank you,” Tilly said.

He tapped a hand on hers in a ‘there there’ manner and then got up and left the room.



“Let’s do a little information gathering,” Mya suggested. “See what we know and then work out possible next steps.”

“Okay,” Tilly replied. She was sounding weary, and I realised the shock was getting to her. All the adrenaline etc that would have flooded her system would be now wanting her to shut down.

I nodded.

“First, it’s been a stressful day, so let’s do five deep breaths,” Mya ordered. “Close your eyes.”

Mya was into relaxation, visualisation, manifesting etc. If an apocalypse was due to happen, Mya would probably ask if we could do yoga first. But then it wasn't that long ago that Mya was a bookseller, faced with a choice of death and nothingness, or Death and his mansion. Therefore, who could blame her for finding ways of coping with the changes?

It was true what Spence had said. We all did seem to have to go through the tough before better times came through. I'd been murdered before I'd become an angel. Then I'd found out that actually I'd apparently always been an angel: Kafziel, also known as Cassiel. Heaven had told me I was a soul reborn. But I kept being sent down to help people and that was a lot better than being dead. An opinion Mya shared.

After the deep breaths, Mya asked Tilly to describe everything she knew about how she and Milly came to be turned into their current form. Jenny knocked on the door, and she and Spence came in. Jenny carried a tray of drinks.

"If it's okay, we'd both like to hear this," she asked. "The information will help us to help you."

"Yes, no problem," Tilly said.

"And we've brought ya some refreshments because that hussy never remembers to get anyone a drink. Learn where the kitchen is cos ya'll bloody starve if it's down to her," Spence drawled.

Jenny fixed the drinks, while Mya fixed Spence with a glare.

And then everyone looked at Tilly and waited for her to recount the story of how she and Milly came to be.

"A witch called Augusta created us having fallen out with her schoolfriends," she explained. "But she quickly made friends again with them and we were left in a toy chest. It wasn't until her daughter, Rosa, came upon us, that she spelled us into life. They moved away and left us in the store. Rosa had done her best to give us as much information as she could, but she was just fourteen years old, so it had mainly been books on magic and witchcraft, along with anything educational she could find. But this is Gnarly, and the people here soon discovered we were alone and did their best to help us, teaching us how to live and socialise, and run our store. However, despite knowing about magic, it wasn't until Chantelle managed to perform a successful spell on us that we were able to talk and function separately to one another.

"They never contacted you again after they moved?" Mya queried.

“Augusta came to visit us for a very short while, years ago, and she told us more about the magic contained in the building. Asked us to keep it hidden. Then there was no more contact with the Whitlams.”

“What were their names?” Mya asked, getting out her phone, and I knew she was bringing up her app for The Book of the Dead.

“Augusta Whitlam and Rosa Whitlam,” Tilly stated. “Both born here in Gnarly so it should be relatively easy to look up.”

A few moments later, Mya’s gaze locked on to Tilly’s.

“Honey, they were both murdered. By someone called Wilder Chadwick.”

“Is this Wilder still alive?” Death asked. Mya tapped some more.

“Yes.”

“Then if this Wilder fellow is the one who took away Milly’s magic, he’s not a true demon. He’s still part-human or his death would be listed.” Death rose to his feet. “I’m going to see if I can set something up,” he stated.

I nodded. Meanwhile Mya was still tapping into her phone.

“I’ve looked up births and deaths and Wilder is apparently the younger brother of Augusta’s husband. Husbands took their wife’s surname to keep the witch name going.” She tapped some more and then ran a hand through her hair.

“Wilder killed his brother too,” she said. “He was found stabbed in the street.”

Tilly began to cry.

Death returned to the room. “This isn’t how things are usually done, but I’ve arranged for a spirit snapshot.”

“We’re trying to save a life here; it’s not time to take fucking photos,” Mya yelled.

He looked heavenward. “It’s a little used way of communicating with passed on souls,” he explained. “It can only be used if the death was unresolved and someone else has been put in the path of danger. And we won’t get long.”

“You mean we can talk to Augusta and Rosa?” I asked.

“Possibly. In any case, we need to try,” Death answered.

CHAPTER

FOUR

Tilly

My eyes wanted to close and yet I couldn't allow that to happen. Not right now, when I could glean extra information to help my sister. Part of me did want to sleep, to see if Knight would appear and could help in any way. But right now, I needed to focus on what the Whitlams had to say, if we could indeed reach them.

Death got everyone to go through a cleansing ritual and said some words about not inviting in any other spirits. And then he asked for Augusta to appear. There was nothing for a moment, and I saw Spence was about to say something, then the air glimmered and she appeared.

Augusta Whitlam's ghost was in the room.



Her eyes scanned the space, looking at everyone in turn. Her gaze moved and settled on mine. She said nothing and no expressions of emotion appeared on her face.

"I thank you, ghost of Augusta Whitlam for joining us here today. Please could you tell us the origin of the Wood twins," Death requested.

Augusta began to speak. She was robotic in tone, and I remembered then how Death had described this. A snapshot. Augusta's ghost wasn't truly in this room, just a small part of her memories were present here.

"All I'd heard was of how popular the Whitlam family were in Gnarly. My mother had been adored, simply adored. She told me how I would love school. How everyone would bend over backwards to accommodate me because I was a Whitlam witch."

She carried on speaking, and her eyes stayed on mine throughout.

"I came from a long line of witches. The men who married them took the witch's surname in order that the Whitlam line stayed strong. Where usually there were multiple births in the family, for my father and mother there'd been only me. It was a lot of responsibility I bore on my shoulders. The continuity of the line was with me. But, you know, it was nothing really because I'd be so popular that people would flock to give me everything I desired." She sighed.

"Except, I wasn't popular. Not with the other kids at school anyway. I didn't want to be a leader or a follower, I just wanted to be me. But the other kids, especially girls, knew that being around me was useful to them and so rather than be left alone which I preferred, I always had someone flanking me. Usually, those someones were the twins Sadie and Beatrice Poppleton. On the day I carved the wooden dolls they'd found me sitting by the tree at the back of the school property. I was whittling a piece of bark, carving it into the shape of a cat.

"Beatrice had come stomping over, her sister close behind. She scolded me for being 'dull' saying that Monty Chadwick wanted to invite me to prom. That I must say yes, because then Harold and Bertram would ask them. She said we needed to be looking to the future now, and they were the most eligible of husbands.

"I was so annoyed that I cut straight through my carving. Throwing it aside, I'd stared at them both, exasperated at the constant fawning around the males of our class. They were all idiots. I didn't want to spend time with any of them. I told them I liked being dull. It was better than being pathetic. Sadie gasped and Beatrice narrowed her eyes at me. Beatrice said it was because as a Whitlam I didn't have to seek out a man who could provide for my future, and that perhaps I ought to think of someone other than myself from time to time. That I might think them pathetic, but they found me obnoxious. That I believed I was better than everyone else. She warned me that if I carried on as

I was, my family would fall from grace when I destroyed the line of succession. To hit harder she asked if I thought I could carve my future family?”

My breath hitched at those words. Was that where the idea for us had come from? But Augusta did not pause in her commentary, so I concentrated on her words once more.

“They stomped off, and I stood up and kicked a nearby stone. I knew full well what was expected of me, but just for once I wished to rebel. I was in a temper, and skipping the rest of the day’s classes, I snuck off home. In my bedroom I had all my crafting tools. My father was a carpenter and I’d watched, fascinated, as he performed his craft around the home, making us furniture. Then I’d watch my mother perform her own craft—witchcraft. Never the twain did meet. I’d ask my mother why she didn’t just magic up a chair or table, and she told me that sometimes you had to step back and allow people to have their own role in life. In this case, for my father to feel he provided for the family with his woodwork.

“He always looked so happy when he was working with wood. I’d hang around and as I grew older, he passed me offcuts and small tools, showing me how to use them. At the age of sixteen, I was now very experienced with my carvings and my dad hung a lot of what I created around the home. My mum would admire them too, but then she’d remind me about my appearance and making sure I kept up with my etiquette classes and deportment.

“I took a large piece of wood and sawed it in half, and then I carved out two wooden dolls. I’d heard of voodoo, and I’d decided to make one of Sadie and one of Beatrice, and I’d spell them to be single forever, or to be unhappy for the rest of their lives with dull husbands and a dull life for calling me dull. I’d just finished carving the dolls when there was a knock at the door. Staring out of my window, I saw Sadie and Beatrice below. They waved up. School wasn’t over so they’d clearly cut classes too. I walked downstairs and opened the door. Beatrice apologised for calling me dull and said she thought my carvings were pretty amazing. She urged me to accept the prom date with Monty though because their mother was making their lives a misery going on about finding suitors. She said if I did that, we could maybe do something I liked. She held up my half carved broken cat that she’d glued together and told me she’d tried to mend it. I took it from her and looked it over. She’d done quite a good job of putting it back together.

“Sadie asked if I’d teach them how to carve as she’d like to make a

jewellery box. She said a giant one in which to store all her future diamonds. I laughed then and forgot all about cursing my friends' effigies. Maybe everyone had things to rebel against in life, while having to settle for what must be. So, the carved dolls went in my toy chest. I went to prom with Monty, and a few years later I'd fallen in love and married him."

There was a pause for a moment, and I wondered if that was the end of her tale, but then Augusta carried on.

"We had one daughter, Rosa, and I tried my best not to put a lot of pressure on her, while knowing she was the only chance of continuing our line. But Rosa was such a strong witch, the seventh generation of our line, and I had no idea what she'd do with the wooden dolls in her chest. No idea at all.

"Our family had lived a good life in Gnarly until Monty was tragically murdered while at work in London. Stabbed in the street after a mugging. Shortly after that Wilder, my brother-in-law, and his wife, Christa asked us to move to Chester and live with them. So we did.

"But being away from the source of power was having an effect on my magic and it was becoming weaker. Wilder knew this and I overheard him and Christa arguing one day about her needing to have patience as things were now in motion. I heard her yell at him that she'd waited long enough. Had put up with us long enough. The next day she was gone. Wilder said she'd left him, had walked away and gone back home to her own family, and I wanted to believe him, but the feral look that his eyes had held made a shiver go up my spine. For the first time in my life, I was scared of my brother-in-law.

"Finding the information for Christa's family, I called and asked to speak to her, and was told that she lived in Chester with her husband. I began to wonder then if my husband's death had been an accident after all. I decided to visit Gnarly to see if it was true that the Wood twins existed. And they did.

"For a few days, each time my brother-in-law went about his business, I would appear in Gnarly and see the twins. They'd been taken under the wing of the fell and had maintained the second-hand clothing store called *Seconds the Best*. I reminded them of the power in the cellar, but they'd not forgotten. My young daughter had taught them about magic and witchcraft even though they held no powers of their own, for they were not really of our bloodline after all.

"It was then that a seemingly insane idea had come to me. If vampires

could drain and then feed their victims, making ‘family’, then maybe my own blood could do something for the twins? I paid a physician to draw two vials of my blood on the sly, and I placed them in a fruit drink I gave the twins. They knew of it. I didn’t trick them. It didn’t seem to do anything at all. But at least I’d tried.

“Shortly afterwards Wilder came to me, asking what I’d needed to draw my blood for. Damn doctor had betrayed me. I feared then for my own life, and shortly afterwards I was trapped in a fire where I perished.”

Augusta stopped speaking, as if it were a video where someone had pressed pause, and then there was another shimmer and she was gone.

“Wow,” I said. “Looks like Wilder was a bastard even before he became a demon.”

Mya nodded.

“Let’s see what Rosa has to say before we talk on it further,” Death stated.

But no matter how much he tried to call her through, she didn’t come. Death excused himself from the room, and we all stayed quiet and lost in our thoughts until he returned.

“Rosa is not in Heaven or Hell,” he declared.

Mya’s head snapped in his direction. “But then she’d be here, so where is she?”

“I don’t know,” Death admitted. “If you don’t go to Heaven, Hell, or Purgatory, then you’re stuck somewhere.”

“Like in a chute? Needing to be shoved through?” I asked, confused.

“No, like in a black hole, a void, a place in space and time,” he said.

“She’s lost, you mean?” I pushed.

“Yes, basically her ghost can’t be located,” Death said. “We can’t contact her, and The Book of the Dead can’t inform us unless there’s some kind of communication from wherever she is. Right now, that channel is blocked.”

“I need some time to think. My mind is a complete whirr,” I said, getting to my feet. “Is it okay if I go lie down in my room for a while?”

“Of course,” Mya said. “Shall I come show you where it is again?”

“No, I’m fine,” I replied, and then I paused, looking at Kaf.

“Am I fine? Or do I need someone with me at all times?” I checked.

“You’re okay here. The Home of the Wayward has security, and like Spence said, the house will protect you anyway.”

“Okay. That’s good. Right then, I’ll see you all later. Please come get me

if there are any new developments.”

With that I walked to my room, where the only thing I did was put my notepad and a pen nearby, before I crawled onto the bed and closed my eyes.

I was asleep in seconds.

CHAPTER

FIVE

Knight

I didn't appear in every dream. Not everyone suffered nightmares, and I was only one man. Just as Death couldn't appear at every demise, I was helped by others. Death's souls were often collected by angels and demons. Here in the nightscape, I had lesser female demons called mares, who liked nothing better than to sit on people's chests at night and put awful scenarios into their minds. They'd feed on the fear. It didn't affect a sleeping individual in any other way than leaving that residual feeling of uncomfortableness, and if they stayed a little too long, a longer lasting remembering that felt like a shadow hanging over you.

It wasn't hanging over you, it had been right on top of you. If people really knew the origins of their nightmares it wouldn't be what they'd dreamed they'd be worried about. They'd never want to close their eyes again!

I sat in my office and watched the information on the large monitor. The sleep of the whole world. There was a quota of minutes I had to rack up, and it wasn't anything unrealistic. But mainly, I was there to make sure the mares did what they needed to do. To chase up any whose lights stayed on red, to see why they weren't working. Again, it wasn't difficult because mares loved their work. It was literally satisfying to them.

As demonic punishments went, mine was not severe in terms of what I had to do. The hours were fine. No, my punishment was that I had to serve up people's worst nightmares and the guilt I subsequently felt was my punishment.

I sighed as I looked at the name Tilly Wood on screen. I'd picked her out as soon as I'd got home from the park, putting a 'pin' on her name so that an alarm went off the moment she fell asleep.

Poor Tilly. She'd lost her sister earlier today and while angels like Kaf were there to help her, I had to play on her fears. It didn't mean I couldn't try to help too though, right? As long as it was mixed in with the nightmare then it might go unnoticed by my big demon boss. I sighed with frustration. I didn't even know how I could help anyway.

"What's up with you?" Katya, one of the mares walked in, looking me up and down. She was one of the most experienced mares and was always punctual and efficient.

"Not really feeling it tonight. Not that it matters. Still have it to do anyway."

"Guess that's how it goes when it's a punishment rather than a way of life," she replied. "Whereas I can't wait." She took a look at the board. "Ooh a young lad has just had his first wet dream. I'm going to make him imagine it just happened in front of his whole classroom, with the girl he fancies sitting right next to him." She went off into the dreamscape. I hoped the poor lad forgot that nightmare immediately or he'd be freaking out every time he went to school.

An hour later the pin alarm went off and the green light on the screen informed me that Tilly had fallen asleep. A second alarm would notify me when her REM started, and the green light would flicker. At that point I would go visit her. While I waited, I'd check my stats and ensure the mares were working their assigned quotas.

Everything was running smoothly so far this evening, and as the green light flickered, I walked over to what looked similar to a mirrorball hanging in the corner and spun it. "Tilly Wood, Knight Mare pin one."

A light ray shone down and I touched it and there I went. Travelling into the dreamscape where I'd meet Tilly.



Tilly was dreaming of trying to get to *Books and Buns*, but whichever way she went she couldn't reach her destination. Whereas in real life I could only appear as the ice cream man, in dreams I was free to do whatever I wanted, so I walked past her and stopped.

"Can I help you? You look lost."

She took a few steps back from me. "I'm err, trying to get to *Books and Buns* but I keep getting distracted." Tilly's brows creased as she studied my face. "Sorry, I'm not sure why I can't get there. Do you know the way?"

"I do."

"But you're not from here, are you?" She stared at me quizzically.

"I'm Knight and I'm the ice cream man in the park. You see me occasionally on a hot day."

"Ah, right," she replied, but she didn't look convinced.

"I'm going that way too, so how about you follow me, and I'll make sure you get there," I suggested.

"That would be great. I don't know what's up with me right now. I've been to the shop almost as much as I've been to work, so why I can't get there today I do not know," Tilly said, stepping beside me. "I'm Tilly, by the way. I work at *Seconds the Best*, the second-hand store, with my sister Milly."

"Nice to meet you, Tilly," I said. I decided then that I would enjoy a coffee and cake with Tilly, creating the dream world around her, before I ruined it all with the job I had to do here.

Walking into *Books and Buns*, the store created itself as she remembered, which was good as I had no idea what it looked like. The only place I knew in Gnarly for real was the park. It had been an agreement when I was cursed that I could choose one job to do occasionally where I provided happiness rather than misery to balance the scales somewhat. I'd been given a couple of options, and I'd chosen to be an ice cream man. In the park I could watch people being happy. It kept my brain from seeing nothing but the office and torment.

"What can I get you? My treat," I asked, as we reached the counter.

The next moment we were sat at the table with coffees and toasted teacakes. Because Tilly was dreaming, parts of our current situation would jump unless I interfered. I would keep us chatting at the table, but formalities such as waiting to be served were entirely unnecessary when dreaming.

"This is good coffee," I said, after taking a sip. In the dreamscape things

were only as I imagined, so if I thought it was good coffee, it was. But it wasn't genuine *Books and Buns* coffee. I'd probably never get to experience that.

Tilly smiled at me, and my heart leaped.

Oh no. *Knight*, I warned myself, *you can't fall for her*. Nothing good could come from being a man who could only cause you distress. Any other time like the park I'd fade from her mind.

But my brain and body decided to ignore me as I delighted in the warmth within those eyes, which reminded me of dark autumn leaves and fallen conkers.

"*Books and Buns* has the best coffee. And cupcakes. It started off as a cupcake café you know and then it expanded. You must have a cupcake."

The next thing I knew there was a lemon cupcake in front of me. I took a bite. "That is truly delicious," I said, imagining it so.

"Thanks for bringing me here." Tilly looked around the place. "Do you live around here?"

"No, just sometimes work in the park, but I live quite a distance away." I didn't elaborate.

"I do love an ice cream on a hot day. Chocolate is my favourite flavour, with fudge sauce."

That wasn't what she'd chosen the day everything had gone to shit.

"The last time I served you, you had a normal cornet with a flake."

"Did I? Was I with Milly? She's my twin sister. If so, I tend to just choose what she's having, it's easier."

"Not really. I still have to make two ice creams," I pointed out.

She sighed. "We used to do everything the same. I'm still not completely used to having my independence."

I got her to tell me all about how they'd been created from a piece of wood. It helped me know the background of where they had come from. Now I needed to get her to think of her current awful circumstances, so that when she woke disturbed at least she might have an idea of what she could do next. I knew from my own background that if new demons were around, sometimes they had to do something to balance the scales, hence my time as the ice cream man. Demons hated it of course but had to put it in motion. Maybe they wouldn't need to offset Wilder, but it was worth a try.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"What for?" that crease came back between her brows.

“For what I have to do now,” I said, and I began her nightmare.

Milly walked into *Books and Buns*. Tilly was so very pleased to see her, and I knew deep down, there was a part of her who knew they were currently separate and so this was welcomed. She stood and hugged her sister. “This is Knight,” she told her sister. But Milly stood there, frozen.

“Milly?” Tilly touched her sister and found her no longer human. Instead, a piece of skin from the back of Milly’s hand fell to the floor leaving wood revealed underneath it.

Tilly screamed. “Milly. What the hell? No. No.”

I brought the demon in, as much as I remembered him and got him to speak.

“You should have never been born. I have Milly, and next I’m coming for you,” he screamed at her.

“Is there some management here?” I asked Tilly. “I’d like to report this disturbance to the boss. There must be someone who can stop his inappropriate behaviour.”

This was all I could do. I had to hope that this settled somewhere in Tilly’s psyche.

Tilly ignored me, reaching for her sister. “Milly, stop it. Come back to me.”

But instead, Milly turned first to wood and then she splintered apart.

The demon’s laugh would be the last thing she heard before she woke up screaming.



“Base,” I ordered, and the light beam materialised, taking me back to the main control room.

I felt horrendous after what I’d had to put Tilly through.

“Ooooooh, Knight,” my boss said as he cast his eyes upon me, and for a moment, I thought he’d spotted the clue I’d left Tilly.

But then I noticed the look of utter satisfaction upon his face and how he embraced the fear I’d left.

“You were very creative in that dream,” Baal, the demon of fear, and my big boss declared. “That was delightful work. You’d got clearly into the cerebral cortex there and picked at what that woman feared the most.

Marvellous work,” he said.

The guilt hit me then, flooding my system, and his pupils enlarged along with Satan knew what else as he fed upon my emotion.

“I’m being fed so well tonight. It is truly an incredible night so far,” Baal declared and then he disappeared.

I slumped into a chair, placing my head in my hands. Would I ever get out of here? Ever be able to live a normal life? My budding attraction to Tilly Wood made my misery worse, and the sadder my emotions, the guiltier, the more frustrated, the more Baal enjoyed them. Just as I’d left a trail for Tilly to follow, I needed to go back and think once more about the facts that led me here and see if I also could find a way out of my own nightmare. The one I was unable to wake up from.

CHAPTER

SIX

Milly

“Given that we’re stuck here, then yes, tell me about the past now,” I requested. “The more I know of our creation, the more I can be ready if an opportunity comes for us to escape,” I said.

There might have only been the slightest light, but it was enough for me to see that despite her words to the contrary, currently hope was missing from Rosa’s own gaze.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll start from the beginning, even though you already know some of this. It doesn’t hurt to go over old ground, does it?”

“It might spark something within me. Tell me everything.”

She nodded.

“My father had died. He’d been found in the street, murdered, stabbed to death from an apparent mugging. My mother was being comforted by Uncle Wilder, my dad’s younger brother, and his wife Christa. Mum was so lost in her grief that I felt abandoned with my own. The woman who’d always made sure I was okay, was now too heartbroken to care for me too. I was fourteen years old and knew it was time for me to help my mother instead. I was old enough now to bear some responsibility. To that end, I made myself useful in the kitchen helping Aunt Christa. Uncle Wilder kept saying how good I was, how obliging. I thought my aunt and uncle were wonderful, caring for my

mother and me in our darkest hour.”

Rosa stared towards the windows, deep in thought.

“I was lonely and bored though most of the time, and one day, I decided to go through the toy chest in my room. At fourteen, it had been ages since I’d even opened it, but my mother had insisted it stay there as she held a lot of attachment to the things she’d passed onto me. Many of the toys had come down the generations of Whitlam witches. I decided I’d sort through and see what items needed to be stored in the attic for when I had children of my own and which could be given away. I didn’t want it in my room anymore. I was growing up now.

“It was then I saw the two carved dolls. I’d never really bothered with them before as I remembered a splinter entering my finger when I’d picked one up when younger. The pain of my mother digging it out had stayed with me and so the two dolls had been left at the bottom of the chest. I placed both to one side, the keep side. I decided that I would ask my mum to check through the toys once I’d sorted them, just to ensure I didn’t accidentally give away anything of value. You could never know with witch’s belongings which ones truly held it.

“A week or so later, I got the chance to ask her about the toys as she came to my room. My mother told me that we were leaving Gnarly and were going to live with my aunt and uncle. Seemed now there were no longer generations of Whitlams here, there was no reason for us to stay.

“‘But what about the stones?’ I’d asked. ‘We can’t leave them behind, can we? They hold our power’. I knew of the cellar, of the power my mother held within her. The power I would hold in the future. Of the fact we needed to keep it away from anyone who would attempt to misuse it. You couldn’t see the stones. They only appeared when the next in line for the Whitlam power came. But there were many different species in Gnarly, and many witches and warlocks who would know our power came from somewhere. It could not be left unattended.

“Mum said she’d need to find someone to care for the place, until such time that she could find a way of maybe moving the stones. She’d research our family history. Mum was determined, but it didn’t feel right to me. The Whitlam witches had always resided in Gnarly Fell and now not a single one would be left, leaving our legacy: the stones, at the mercy of a caretaker. But her mind was made up, so instead of arguing, I asked her to check through the toys, seeing as now we would be clearing through everything, ready to

move.

“When she saw the wooden dolls, she told me the story of how she’d almost used them for harm and maybe it was better if we gave them away, so no witch would be tempted to do anything similar. The tale was, I think, supposed to be a warning, but instead, I thought about how I could use them for good. What if I made myself sisters from the dolls? What if my sisters stayed at the store and protected the place? I kept my plans to myself, and my mother busied herself with the arrangements for moving. Uncle Wilder and Aunt Christa went on ahead, back to their place in Chester.

“I researched all I could on animating within our craft, first practicing on plastic insects bought from shops, which I’d then revert back to their original form. I figured if they went wrong, I could simply squash one underfoot. But nothing went wrong. My mother had always said I was destined to be an extremely strong witch and my powers were already potent.

“Fourteen-year-old girls were unpredictable. Fourteen-year-old powerful witches were frankly dangerous left to their own devices.”

“You must have been incredibly lonely,” I noted. “To have lost your father and for your mum to not comfort you during that time.”

“I was. My aunt had done her best to make sure I was okay, but once she’d left I had simply no one, not really. My mother was too lost in her grief and distracted by moving to know what I was up to, until it was too late.

“About a week later, I brought you to life. I think my mind had subconsciously thought of Barbie dolls because that’s how you appeared. You were both so beautiful and kind. You with your blonde hair and blue eyes, and Tilly with her dark hair and brown eyes. Both so very beautiful. I decided your surnames would be wood after what you were created from, and named you Milly and Tilly, names I liked at the time.”

“It was strange,” I interrupted. “When Tilly and I appeared we knew about our human-like form, about our bodies and what they were capable of, but we had no idea about living life. We knew we needed to eat, but didn’t know about restaurants etc.”

Rosa nodded. “And I could only give you information from the perspective of a teenage girl. So you read a lot, as I gave you books on magic, make-up, and fashion. I put on documentaries for you. Showed you life as I knew it. About the stones you needed to protect. You were thirsty for knowledge and learned quickly. The only thing I couldn’t teach you was life experience. Because I didn’t have any myself.”

“Yes, we were innocent in lots of ways,” I stated.

“What saddened me was that my mother never even realised I was hiding you. She asked Gnarly council to appoint someone to look after the place and busied herself with the move. Once we were in Chester, I never thought of you again. What I didn’t know was there was a reason I forgot you. When I arrived in Chester, unbeknown to me, my mother spelled it so I’d not miss the fell or anyone there. She meant for it to ease the emotions of the move, but instead it made me forget you existed.”

I gasped. “So that’s why you never returned.”

“Partially. Some years after our move, my mother decided to remove the spell as I was now an adult. I remembered the two of you and told my mother what I’d done. She’d laughed and declared it a figment of my overactive imagination. I often thought of you both but accepted my mum’s opinion and put it down to the trauma of losing my father. I believed that I’d invented imaginary sisters to help me cope. I didn’t realise my mother had lied.”

“And she never told you she came to see us?”

Rosa shook her head. “Never.”

“She visited us on several occasions over a short period. Checked we knew about how important the cellar was. She seemed surprised by how much you’d taught us. By then we were used to being a part of Gnarly. It’s a family in itself,” I explained. “As you said, your mother asked for a caretaker. Fenella who is the main organiser at Gnarly and who sits on the council came to the shop and found us. We told her we’d been left as the new owners, and she accepted that. We explained how we’d been created and so were not as wise to life as others. Our Gnarly family supported us and helped us grow.”

“I feel so bad that I created you and left,” Rosa said, her expression pained.

“Don’t be. You let us have a life. I have loved the time I’ve had with my sister and living in the fell. Up until today life had been incredible.”

“Really?” She picked at the skin around her fingernails.

“Yes. Like you said we must have hope. Because if two women can be created from wood, and if there is magic in the world, then surely all is not lost. My Gnarly family will do everything they can to get me back.”

“And my ‘family’—and I use that term loosely when meaning Wilder—will do everything he can to stop it.”

“He may be a demon, but he has brought upon himself a Gnarly army, and if you met our Queen, Mya, you would not do anything that might piss

her off.”

“Eeek. Sounds like the place has changed so much since I left. Tell me all about the fell now. About your new queen and anything else that’s been happening of late. That can keep us entertained for a time.”

“It will definitely take a while,” I remarked. “I’ll tell you about our queen, how she dates Death, how she got the curse of not being able to keep love alive removed. Then there’s my friend who became a dragon king, how Fen married Father Christmas, the birth of rare vampire twins. Just so much.”

“Good grief!” Rosa exclaimed.

“Hey, what do we do for food, drink, and bathroom breaks?” I asked, having just thought of it.

“We’re a soul and a spirit. We have no need of such things.”

“Oh. Come to think of it. I’m not hungry or thirsty. So it’s just us here doing this?”

“Yup. Just us in the dim room.”

Her words reminded me of how trapped I was. How imprisoned. Right now, I could talk to Rosa and catch up and discover our pasts. But what if time went on and we were still trapped here. What then? I’d seen the defeat in Rosa’s gaze earlier. I didn’t want to lose hope. I needed to stay positive no matter what.

I thought about Mya’s meditations and affirmations. Things I’d had a smile about because Mya threw herself all into things she liked with a sometimes overenthusiasm that made us raise a brow. Now, however, what she’d taught me might just help me stay the course. Once I’d run out of conversation, I’d encourage us to begin to meditate and express gratitude. We would fight to stay positive and that way we’d stay strong for when Wilder returned. Because at some point he would, and we needed to be ready.

I told Rosa a little of Mya’s ways. “We’re now a two-soldier army, and we’re preparing for battle.”

“Are you this bossy with your twin?” Rosa asked, with a slight smirk to her lips.

“I don’t think I am. Looks like I just boss about little sisters,” I said.

And that brought a large smile to Rosa’s face.

“Sisters,” she repeated.

CHAPTER

SEVEN

Kaf

As soon as Mya had gone to her room, I said my goodbyes and left the mansion myself. I needed to gather my thoughts and also go to *Seconds the Best* as I expected a demon uncle to come visiting at any time, if he'd not been already.

Tilly had passed me the keys and so I opened up and went inside the store. It was past closing now and so I'd just ensure the cash register was totalled up and then I'd spend my evening going through stock and making sure everything was ready for opening in the morning. It was the least I could do to keep things running smoothly for them until we got Milly back and got rid of this Wilder chap.

I sighed in deep frustration. I'd wasted so much time over the past few months, not acting on my feelings for Milly for in case I got sent back to Heaven. It had never entered my head that Milly could end up leaving. Why on earth had I not asked her out? From Tilly's indication Milly liked me right back. I was a fool.

And now I might never see her again. Not in human form anyway.

Mya had placed the wooden doll carving of Milly on top of *The Book of the Dead*, stating that she and Death could use their apps and anyone trying to intercept the doll would come into contact with the book, which did not like

being touched by anyone without permission. In the past it had knocked Mya unconscious when she'd disrespected it.

Once I'd done the routine shop tasks, I sat on my bed, at a loss for what to do as I didn't like my mind being able to ruminate on the worst-case scenarios. Reaching for my phone, I called my brother.

"Hey, dude. You busy?"

"Actually, you've got me on the one night I'm not. Fancy a beer and a catch up?" Connor asked me. "Only, I've the night off, and Mitzi's gone out with Chantelle to watch a show in London."

"You had a night free and didn't call to ask me if I wanted to hang? I'm hurt," I mock complained.

"I'm fucking knackered mate."

"Fucking possibly being the most important word in that sentence as the main reason for the knackered-ness."

"Leave me alone. I'm in love. You should try it," he teased.

"Yes, well there's a problem with that," I stated.

"I know. You might get called back up to Heaven. You also might not. Have you ever thought you might be able to stay on earth? I've been thinking about this. When you were my earth-bound brother, the soul of Cassiel had been made mortal again. Therefore, if it's happened once, it can happen again, right? Talk to the people upstairs."

"That's not the problem at the moment," I said, giving him a short version of what had happened earlier.

"Jesus. I'll be right over, with lots of beer and some hot food from the bistro," he said, ending the call.

It was a rookie mistake I made when I heard a knock on the front door and assumed it would be my older brother. Instead, Wilder the part-demon pushed his way inside the shop.

"Where is she?" he snarled, looking around the place.

"Where's who?" I replied, acting ignorant.

"You've one minute to tell me where I can find the other twin; the one who got away thanks to that bloody ice cream man, or should I say fellow *demon*," Wilder warned. "Or I'll incinerate you and go ask someone else."

I smiled. "Who made you part-demon?" I asked. "And what do they get out of it? They aren't just going to let you get all the Whitlams' magic and take none for themselves. I don't know what deal you think you've made, but I bet the reality is very different. Like *they incinerate you* different."

“Twenty-five, twenty-six...” Wilder continued, but he wasn’t looking as confident now. I was getting to him.

“Tilly is safely away where you can’t get her. Milly’s doll is also in a protected place. I’d suggest you change your plans. We can come to some arrangement as to where you can stick your threats. I’ll give you a clue. It’s a dark place full of shit, just like you.”

“Forty-eight, forty-nine. The clock is ticking. Fifty-one...”

“Have you actually tried the circle downstairs to see if it will open and give you its power, before you rushed into trying to destroy the twins?” I asked him.

He stopped counting.

“I tried to draw it to me like my niece did. She received her powers at my home. When I killed her, it ignored me.”

“Are you sure it killed her; she’s not moved on.”

He raised a brow and smiled smugly. “Got Death inside have you, or that meddling Queen I’ve heard about? Rosa is being held in a not-so-nice safe place where no one will find her. I want her powers and so she had to die, but I might still need the information she holds. Therefore, I’m not ready for her to move on yet. Or for her to move on peacefully.”

“She’s in a holding place of some type then? Thanks for the info,” I teased, even though I already knew this.

An unkind smile spread over his face. “Your time’s up. However, if you let me go to the cellar, I’ll give you time to leave.”

I shrugged. “Feel free to go downstairs. You’ll need the practice of moving in that direction for when you’re dead and become a full demon,” I returned his vacuous smile. “I’m not leaving, so get on with it.”

“You’re a cocky shit. What kind of supernatural are you?” Wilder asked, looking at me so closely I’d bet he’d be able to count my pores.

“This is another reason why you’re not all you think you are. You might be part-demon, but you lack knowledge and that will be your downfall.”

“There’s a trap down there, isn’t there?” Wilder said suspiciously, then muttering under his breath, “*Otherwise, why would he be so eager to let me go down there?*”

The reason I was eager was that my still human brother was due at the door at any minute.

I sighed. “Please yourself. Go look or go home. I’d rather you didn’t look. Just in case you did receive the powers.”

“You’re bluffing me,” Wilder said. “I’m not going down there today. I’ll be back when I’ve found out more about Gnarly. I’ll leave you with a parting gift though in thanks for your helpfulness,” he said, and he extended his arm, a ball of fire leaving his fist as he opened it. My wings came out and I batted it right back at him. It burned the skin on his right cheek before healing back over.

“Ahhh, so you’re on the side of good, and I’m on the side of evil,” he declared. “Good to know for when I’m working out how to kill you.”

“It’s not too late to ask for help,” I told him. “Your greed will kill you before you get those powers. You are taking on everyone who loves the twins, and that’s many, many people.”

His nostrils flared. “Love is a weakness. One I will exploit until those powers are mine,” he warned. “Until the next time, angel.”

He stormed out of the doors.

It was another twenty minutes before my brother turned up, complete with mussed up hair. “Mitzi called in on her way to Chantelle’s,” he attempted to explain.

Chantelle now lived across the road from my brother’s bistro.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. It was possible Mitzi had saved Connor from danger. Something I was going to have to think about. Because if Wilder discovered who I was, and then discovered my brother was human... it would place a target on Connor. It was hard enough losing Milly, but to lose my brother when we’d only recently found each other again? “Erm, Connor, you might have to temporarily move out of your flat,” I said. “Ooh, can I smell chicken wings?”

“Back up, buster, and tell me what’s going on,” Connor demanded.

“It’ll be better to stomach if ours are full,” I replied, reaching for the bags he’d brought.



“I think we need a Gnarly council meeting, an urgent one. Fen will know what to do,” Connor stated once we’d finished eating. “This could affect everyone in the fell. People need to know there’s a part-demon determined to access the shop cellar. That way they can put protection spells over themselves and also, they may be able to help in getting Milly back. Wilder is

essentially taking on a whole army of supernaturals.”

“You’re right. Let me call Fen now,” I said.

Connor reached for his coat. “I’m going to head back and talk to Chantelle once her and Mitzi are back from the theatre. Get her to put a spell on me that will make Wilder think I’m an angel even if I’m not one. I think that’s my safest bet in not becoming an easy target.”

“Another good idea, bro. I’ll text you later and let you know what Fen’s said.”

Saying goodbye to Connor, I closed the door behind him.

Reaching for my phone, I saw I’d received a text notification from Tilly. I tapped in to read it.

Tilly: I had the most horrendous nightmare. I wrote some things down, but it’s faded so fast so I’m not sure what any of it means. I wrote, *evil man made Milly splinter apart. Need to report to management. Does that mean I need to speak to Callie as we were in Books and Buns in my dream?*

I pondered over her words and then typed a reply.

Kaf: Was there anyone else in your dream? A man like the ice cream man?

Tilly: I vaguely remember a man’s voice told me to report to management, but I’m not sure...

Kaf: Never mind. Just know there’s someone on our side but they’re cursed for you to forget them.

Tilly: But you remember them?

Kaf: They’re within the angel and demon realm so I remember him.

Tilly: So report to management could be Callie, or it could be the demon’s management? Maybe you need to ask your angel and demon experts?

Kaf: I’m calling you as I have other things to say.

Tilly answered straightaway and I told her about how Wilder had turned up briefly.

“I’m just about to call Fen to ask her about a village meeting as having Wilder popping in at whim could affect anyone here. He’s a loose cannon. We can ask Callie then if she knows anything through her fae heritage, and I’ll come through to the Home of the Wayward first and talk to Heaven. Can you ask Mya to talk to downstairs and say that Wilder showed up tonight to try to get to the stones, but I freaked him out so much he left without doing

so?”

“I will. Gosh, you shouldn’t be there at the shop, Kaf. You’re putting yourself in danger. I’d never forgive myself if something happened to you.”

“I’m sent here to do good, to protect. You have to accept I need to be at the shop. Wilder’s going to try to get to the seat of power and if it doesn’t give him that power, he’s going to do everything he can to get to you. But you’ll have the whole village behind you, Tilly, remember that. Think you’ll be able to sleep again after your nap?”

“I’m sure I will, even if only for a short time. I only had an hour earlier,” she reassured me.

“Then go talk to Mya, and afterwards, try to relax and keep that notepad and pen handy. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Okay. Text me with what Fen says.”

“Will do. Sweet dreams!”

“I can but hope.” Her voice however suggested she held little.

After ending the call, I immediately found the emergency number noted on the Gnarly council’s website which I knew was Fen’s number and I sent her a text.

Kaf: We have a huge emergency in Gnarly connected to the twins. I need your help ASAP.

Not one minute later she called me back and we arranged to meet at the community centre at ten am. Fen had emergency procedures and would alert everyone.

When I ended the call, I felt better. Like I was doing all I could. I could only hope that there was a way back for Milly, because though Tilly had been getting used to them not being joined at the hip of late, I wasn’t sure she’d survive a permanent separation.

CHAPTER

EIGHT

Tilly

After ending the call, I went in search of Mya. As I walked into the living room, I saw her stuff a notebook down the back of the sofa.

“You saw that, didn’t you?” Mya sighed. “Why didn’t I use my vampire powers to hide it in a split-second.”

I shrugged. “If it’s private, I don’t need to know about it. Or maybe subconsciously you want me to see it. I draw the line if it’s photos of Death naked, but other than that I’m pretty open to chatting about anything on your mind, or any secrets you’re keeping. I won’t say anything. It might take my mind off things, though I do need to talk to you about some stuff. That’s why I came to find you.

Mya paused for a moment and then reaching behind the cushion she brought out the book. “It’s my secret wedding notebook.”

“You’re getting married in secret?” I gasped.

“No, dufus,” she continued. “Secret as in no one knows I have one. I’m all cool about getting married, yeah. If it happens it happens, no biggie kind of thing...” her voice trailed off.

“Except you’ve got super excited and started planning things,” I guessed.

“Inside my head, a bridezilla is wanting to emerge. You have to save me from myself. Death and I don’t even have a wedding date planned.”

“Maybe that’s the first logical step then,” I suggested.

Mya shook her head vehemently. “Oh no. No, no, no, no, no. I need to know exactly what I want for my wedding before a date is set, as otherwise I fear Death will talk to Fen and the next thing I know I’ll have some kind of large white wedding with the whole village staring at me.” She shivered. “I don’t want that, Tilly.”

“And what do you want? I’m guessing there are some ideas in that notebook. Care to share?”

“Really? You’re up for it?” she double checked.

I nodded. “Go for it.”

Mya opened her book and I had to keep myself from exclaiming in shock and possible swearwords, because it was *full to bursting*. Pictures from magazines were stuck in, there were questionable sketches that looked like a four-year-old had done them, and many bullet-pointed lists.

“Wow, you really have been thinking about this,” I finally commented.

“I have and I know I can’t make all the decisions because it’s Death’s wedding too, but really, he’s getting me, so I should be able to have everything I want, right? And also, I’m the bride and everything focuses on the bride if we’re being honest, doesn’t it?”

“If we’re being honest,” I paused, “you are officially a Bridezilla.”

I met Mya’s gaze and we both started laughing. Then I found I couldn’t stop, and tears began rolling down my cheeks as I imagined Mya at the church, having forgotten to even tell Death there *was* a wedding. I told her my thoughts and she collapsed laughing again.

“Oh my god, I needed that,” I said, laying back against the sofa, the occasional giggle still erupting from my throat.

I watched as Mya wrote in capital letters on a page.

DON’T FORGET TO MAKE SURE DEATH KNOWS ABOUT THE WEDDING.

And that was it, we were off again.

Finally, having stopped giggling, Mya took me through some of her ideas, one of which was to have her wedding at the Letwine mansion, given she was a Letwine vampire.

“I think that’s a great idea. Their space is vast both inside and outside. There’s one thing for sure, they’ll be able to get the place set up quickly with marquees and tables and chairs with all that vamp speed available.”

“Will you be a bridesmaid?” Mya asked.

I gasped. “Won’t you be asking Callie?”

“She’ll be my maid of honour, but I want a few bridesmaids too. You and Milly, and Dela, I was thinking. You were all the first to welcome me to the fell. And Lawrie will be giving me away, which he doesn’t know yet, but on vampire terms technically he’s my dad so that’s just too amusing to pass up.”

“If we’re around, then of course we’d love to,” I said, but all distractions were now gone as I thought of my sister.

Mya put her notebook back behind the sofa. “I’m going to pour us a glass of wine each, and then we’ll have a good chat about things.”



Wine in hand, I told Mya about my conversation with Kaf.

“I agree with holding a meeting tomorrow. I’ll be there. Death too if he doesn’t have to go elsewhere. Jenny and Spence can keep an eye on things here. In the meantime, I will talk to Satan or one of the other higher demons. Kaf has the angelic realm taken care of. I’m not sure what else downstairs will say as they were stubborn before, seeing as Wilder isn’t technically wayward, but I’m sure I’ll have some bargaining or blackmail in my repertoire. I just need to have a good think. I’m sure that’s what the ‘report to management’ in your notes is about, although it could just be a dream and not a sign, you know?”

“Kaf said I needed to note down anything that seemed like a message in my notebook.” Something else nagged in the edge of my brain, like there was a reason why. A shadow I just couldn’t make sense of. “He said it was important.”

“Okay. Then for now, I’ll go talk to those downstairs, and you take the rest of this bottle of wine and go relax in your room. I’ll also go to the turrets and see if there’s anything useful there for me to read up on. What do you like to read? I’ll get you some books while I’m there.”

I wasn’t sure I’d be able to concentrate but I needed to focus on something. “Books on dreams please,” I said as the idea suddenly came to me. “And nightmares. Also, anything on witch stones, transfer of powers, that kind of thing.”

“It was supposed to be an idea to distract you from current circumstances,” Mya said bemused.

“While my sister isn’t with me, I want to do everything I can to get her back,” I replied, my voice gentle.

Mya nodded her head. “I understand.”

“But you can get me a couple of books on living room decoration as well,” I added. “And I can have a think about some options for yours.”

“That’s better. At least try for a brain break in between all your trying to help your sister, because it doesn’t seem like sleep is necessarily going to bring you any peace, given you had a nightmare.”

Nightmare. That word felt like it was echoing in my mind.

Nightmare. Nightmare. Nightmare. And again, that shadow form in my periphery. A thought stuck and unable to be brought forward. *Much like when a nightmare itself fades, I mused, and you can’t remember it no matter how hard you try.*



I’d had a shower, put my pyjamas on, and then climbed into bed and drunk more wine while reading the books Mya had dropped off. Firstly, I opened the décor books and made some notes on quick changes that would add a little of Mya’s personality to the mix, while not modernising what was a gothic style mansion. Mya wasn’t an *Elvira* kind of character, and it was important the place retained its character while allowing Mya to infect it with a little of hers. That done, I opened up the book about powers in stones. It spoke about places like Stonehenge and the Cotswolds, discussing the powers in standing stones, but I didn’t find anything about any holding a family’s witch powers and transferring them. Frustrated, I put the book down and picked up one of the books about dreams and nightmares.

The book “The Mystical Dreamer’ claimed that dreams could communicate messages from spiritual beings or supernatural entities. Was that happening to me? Or was it simply my worries about the factual things happening in my life? I read until the early hours of the morning but didn’t find anything I felt proved useful in getting my sister back. In fact, I felt quite the opposite, entirely powerless and useless. I put the books down and then afraid to actually punch anything in the Home of the Wayward like my pillow, lest it take revenge on me, I settled for a silent scream.

Feeling a tiny bit better for letting some rage out, I closed my eyes, pulled

my duvet up over my head and prayed for sleep. It took a while, but eventually it came.

I sat up in my bed, but I knew I wasn't really awake. Dream me had sat up, disturbed by something. Switching on the bedside lamp, I startled when I found the man I'd bumped into before, sitting in a chair at the foot of my bed.

"I'm not really here, it's a dream," the man said.

"Good because I'm in my pyjamas," I stated. "Not the sort of way I'd be happy to appear to a virtual stranger in real life."

"Virtual?"

"Well, I've met you in the street when we went to Books and Buns, but I don't really know you. You just keep appearing in my dreams for some reason."

The man gasped. "You remember you dreamed of me before?"

"Yes, why?" I was a little disturbed by the fact he looked quite shaken by the fact.

"No one ever remembers me. Not from one dream or nightmare to the next."

The word nightmare pinged in my mind.

"Can I ask you something? Even though it makes no sense because this is my dream?" I queried.

"Sure."

"Are you a supernatural or spiritual being who's come to my dreams to pass on a message?"

"I am a supernatural being and while I would like to help you, my role in dreams is primarily to turn them into nightmares."

Dream me paused to consider his words. "You are a supernatural who is here to turn my dreams into nightmares?"

"Yes."

"So you're a bad guy?"

"In dreams turned into nightmares yes."

It was a strange answer. "But the rest of the time?"

"I sell ice cream. It's only an occasional job but I enjoy it. A time I can be around people and cause a smile instead of a scream."

"This dream is bizarre," I told myself.

"Tell me about yourself," the dream guy asked.

"It's funny that you're a dream guy," I said. "Because you are quite dreamy."

The man chuckled. "Is that so? You're quite dreamy yourself."

"That is just typical, that I find a nice guy in my dreams, not in real life."

"You don't have a dream guy in real life?"

"I don't have a dream guy or a nightmare guy in real life." I sat and smacked myself in the forehead. "What is it with that damn word?"

"What word?"

"Nightmare. There's something on my mind and I can't dislodge it. Ugh," I yelled in frustration.

"It's my name," the guy said. "I'm Knight Mare. But you'll never remember. I'm cursed. In a moment I'm going to wreak havoc in your sleep once again. I should have done so already, but it's so nice to talk to you. In real life I think we might have got along."

"I need to find my sister, not a man," I reminded myself. "Where is my sister?"

The next thing I knew, I was no longer in my bedroom. Knight was the ice cream guy, and my sister was touched by a demon and turned to wood. I screamed.

"Why can't I help? Why can't I do anything?" I fell to the floor of the park and wept. Then it was like someone banged loudly on a window. Dream me looked up, and then I woke up.

Grabbing my notepad and pen I wrote just two words: Night Mare. Then I closed my eyes and fell into a dreamless sleep until the morning.



When I woke the next morning and looked at my notepad, I swore. Why the hell had I only written Night Mare? I hadn't even spelled it properly. Yet there was no time to dwell on it right now. Gnarly was meeting at the community centre to discuss my sister. I needed to eat a decent breakfast, drink plenty of coffee, and head over there in the hopes that this would be the day I saw my sister again.

I missed her so damn much.

Changing direction from heading to the living room, I entered the room on the second floor that used to be Death's bedroom/office and was now just used for work. After knocking on the door, I heard Death's voice say, "Come in."

I opened the door and popped my head around. “Hey. I know it sounds silly, but I just wanted to see my sister.”

“It’s not silly at all. Take as much time as you need. I’ll be downstairs with Mya, getting ready to go into the village,” he said, rising from his chair and leaving the room. He patted me on the shoulder as he left. A chill passed through my body, making me shiver.

“Sorry, I forgot that happens,” he said.

I smiled. “Your touch might be cold, but your heart is warm. That’s what matters.”

“Thank you, Tilly, that means a lot,” he said, and he almost skipped out of the room.

Left alone, I walked over to the wooden form of my sister and picked her up. Then I screamed in horror as the bottom of the doll set alight, akin to a newly lit smudge stick. I dropped the doll, which floated in mid-air as if possessed. The Book of the Dead’s pages flipped like crazy, until they reached a blank page, and my sister’s effigy moved across the page leaving a blackened trail of words.

THE ABYSS

Then the words disappeared, the book smacked shut, and the doll fell to the ground. I swept the doll up, speechless to see there were no blackened marks on it at all, like it had never happened.

It seemed the book had managed to communicate with my sister, despite her having not technically been born.

“Thank you,” I told the book, spending a few moments holding my sister, telling her I would do all I could to bring her back, before placing her back down on the book and leaving.

I had really seen those words, hadn’t I? Please don’t let it have been my mind playing tricks on me.

Taking the notepad and pen from my handbag, I wrote under *Night Mare* adding *The Abyss*.

It was time to go get some answers.

CHAPTER

NINE

Milly

I had no concept of time here in the abyss at all. Whether it was dragging, or years were passing, I didn't know, and Rosa couldn't tell me either. All I knew was that I was grateful I wasn't alone because that would have been unimaginable in terms of terror.

"There must be something we can do to escape," I whined to Rosa after a period of sitting staring into space.

"If there is, I don't know what it could be. What I loathe is that Wilder will be glad we're suffering."

"He'll suffer if I ever get my hands on him. I hope if he picks up my doll form I leave him with a splinter that's impossible to remove. Preferably right up his arse crack. I don't mind if Tilly has to shove me there in order to incapacitate him," I muttered.

Rosa sniggered. At least I'd put a smile on her face.

My dark mood persisted though. First, I sat scowling. Next, I got up and paced the small space. Bored with that, I tilted my head back and looked up. Finally, I got on my knees and inspected the perimeter of the room. Nothing revealed itself, and with a large sigh, I stood back up.

Rosa just left me to it. I'd bet she'd done all this herself before my arrival. Either that, or she was hoping I discovered something she'd missed or hadn't

considered.

Pinching the bridge of my nose as I stood a moment, I wondered what to do next. My foot tapped impatiently. “I’m going to the window. Pull me away if I get distressed,” I told Rosa.

“Okay.”

With shoulders back and a fast-paced stride, I moved over to the windows. This time when I looked out, I saw Gnarly Park. My gaze was from the perspective of a watcher, but I wasn’t me as I could see myself. Neither was I taking an overview from a distance. I was near everyone. The ice cream man was there. I’d forgotten all about him. How weird. It was strange watching myself from an outside perspective. There I was standing in my shorts and t-shirt, enjoying the warmth, a smile on my face.

“What do you see?” Rosa asked.

“It’s the day at the park where I was turned back into a doll,” I explained, but I wasn’t so focused on my words to Rosa; no, my focus was more on how I looked at Kaf. Like he was *everything*. More than that, I saw how, when I wasn’t looking, Kaf looked at me. From his appraisal of my body, his eyes focusing on my arse and legs in my shorts (something I’d hoped would get his attention let’s face it), to a glance of *longing*, followed by a look of sadness. Did he like me too? It certainly looked like it from where I was standing. Or was this just a tease, and what I was seeing wasn’t real at all, but a trick to play with my emotions. Yes, I’d bet that was the case. Kaf looked at me in the park and smiled, and the me standing in front of the windows smiled too seeing how handsome he was when his face lit up with happiness.

It was then I noticed that I couldn’t see Tilly. Why could I see everyone else and not her? Panic hit me until I realised what I was actually seeing right now. Tilly’s viewpoint. I was seeing this through Tilly’s eyes.

And then it came. Wilder appearing and rushing me, touching me, and I turned to wood. Everything around Tilly disappeared then, and in the darkness, Tilly shouted, “Why can’t I help? Why can’t I do anything?”

Was she now in this darkness too?

I banged against the windows, but Rosa pulled me back.

“They can’t hear you, Milly. You’ll just wind yourself up.”

But I wasn’t sure because as I’d banged, I’d seen Tilly stop as if she’d heard something and then she’d disappeared too.

Had the vision all been a tease? Or did this mean that my twin had actually heard me? I rushed back to the window but all I saw through it this

time was blackness. I began banging on it again. “Can you hear me? Tilly, are you there?” But of course, there was no answer. This time, Rosa left me to it, until defeated, I returned to sit back down.

“I’m sure Tilly heard me, Rosa. I banged and she stopped what she was doing.”

She squeezed my hand. “It’s just coincidence. You have to keep calm, or this place will drive you mad. We can’t communicate with anyone. We are stuck here until Wilder decides otherwise.”

“You said we had to have hope,” I scolded, my frustration making me short with Rosa. “So while probability would suggest my observation is coincidental, I’m going to retain the tiniest piece of hope that she did hear me until proved otherwise. I shall keep trying to contact my twin,” I declared.

“I’m sorry,” Rosa said. “You’re right. Also, there have never been twins like you, created from wood and witchcraft. Maybe you can do something others cannot. I will also try to be hopeful, but let’s remember it is only the tiniest possibility that she heard you.”

“Agreed, but tiny is better than nothing. I intend to continue to look out of the window regularly to see what else is revealed. Will you do the same?”

“Of course.”

But nothing was shown to either of us through the windows. We had just that barest of light from the abyss itself. Eventually, worn down once more, I sank to the floor and stared into nothingness again for a while, my mind needing a break.

CHAPTER

TEN

Knight

Approximately 1300 AD

My family and everyone else in our village worked the land from dawn until dusk. Or should that be everyone except the clergy and nobility. The church took part of our earnings and I'd sit in a service when I was able wondering why they deserved our money when my prayers for an easier life went unheard.

We relied on our neighbours and they on us because life wasn't easy when it all rested on your crops surviving, begging the Lord for rain or for there to not be a bitter frost. Relief came from the ale we brewed, and the secret gambling dens. Sometimes the roll of a dice meant a good feast. At other times my mother would clip me around the ear and tell me she'd pray to the Lord for my soul when I lost my week's wages.

Many people didn't understand the clergy's teachings, but I felt it was simple. Sin, and the devil took you was one option. Be a good person and the church would take advantage but you'd be rewarded by Heaven in the afterlife was another.

I worked hard, and played when I could, until one winter when everything changed.



The weather was bitterly cold. So much so that crops were destroyed, and many of our village faced an unknown future, my family included. Our local church had said this was due to sin, and in punishment Satan had sent the frosts. They urged us to offer as much as we could to the church, in order God might take mercy on us. My parents were already worried about how we would survive the winter, both in terms of the weather and of getting enough to eat, and now they had the extra burden of the church asking for any spare food or monetary donations. I felt even more of a burden to them because in my twenty-sixth year I should have now moved on with my own family; should have my own responsibilities even if we remained under the same roof. The fact I still regularly gambled my wages had my mother in tears and my father introducing me to his bare fist, but I was convinced that the rare days I won made up for it.

I was a damn fool, soon to be a damned one. But I'd begun to become a disbeliever. Sure that the clergy at our church were just trying to keep themselves fed and alive. Suspecting they didn't care about our survival, just their own.

Following another lecture from my mother after I'd lost a large sack full of grain while trying to win a side of beef and other meats, I'd gone into the village where I'd been thrown out of the church. I sat outside the church grounds, my backside on the dirt floor and my back leant against a stone wall.

"You needing help, son?" a man asked, as he walked by me.

"Not unless you know how to turn bread into wine. No, actually, to turn fresh air into ale," I said dismissively.

"It sounds to me like you've had enough ale. Go home while you can," the man ordered. "Selfishness is a sin, and you don't want to be out after dark in this condition."

"Why don't you mind your own business," I snarled, closing my eyes to block the man out. When I opened them again, he was gone, but another smaller man, an older one, stood in his place.

"He's gone, the one who advised you to go home," the second man said.

"Thank the Lord," I sighed. "I hope you're not here to deliver a sermon to me on how I should behave and what I should do because tonight isn't the night."

“What do you want to do then? Sit in the cold all night?” the man remarked.

*“What I **want** is to live a life where I’m warm, and where those who can sleep at night without worrying where their next meal comes from get a turn in feeling the fear my family does. We come here to pray.” I pointed to the church behind me. “Yet, I’m starting to think God isn’t listening to the clergy here. It’s all smoke and mirrors and parlour tricks where those of the cloth take from us and deliver nothing in return except words. My family and I can’t survive on rhetoric. Maybe if those who delivered it felt the cold and hunger, they might change their sermons and requests and actually do something more to help us.”*

“You sound bitter. You want those who don’t know your suffering to experience it?”

“Yes, and I want to feel the heat, instead of the cold permanently biting at my extremities. You stand there bemused—I can see it in your face—but I don’t remember the last time I felt warm. The ale makes it bearable, but my access has just been cut off. I’m of no use to my family right now unless I leave the village and go beg. To try to make up for what I’ve gambled and lost. That’s what I’m reduced to and I’m tired of it. So very tired.”

The man’s gaze focused on me with interest. Come to think of it, I’d not seen him around here before. Maybe he was an employer from outside our village looking for workers. Had heard of our current misfortune. I sat up straighter.

“And what’s this worth to you? I mean, you risk your life out here in the cold, vulnerable to the elements and to those who would take advantage.”

“When I might not survive the winter, I’m not worrying about what tonight brings. I’m not only tired in body, I’m tired in my mind too. I’ve lost my faith.”

“Yet you sit outside the church. Are you not going inside to see if they can help you?”

“Already been. They didn’t want to know. Just wanted me to repent for my sins. For wasting the grain because I could have donated some of it. Instead, they reminded me I’ve thought only of myself. They told me to think of my sins and do better. Damn them all. I’ve spent twenty-six years of my life being good, maybe I’ll spend some time on the side of evil instead and see where that takes me.” It was supposed to be an internal thought, a flippancy, but I voiced it because of the ale in my system, my self pity still making me

full of contempt, ready to blame anyone but myself.

“I can help you with that, you know. Give you a life where it’s warm. One where you can see the more fortunate suffer. It’s not here though, in this parish. You would have to move.”

Clearly, I was right. The man had come to offer employment. “I accept,” I said drunkenly, reaching out for the man’s hand.

As my hand met his, a sharp burning sensation coursed through my body, cooking me from the inside out.

I’d accepted a demon’s deal. Ignored the first offer, the one where I could have chosen the help from God. Instead, foolishly, before I’d even heard where the second deal came from, from Satan, I’d shook a demon’s hand.

And they were right. It was warm in hell—very warm—and the fortunate people did get to experience fear. But demon deals nearly always came with twists in the tale, and this one was that they only suffered in their sleep. In dreams which came to be known as nightmares. A word some remembered on the cusp of their disturbed sleep, but never knew from where it came. Never remembered the man, or in time other demons, who caused that fear.

For years I asked to be set free, only to be told that until someone forgave me for causing them pain, I would never leave Hell.

And the biggest hell was never knowing what happened to my family. Whether they ever survived that year in the harsh winter, and of what harm my disappearance caused them. Had I contributed to their suffering, by failing them when they’d needed me most?



I pulled myself out of my contemplation. For over seven hundred years I had entered dreams and created fear, and no one had ever remembered me. The only person in Gnarly who was aware of my existence before Kaf was Stan, aka Father Christmas. Possibly because he was descended from Nephilim and so carried traces of angel DNA, and mainly as he belonged to the ‘Dream team’, except he made dreams come true. But he couldn’t help me. Couldn’t make others remember me. I’d felt fated to be in hell for eternity.

Until Tilly’s dream. Tilly had remembered me from a previous dream. She couldn’t remember my name though. It was just as happened before, that dim recollection of the word *nightmare*. But this was *different*. No one had

ever remembered me from a dream before, and now...

Now I couldn't wait until she fell asleep again.

The woman I felt drawn to, was the one to remember me.

For the first time in over seven hundred years, I didn't feel entering a dream would be a curse. Instead, it could be an opportunity.

Towards freedom.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Kaf

The first thing I needed to do before I went to the community centre was to visit the Home of the Wayward and access the attic so I could speak to someone from Heaven.

Spence let me into the house, and directed me upstairs, though I knew my way. This wasn't my first rodeo.

I pulled down the loft ladder and climbed up into the attic space, where I walked towards and pressed the gold button that dialled the Heavens.

The next thing I knew, there was an archangel sitting on a white throne in front of me. He carried a lantern and had a blue jay resting on his shoulder.

"Cassiel," he greeted me.

"Uriel," I went over, and he stood. We embraced and then he sat back down, and I took a seat in front of him.

"Someone is experiencing sadness due to loneliness, and you are trying to help them," he stated. "That is my jurisdiction and so I am here to see how I can assist."

"Indeed. As usual, I find myself not knowing my way forward. The man who is causing this sadness is only part-demon, and the fact that there is some humanity there has me cautious. Although having met him, I found no evidence of his humanity beyond an element of fear."

“Which you should seize on, should you not? A demon would be reckless and have no fear.”

As soon as he said the words, I felt stupid and naïve. Of course, I should be playing on Wilder’s human fears. But then he still had a demon behind him. One yet to reveal themselves.

“Thank you. These wise words have given me a new angle to consider, something I can take to the meeting as a point of discussion.”

“You’re welcome, Cassiel. Remember that you represent duality. That there can be no light without dark, no happiness without sorrow. Use your strengths to ensure there remains this balance.”

His words were like a riddle for me to ponder, yet they had still helped. It was time for me to leave here and go make plans with the rest of the fell.

“Until we meet again, Uriel,” I said, and we once more embraced, and then he was gone.

A white feather laid on the floor where he had been seated. I picked it up and nestled it in the palm of my hand where it slowly disappeared. For we were both made of the same matter, Uriel and I: the divine.



As I made my way down the loft ladder, Mya was coming up from the basement.

“Shall we have a quick chat before we join the others at the community centre?” I suggested.

“Yes. Let’s see if you were given anything other than the run-around. I’ve left with more questions than answers,” she huffed.

“Isn’t that always the way with these people. They only help us to help ourselves,” I noted.

“One day, I’m going to see what happens if I put liquid nitrogen down there to see if Hell can freeze over,” she retorted.

I couldn’t help but smile.

Mya opened the door to a nearby consulting room and indicated for me to step inside. We both took a seat.

I told her what Uriel had said to me about my duality.

“That’s rather like what Spence said. About us all experiencing some trauma before we get to the good stuff.”

“It is, but I felt it was also general. That in life there is always darkness and light, always things in opposition to create balance. It’s not one then the other and done. It continues on throughout life.

“And so does good and evil. Which is why Hell have had to provide me with something to balance the fact Wilder has been given demonic powers. It’s an unfair advantage over the twins.”

“So how did you get on?” I asked.

“Apparently, I am getting a key,” Mya said. “But the demon I spoke to wouldn’t tell me where I’d find it and what it unlocked. Just that I would get a key and it was up to us to discover what it was for. It was all they would offer for one of their demons attempting to disrupt the fell.”

“It’s something at least,” I replied. “Come on, let’s find Tilly and then get to the community centre and see if we can find a way forward.”

Of course Tilly had news of her own. The Book of the Dead had revealed the words The Abyss. A quick investigation on the internet and by Jenny in the library had revealed this to be a place of extreme darkness where souls and spirits could be hidden.

“That’s where they are. My sister and Rosa. I just know it,” Tilly stated.

“It’s another piece of the puzzle,” I said, my eyes moving to look at the clock on the wall. “Come on, we need to leave this for now and get to the community centre.”



When Tilly walked into the community centre with us, she burst into tears.

“Oh my goodness. I knew some people would come to help, but I think the entire village is here,” she said as her gaze cast around at everyone seated.

“Everyone *is* here, sweetheart,” Fen said, approaching. She opened her arms out to Tilly, who stepped into Fen’s embrace. That was it, Tilly slumped and let Fen comfort her.

“I j-just m-miss my s-sister.” Tilly’s voice was muffled into Fen’s clothes.

“We all miss her, and that’s why everyone is here. You are both so dear to us, like daughters of the fell itself. You were left for us to care for you, and I feel like we’ve failed you with what’s happened to Milly.” Fen’s voice was choked with emotion.

Tilly stepped back. “Oh no, Fen. This is all Wilder’s fault. If he hadn’t come to Gnarly, we’d be absolutely fine. The fell has cared for us all our lives. No one here is to blame for any of this.” Her words of reassurance to Fen both comforted Fen and also gave a newfound strength to Tilly. From being immersed in grief, she now appeared determined, her shoulders straight, and she left Fen’s embrace and looked to me.

“Will you begin the discussions?” she asked. “You naturally have a calming influence.”

“Of course.” I took her hand. “Let’s go take a seat and see what the people of the fell have to say about the current situation.”

We walked to the front where there were four chairs set out facing the audience. Fen fixed us with small microphones, and she, Tilly, Mya, and I sat on the seats at the front. With a nod from Fen I began to speak.

“Most of you will now be aware of recent happenings in the fell. Yesterday, in the park, an uncle of the woman who magicked the Wood twins to life, turned Milly Wood back into her wooden carving. This carving is safe and protected in the Home of Wayward Souls until such time as we can reverse the process. However, this uncle, a man named Wilder Chadwick, has made a deal with a demon and currently possesses demonic powers. His goal is to get to Tilly next. Now Wilder is currently still part-human so we can take advantage of that by exploiting his human fear.”

Tilly spoke up. “We have discovered that Milly and I should inherit the Whitlam witches’ power. Wilder wants this for himself and the only way for him to get it is for him to destroy me too. For the time being I am staying with Mya for my own safety, but I’m here today to ask my fellow villagers if they know of any way for me to get my sister back, and to get rid of Wilder and the demon behind him.”

People began shouting out all at once, but Fen raised a hand. “I’ll come to you in turn,” she said, switching on a microphone. She went up to Chantelle. “Yes, lovie?”

“As a witch, can I not make a spell that would undo Wilder’s magic?” she asked.

Mya answered. “I’m afraid not. It’s a demonic magic that can only be lifted by a reversal or by the power that placed it there in the first place, ie the Whitlam witch magic. Unfortunately, the witch who currently holds the power has been murdered and placed somewhere out of reach.”

“That’s terrible,” Chantelle said.

Mya nodded. “I know. We believe... and this is new information we only discovered just before we came here... that both the witch—Rosa’s—spirit and the essence of Milly are being held in a place called The Abyss. We shall of course investigate this further in due course. Thankfully we have an angel on our side who can help us deal with the demons. I’ve been told by the basement that I’m to be sent a key of some kind in order to balance the scales.”

“Will this key unlock Wilder’s actions?” Chantelle asked.

Mya shrugged. “I honestly have no idea.”

“Your help is required though, Chantelle,” I told her. “For a start, I need you to put a spell on Connor so that he appears to demons as an angel. If Wilder gets to know I have a human brother, I’m afraid he will use that against me.”

“I’ll peck his eyes out,” Mitzi yelled. I saw my brother kiss her on the cheek in a thank you.

“Connor already asked. I intend to do it after this meeting,” Chantelle confirmed.

“Thank you.” I was relieved. The sooner my brother was safe, the better.

Lawrie raised a hand and Fen went over to him with her microphone. “You have the support of all the Letwine vampires, should it be needed,” he confirmed. “We can’t drain him as demonic tinged blood is unpalatable, but we can tear him limb from limb. That would certainly take advantage of his human fear.”

“We’d like to refrain from murder if at all possible,” I said.

“Ugh you angels are no fun,” Lawrie huffed.

“We could shut him in a room with you for an hour, Daddy dearest,” Mya said with a saccharine smile. “He’d quickly reverse his magic.”

“Or give him a self-indulgent daughter,” Lawrie replied. “He’d beg for the chance to undo his vile actions.”

“By the way, you’ll be giving me away at my wedding, whenever that is,” Mya added.

“Naturally, I’m your father,” Lawrie remarked, rolling his eyes.

“If we can get back to discussing Milly and Tilly,” I said loudly.

In turn, all of the Gnarly residents pledged help in any way that they could. All said they would be on the lookout for Wilder entering the village.

Fen ended the meeting, ready for the four of us to discuss the outcome of the village discussion. After all had left, we sat down together.

“Is it me or can you feel a kind of power in the air?” Fen said. “Like the community coming together is creating a force of some kind?”

“It could be Gnarly’s own power adding into the mix,” I suggested.

Mya opened her mouth to comment, but all conversation was halted as an elderly woman wearing a tweed suit and her hair in curlers, covered by a hairnet, basically crashed through the door of the room.

“This better be good,” she yelled. “I’d got a hot date. Emphasis on the hot from where I come from. Now I’m out here with my hair not finished.”

We all looked at each other, not knowing who this ranting woman was.

“Do you think she’s a demon?” I asked Mya.

Fen looked. “She could just be in the menopause. Best we ask.” She turned her attention to the woman. “Who are you, dear?”

“I’m Thea,” the woman said. “Your key.”

CHAPTER

TWELVE

Tilly

On our way here Mya and Kaf had updated me about their talks with Heaven and Hell and so I was aware of the ‘key’. I didn’t think any of us had expected it to be the ranting woman though.

“What do you unlock?” Mya asked her.

The woman gave her a stone-cold glare. “Yeah, that’s how Hell works. Here I am to help you with every need.”

“It was worth asking,” Mya snapped. “It would be just like Hell to make me jump through hoops and then for me to find out I only had to ask.”

“What level demon are you?” Kaf asked Thea.

“Who says I’m a demon? I’m a key, that’s all I’m telling you. It’s for you to fathom what I unlock and how that happens.” She sat on a chair, folded her arms across her chest, and exhaled loudly.

“What about if I got you a cuppa and a biscuit?” Fen asked, receiving a glare from the woman despite her kind offer. Fen looked at us all, pulling a face that said, ‘Got a right one here, haven’t we?’

“Cat got your tongue?” Thea asked me.

I ignored her. “I suggest we take Thea to the cellar at the store first; see if she can unlock the stones in some way that they reveal themselves to us.”

“That could go very wrong if Thea is a demon. She might have been sent

with an ulterior motive,” Kaf said. “What if Hell has sent her to access the cellar power for themselves?”

“I think we have to take the risk,” Mya noted.

“I hate all this,” I said, my voice rising with every word.

“Meanwhile I’m loving being here listening to all your whining while my hair is still in rollers, and I’m also now getting cold,” Thea huffed.

“Shut up unless you’ve something helpful to add,” I ordered.

Thea shut up.

It made me wonder...

“Thea, stand up and hop.”

Her eyes narrowed at me, but she did as I requested.

“That’s how I protect us,” I said. “She can only do as asked.”

“You make sure to keep those orders to things that benefit you,” Thea snarled. “I might be like a genie, and you only get so many tries.”

“If you stop being Mrs Angry Pants, then once I have my sister back, I might just pop you around to Charity, our resident hairdresser. She can finish your hair for you and then you can get back to your date,” I shot back.

“Come on then, let’s go to this shop. What are you all waiting for.”

“Please don’t tell us the lock is between your legs.” Mya grimaced. “Ie, we get you ready for a shag and then you’re amenable.”

“I’m the key, not the lock. But just to settle matters, in analogy I’m not a penis and we don’t need to find a vagina. Though he’s a dick and you’re a cu__”

“SHUT UP,” I yelled, before Mya vanquished Thea through anger and we never got the key out of the room.



After leaving the community centre, we all walked towards the boulevard, headed towards *Seconds the Best*. As we did so, we walked past Connor who was standing with Mitzi and Chantelle.

“Oh wow, he is gorrrgeeeeeeous,” Thea said—now free to speak again—almost going into a swoon.

“Isn’t he just divine,” Mya agreed.

“Like a god,” Fen and I said at the same time. How had I not noticed how hunky Connor was before? Mitzi had, the lucky cow.

“What’s... going... on?” Kaf asked, drawing the words out, and looking around him as if waiting for a prankster to pop out saying, ‘Got you’.

“Huh?” I stated.

“Why are you staring at my brother like he’s made of gingerbread, and you want to taste his icing and smarties this second?”

“Are you sure you’re the angel?” Fen asked Kaf. “Because Connor looks heavenly.”

A smirk appeared on Kaf’s face. “Chantelle?” he asked. “Has your spell not quite worked?”

Chantelle was known for getting spells wrong, but had been much better of late, even managing to pass spell school.

“Sorry, I’m just admiring Connor,” she said. “I can’t seem to take my eyes off him.”

“I believe you’ve spelled him as heavenly,” Kaf explained. “When I asked for you to spell him so people not from Gnarly think he’s an angel.”

“Oh, okay,” Chantelle said. “Reverso.”

Suddenly, Connor was back to normal.

“I’ve got my spell a little wrong, just need to tweak some words and do it again,” Chantelle explained. We stood by while she performed her magic.

This time when Thea looked at him, she mock-retched. “Not another one of these goody-two-shoes,” she said. “I’ll be glad to get home.”

Connor scrunched his forehead and then stared at Kaf in a quizzical manner.

“Later, bro,” Kaf said, and then we said our goodbyes and continued on to *Seconds the Best*.



We stood outside the store. “I am letting you inside, Thea, and you are only allowed to do anything connected with your role as the key. You aren’t allowed to attempt to access the power for your own good or anything else of an evil intent.”

“You lot are no fun whatsoever. Don’t bother banishing me from Gnarly when I’m done. I’ve no intention of returning to Dullsville of my own volition.”

“I’ll go in first and just check the place over,” Kaf insisted.

A few minutes later, he returned, unsmiling and humourless. “Wilder has been,” he said simply. “He’s left the place in a mess.”

Pushing past him, I looked at my shop. Furniture was thrown around, some items clearly broken. I ran upstairs to the second floor, but that one was thankfully untouched.

Mya stood behind me. “Come on, Fen and Thea are waiting downstairs and Kaf has gone down to the cellar.”

I nodded and followed her back down. Then we all trooped down into the cellar. Wilder had clearly been there evidenced by the scorch marks and symbols on the walls and the floor.

“I’ll clear this space of the demonic elements,” Kaf said.

But I was focused on Thea. “If you are a key who opens the power of the stones to me, please do so.”

Thea stood still.

“If you open the power of the stones, please do so.”

Nothing.

“If you are here to connect me to wherever my sister is, please do so.”

Still nothing.

“If you are here to connect me to the Whitlams please do so.”

Thea didn’t budge an inch.

“Why are you here?” I yelled in frustration. Kaf placed a hand on my arm instantly calming me down.

“I’m a key,” Thea replied simply.

I’d wanted to launch myself at her prior to Kaf’s soothing influence. But it wasn’t her fault. She’d been sent this way, and it was for us to work out why.

“There’s nothing further to do here,” I said. “Kaf, can you clear this space of Wilder’s presence and demonology. Fen, thank you for being here but you can go home now.”

“I want to help,” she said.

“I know. Maybe you could sit with Stan and think about Thea and what she could be for?”

Fen nodded.

“Mya, we’re going to look at some furniture and other items from here that I think might suit your living room. We may as well get them and send them back via the portal before Wilder or his demon ally return to destroy the rest of my store.”

“And what do I do? Just stand here while you two fawn over a cushion?” Thea whined.

“Yes, just stand there,” I ordered. Once more, her eyes narrowed, but she knew she had no choice.



“Are you sure about this?” Mya checked in with me. “It’s been a strange and stressful day and maybe we should just head back to the house and rest.”

“I need to keep myself occupied,” I replied. I pressed a fist to my lips and tried to hold back the tears that threatened to pour from my eyes. “Just give me a minute,” I said. “I don’t want to cry.”

“Show me the items you had in mind,” Mya prompted, changing the subject and providing the distraction I sorely needed.

Eventually, Kaf returned from the cellar and helped us carry items into the portal. These would be in the portal at the Home of the Wayward by the time we returned and then I could spend some time changing the living room décor and furnishings while I pondered the riddle of Thea some more.

Finally, a couple of hours after we’d started looking, we were done, and the furniture etc had gone.

“Let’s have a nice walk in the fresh air back to the mansion,” Mya said.

Kaf said goodbye as he was staying at the shop.

“Where am I going?” Thea asked.

“You can stay in the basement, seeing they were the ones who sent you,” Mya decided.

“Come on,” I told Thea. “Let’s go.”

“Please, please, please work out why I’m a key,” she pleaded in a whiny voice. “Or I’m going to miss my date with Every.”

“What’s his surname? Thing? One? Body?” I joked.

“His mother misspelled Avery. It’s not a person’s fault what they’re named you know,” she said sulkily.

It was the first time I’d looked at Thea beyond her being a key from Hell. We knew nothing about her. Was she a demon? Had she been born that way or made one? It was time to talk to Mya when we were alone and try to find a way to learn more about her.



Once back at the mansion, Thea was sent down to the basement for the time being and Mya and I set to sorting out her living room. She assessed the space and then got out her phone. “Can you come to the mansion right now? Living room. Yes, it’s an emergency. It’s my eyes,” she said. A moment later, Lawrie appeared.

He peered closely at her face. “What’s wrong with your eyes? Are you blind?”

“Are you blind?” she repeated. “Look at the state of this living room. Now help me move things.”

“You’ve brought me here to help you move furniture?” Lawrie’s lips pulled back in disgust. “You’re a vampire, you can move it yourself.”

Mya folded her arms across her chest and stared at him defiantly. “Yes, I have. It’s your fault that I live in Gnarly, so you can do the heavy lifting while I just advise on where I want things. I need to be able to stand back and look at the overall aesthetic.”

Lawrie gave her a hard smile. “You mean you can’t be arsed. And sorry I brought you here. It’s worked out terribly for you: living in a mansion, meeting the man of your dreams, and getting engaged.”

“Okay, you need to be here to help because that’s what father’s do. They help their daughters when they’re in need.”

“Once again, you misuse my role in your life beyond the fact I drained you to death and then was forced to bring you back to life.”

“It’s still your ju-ju that made me. Therefore, you’re my dad, and I’m your pain in the arse daughter.”

“Fine. Tell me what you wish for me to do,” he said.

I couldn’t help but smile. Mya and Lawrie’s banter was not only amusing to witness, but they clearly both were becoming fond of the other one, despite their words to the contrary.

Mya did join in, and their vampire speed and strength meant the room was changed in record time. They even painted with some secret formula, fast drying paint that the Letwines had developed. Lawrie even popped back to the manor to get some new carpet from a storeroom they had there. Apparently, they kept spares in case of accidents, and by accidents he meant spilled blood, both out of a glass or occasionally out of a body if one of his kind went rogue or an enemy dropped by.

Finally, the three of us stood back and looked at our handiwork. We were standing on a newly fitted black carpet with a swirly indent pattern instead of the dusky pink from before.

“Apart from the carpet, everything else is second-hand so I think we’ve done well,” I remarked.

“It was an off cut as the Letwine rooms are all so very vast, so it would just have been wasted otherwise,” Lawrie said.

“That’s perfect then,” Mya added.

Red blinds now hung from the windows, and the walls were now all white, apart from one accent black wall at the front. The sofa was black, and there was a red accent chair. Of course, the sofa bore cushions: red ones and white ones.

“Can I go now?” Lawrie begged.

“Yes, your work here is done. Hang on, I’ve something for you,” Mya said, leaving the room.

Lawrie addressed me. “If she comes back with something as a genuine thank you, you will have to pick me up from the floor.”

I smirked.

Mya walked back in with a black bin bag. “Here are the carpet remnants. I’ve enough stuff to clear up of my own.” She handed them over.

Lawrie and I looked at each other and burst into peals of laughter.

“What?” she said, staring at one of us and then the other.

“I will treasure this forever,” Lawrie said with deep sarcasm as he gestured to the bag in his hand. “I hope you get your sister back soon, Tilly. Know we are all thinking of you.” He disappeared; his words, though meant well, reminding me of the very thing decorating had distracted me from.

Death walked in then.

“Has someone been murdered in here and that’s why the room now has so much red? Did you not drink enough again, Mya?”

“This, Big D, is our new look living room. The inspiration for which is...” Mya attempted to do a drum roll on the edge of the sofa, “...Louboutins.”

“You made the living room look like your favourite shoes?” he mused. “What about the white walls? How does that work?”

“I didn’t just use my favourite shoes for inspiration.” Mya smiled at Death. “The white is because your work outfit is black and white. Your reaper outfit. You’re my fave too, Big D.”

“Am I?” He raised a brow. “What is it about me you like?”

“I’m going to my room to think about the day’s events,” I said, before I became witness to things I wouldn’t be able to excise from my mind.

The last thing I heard just before I closed the living room door behind me was Mya telling Death they couldn’t do it on the brand-new sofa. So much for not getting distracted by Big D’s big D.



When I made it back to my room, I realised that I felt absolutely wiped out. From seeing everyone at the community centre, to going to the shop, and then decorating—plus my mind working overtime trying to think of the meaning of the key and other ways to get my sister back—I was exhausted. As I heard the door next to me open and bang shut, I grabbed my noise cancelling headphones to block out any unwelcome sounds. Getting my notebook out, I decided to write down all my thoughts from the day. Once that was done, I escaped to the kitchen to get something to eat and drink.

“How did today go, lassie?” Spence asked, from his seat at the small dining table.

My shoulders slumped and Spence pushed out the chair opposite for me to sit on, using his non-wooden foot.

“Everyone was great. They all offered their support, but...”

“It didn’t achieve anything,” Spence finished.

“We have a key called Thea from the demon department,” I said, explaining about the stranger in the basement.

Spence rattled his fingertips on the table. “I’ll get Jenny to see if she can find anything on a demon named Thea, in case she’s known within the hierarchy, though it doesn’t ring a bell. Has Mya asked The Book of the Dead? If Thea wasn’t born a demon, she could be in there.”

“That’s a point. If she was killed to end up being whatever she is, her human life would be in the book, wouldn’t it? Good thinking, Spence.”

“Not just a pretty face, me,” he said, grinning and showing me a mouthful of rotten teeth.

Spence left me to eat in peace. I wouldn’t be asking Mya to consult her app or the book tonight that was for sure.

Instead, when I got back to my room I tapped into my computer and put

in the words night mare.

There was a ridiculous amount of results, none telling me anything of use. Eventually, I gave up and decided on an early night, to see if my dreams might reveal anything more helpful.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Milly

It felt like I now spent prolonged periods of time just sat doing nothing, as if my soul was shutting down. Maybe it was. It could be a restful state, and then again it could be I was dying, or separating away from being Milly Wood. If souls were reborn then maybe that's what would happen to me. I would soon be someone else. But then again, I was trapped here, and if Rosa's spirit couldn't move on, I probably couldn't either.

It was far more likely that being in this confined space with nothing to do was just driving me to the point of insanity.

Standing up, I headed back to the windows.

Rosa had given up in telling me not to keep going there now. Every time there was nothing shown to me, I became increasingly despondent. But I would not give up.

This time as I looked through the window, I saw Wilder. I gasped when I realised where he was. Breaking into the shop.

"Tilly," I said, worried. "Please, not Tilly."

"What do you see?" Rosa asked.

"The shop, and Wilder." I continued to narrate as I watched. "He's inside, but the shop is dark. Tilly isn't there, thank goodness."

Rosa let out a sigh of relief.

“He’s going down into the cellar,” I began. I continued to describe everything I saw. How Wilder said incantations and daubed symbols on the walls. How he chanted and became increasingly angry as the stones stayed hidden. He flung himself at the floor like a caged animal, and then at the walls, clawing at them. His hands left burn marks on the walls and floor. I wondered if his demon energy was consuming him slowly, invading his body.

At the point he gave up, he ran upstairs and threw furniture around. Chair legs broke off and vases smashed.

“I will be back,” he raged, and then he left the store, banging the door behind him.

“I feel so hopeless,” I said. “But at the same time, relieved because he didn’t get what he sought.”

“That’s what you must hold onto,” Rosa said, standing up. “Here, let me look now.”

Rosa stared out at the window. “It’s just the usual blackness,” she said, her voice sinking. “Oh, no it isn’t. It’s the darkness from a room. There’s an elderly woman sitting on a chair.”

“Someone you know?”

“Not at all.”

Rosa continued to look. “She’s talking to someone, but they’re not being shown to me. Neither can I hear or make out her words. How strange.” After a moment of quiet, Rosa screamed, causing me to startle before I hurried towards her. Turning to me, her face was full of shock. I steered her towards the floor, but she was going down anyway.

“What is it?” I asked her.

“The old woman. She turned and she looked right *at me*, Milly. Right at me. Then she laughed. An evil, horrendous laugh that I heard. There was no other sound in that display, but her cackle and I can’t get the sound out of my head.”

“I’m sure it just seemed like she was looking at you,” I attempted to reassure her.

Rosa shook her head.

“She said my name, and her stare... It was pure evil.”

“It’s just this place tormenting us,” I said. “You’re clearly right in that it’s not showing us the truth. It’s messing with our heads.”

“She knew my name,” Rosa said. “She knew my name.”

For a long time, Rosa kept repeating those words, just over and over. It was like she was in the thrall of someone. Eventually, she closed her eyes and stopped talking.

I wondered how she'd be when she woke back up.

I wondered if we should ever look through the window again.

I wondered if the woman she'd seen was real.

Despite it being the stupidest idea ever, I walked back to the window once more. Even knowing I could end up tormented like Rosa wasn't enough to keep me away. I just wanted to see my sister so much.

And there she was. I watched her walk from the kitchen at the Home of the Wayward, down the stairs and into a bedroom. I saw books on Tilly's bed connected with dreams, and a notepad and pen. The image zoomed in on a page. The words Night Mare and The Abyss were written on it. She knew about the abyss? Was she trying to get me back? Then it was like the 'camera' working the vision retreated from Tilly's room. It showed me going back upstairs, to a doorway off the hall, and then going down more stairs. Down, down, down. Until a basement revealed itself. I knew then that the room Rosa had seen was the basement attached to Mya and Death's home. That the woman who'd scared Rosa was the one whose back I was staring at now.

The woman turned around and looked at me.

"Milly, Milly, Milly. That nosiness of yours. I don't know whether to admire you or declare you stupid."

"Who are you?" I shouted through the window.

"That's for your sister to find out," she said. "Or not."

The vision ended.

Was it true what I'd been shown?

If so, Wilder was trying and so far, failing, to get the Whitlam powers. His frustrations were making him ever more dangerous and unpredictable.

If so, Tilly knew about the abyss, but there was a demon in the basement who knew about Rosa and me.

The alternative was that Wilder himself was behind these visions, more tormenting while he was trying to get the power. A way of keeping Rosa and I weak.

I just had to hope that Rosa stayed strong, because to be continually under torment could cause her to give up. I had to remind her who she was. The seventh generation. A strong witch. I remembered then that she'd said the

powers had found her. She'd been able to call them to her via her new home.

Maybe, just maybe, she could call them through the veils, to here?

They weren't her powers now that she'd died.

But wasn't I now one half of who should receive them next? Though Rosa brought us to life as 'older sisters', we were not genuinely of the Whitlam blood line. However, we now carried a trace of Whitlam blood, and so the power would seek us out.

Maybe Rosa could call them to me?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Knight

Something was changing within me. Usually, I spent my days and nights doing what needed to be done: creating my nightmares. The guilt would then rip through me, my own demons feeding the larger one—my boss. But since seeing Tilly, with her kind and beautiful face, and her slightly remembering me, my heart felt like it had begun to beat a different rhythm, and my stomach fluttered. I'd placed another pin on her, to be alerted when she slept, and I couldn't wait. Tonight, I'd been unable to sit still, pacing the floor, and I'd not entered anyone else's dreams in case I missed Tilly's.

When the moment came and the light notified me that she was dreaming, I could have jumped for joy.

I appeared in her bedroom. Once again, I sat on the chair. Tilly woke up and switched on her bedside light, startling when she found me sitting there.

"It's you again. Why do I keep dreaming of you?" She ran a hand through her mussed-up hair.

She'd remembered me again! "Maybe I'm important to you in some way? Or it could be that last time you called me dreamy, and you needed to see me again," I teased.

"How do I know I'm dreaming, and this isn't real?" she asked. "It feels real."

“I can’t tell you if this is real or if you’re dreaming. You’ll find out though, won’t you? Your alarm will go off, or you’ll wake up if it’s a dream.”

“What’s your name? I’m Tilly.”

“My name is Knight. Knight Mare.”

“I wrote that down and couldn’t remember why,” she exclaimed. “It’s your name. That’s a strange name if you don’t mind me saying so. I tried to look up the words to see what they meant, but you didn’t come up on the search.”

“Did you spell my name right? Knight with a K?”

“No. No, I didn’t.”

“You might not find much about me anyway. Little is known of the person who creates fear in people’s dreams.”

“You are the creator of nightmares?”

“The original. It’s where the name came from.”

“Huh, well who’d have thought it.”

“Indeed.”

We sat quietly for a moment.

“If I’m dreaming, I’m going to wake up and forget this again. I hope I remember Knight with a K.”

“I hope you do too. But no one ever remembers me, Tilly, so don’t be surprised if I fade from your mind once again.”

“Do you not live outside of dreams?”

I smiled. “See you’ve forgotten that too. Very occasionally I sell ice cream in the park in Gnarly Fell.”

Tilly began clenching her fists. She looked at them in surprise. “Why am I doing this?”

“Because something in your subconscious is alerting you to a memory, or to danger.”

Tilly sat quietly. “Dreams are so frustrating.”

“Tell me about it,” I said. “I am forever communicating with people who talk nonsense or who forget me.”

“Am I talking nonsense?”

“No, you’re not. It’s why I’m still here. I like talking to you.”

“Y-you do?”

I nodded. “Is it okay if we chat a little while longer before I do what I need to do?” I asked her.

“I’d like that. I’m in no rush to be woken from a nightmare, but I understand you have to do it. How did you come to be this person who appears in dreams?” she asked.

“I’ll tell you, but you’ll forget.”

Tilly shrugged. “Tell me anyway.”

Though the dreams passed in minutes, actually in the dreamscape time could expand or diminish depending on the person’s thoughts. Tilly was in no rush in this dream. Not trying to get to a place she couldn’t reach like the first time I entered her dream. We chatted for a while. I told her about where I grew up. She told me about how she’d been created from wood and that she was a twin.

Eventually though I had no choice but to end things.

“I have to leave now, Tilly, and you know what that means.”

“You’re going to begin my nightmare.”

I nodded.

“That’s okay. I never remember the bad stuff completely. I hope I’ll see you again, Knight, even if it’s only in my dreams.”

I smiled. “I hope so too.”

“Hmmm,” she said.

“Yes?”

Tilly pushed back her covers and climbed out of bed. “I know I’m dreaming, Knight, because all of this is so crazy. Therefore,” she walked right up to me, “I’m going to kiss you, because you’re dreamy, and I might not get another chance.”

She leaned down and kissed me softly on the lips, and then backed away. Lowering her head, she looked up shyly. “I can’t believe I just did that.”

Getting to my own feet, I closed the gap between us, “Well, believe I’m doing this,” I said, pulling her towards me, and kissing her firmly.

Tilly let out a moan as our tongues danced, the kiss becoming more fervent. Sadly, I knew I had to stop this. She had to experience a nightmare if I’d entered her dreams. Those were the rules. But once again, I fathomed I could put a clue in there.

Breaking the kiss, I said, “I’m sorry.”

Then Tilly was in Gnarly Park, standing in front of an easel where she was sketching her sister. Milly stood in front of her messing around.

“Milly, please stop moving around so much,” Tilly protested. “How can I concentrate when you’re never still?”

She added more shading to the portrait.

“Can we break off please? Can we go and get an ice cream?”

“No, I need you to stand still. I’m not finished. The ice cream can wait.”

“If I stand still much longer, I’m going to stay that way,” Milly protested.

“Stop complaining. The quicker I get this finished, the quicker you get your ice cream.”

Wilder walked up to the side of Tilly. “What a fantastic picture. You have talent. You’ve captured your sister’s likeness uncannily. It’s like a photograph.”

Tilly smiled at the man, unaware of his identity. “Thank you. If only she’d stand still, it could be even better,” she said, raising a brow at her sister.

“I can help with that,” Wilder announced, and walking around to Milly, he touched her, turning her into wood. He gloated at Tilly’s agonised face.

“Now you can draw her to your heart’s content,” he said. “She’s very still now.”

I knew that Tilly would be thrashing around in her bed now in real life, desperately trying to escape her torment. But I couldn’t stay.

Ejecting myself from her dreams, I travelled back to the nightscape, where I came face to face with Baal.

Fuck.

“Three times you have entered the dreams of this woman, Tilly Wood,” he commented. “I think that’s enough bad dreams for her, for now, don’t you?”

“Yes, sir,” I replied.

“I’m handing her over to one of the mares. She’s off-limits to you,” he said.

“What,” I cried. “Why?”

“I don’t know the why, and I’m sure you’re not going to tell me. But you’ve formed an attachment for some reason and it’s in my best interests to break it. No more visiting the dreams of this woman, Knight. If you do, you’ll be sent to a lower dimension to be punished, painfully.”

Baal tilted his head, slowly appraising me. “No guilt for me to feed on. That’s not good enough. I think I shall use my powers to remind you of the fact you are my servant.”

He went to the board and pressed an override. Baal entered a screen I’d never seen before. “What’s that?” I asked.

“Your own worst nightmare,” he said. Then he walked over to the

mirrorball and pulled out a beam of midnight blue. “Enjoy,” Baal said, with a cackle.

My surroundings dropped away, and suddenly I was returned to Lincoln, my back against the stone wall that surrounded the church.



“I was dreaming,” I said, as I took in the familiar surroundings. “Demons. What an imagination. I should not drink Arnold’s ale again. There must have been some herbs added to send me addled.”

As I stood, I groaned as my legs ached from being on the floor for so long. I cast my eyes at the church, wondering if I should go in and pray. To apologise to the Lord for my gambling, and to beg for kinder weather.

No, Knight. They’d only ask you for money you don’t have again. They’re not interested. I thought, and I started to wander back home.

As I walked home, every field I passed was blackened. Frost had destroyed everything. The weather that could feed and give strength, could also strip away all of life. Guilt swarmed me as I thought of how I’d lost my wages on ale and gambling for a better week. I could see now that it was more beneficial to have a week of bare essentials, than a week of nothing at all. Selfish. That’s what I was. It’s just that I wanted more for my family, and it pained me I couldn’t provide it.

Deciding I would tell my mother all of this, I walked up the edge of our farmland. I covered my mouth with my palm as I saw that all our crops were still there, untarnished. *How could this be?*

My hands trembled and I felt a slow smile spread across my face. We had food. I would not gamble this, but we would provide for others where we could. I began to run towards the farmhouse, to apologise to my mother and father and to vow I wouldn’t gamble again. There’d be no need anyway. We were fortunate and blessed and could make our own ale!

“Mother,” I shouted, as I crashed through the door, such was my excitement.

But inside I didn’t find my mother.

Inside I found the man I’d made my deal with.

Stopping in my tracks, icy tendrils of fear trailed up my spine.

The man—the *demon*—laughed.

“Allow me to introduce myself properly. I am Astaroth, drawn to you by your laziness. Look at you now. Believing that a miracle has happened, and you can profit from the land you were so quick to plough and then gamble away.”

“I’ve worked hard,” I protested.

“That may be the case. But you’re always looking for an easy way out, and that’s what was offered to you. Firstly, the angel approached you, but you turned them away; and then I did, and you accepted my offer without hesitation.”

“I didn’t know you were evil,” I said.

“Evil comes in many forms. Some might say you were evil to have food to feed the hungry mouths in your home and yet gamble it away.”

Guilt flooded through me with his words.

“This is what you did,” he said, and he took me outside. My family stood there, lined up. They were smiling and happy.

“I don’t understand.” I turned towards Astaroth.

“You’re a demon,” he said. “Remember that and remember what *you* did.”

He disappeared then.

I let out a large exhale of relief.

Or I meant to. A large blast of fire came from my mouth, burning my family to ashes within seconds and then it spread through the fields until all I had in front of me was blackness.

Falling to my knees, I wept.



And then I was back.

Lying on the floor, Baal at my side. He offered his hand to help me to my feet and idiotically I took it. Baal moaned in ecstasy at the contact.

“Your guilt is so delicious. Yes, this was the best course of action. To remind you of your sin, and your agreement.” He dropped my hand. “Get back to work,” he ordered. “I hope you’ve learned your lesson.” He left then without so much as a backward glance.

For hours I went into dreams and left fear, the guilt building up inside me. But what Baal didn’t know was there was another part to the nightmare

I'd created in Tilly's mind, and partway through my shift I visited the other resident of the fell who could help with my plan to assist Tilly. That done, I went back to work and gave people some particularly bad nightmares so my guilt would rise once more.

Baal visited again at the end of my shift, and satisfied with his feed from my emotions, he dismissed me. I wandered around the nightscape, finally sitting on a bench far away from anyone else, looking at the pastel-coloured clouds around me and the red and black fields. You saw the nightscape as you imagined it, and I saw glimmers of hope in the clouds while knowing my feet were firmly in the land of demons.

And here, safely away from everyone else, I remembered Tilly and our kiss, and though I might never see her again, I would keep this ray of light within me, my secret from my life of punishment.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Kaf

Once everyone had left, I checked over the shop once more and then I set to tidying the place up. Wilder hadn't broken too many things; it was just he'd had a throwing fit and there were some casualties. I soon had the place organised and ready for opening tomorrow.

I couldn't help but ponder what Wilder's next move would be. He'd be getting increasingly furious and erratic as the demonic energy sunk into his being and his frustration grew at not being able to access the Whitlam power.

Shit! What about the twins' home? Might he have been there and unleashed his anger on their property?

Letting my wings appear, I spirited myself off to their house.



Other than having been in Tilly's bedroom when she collected her belongings, I hadn't been to their house or seen the rest of it. After experiencing relief that there seemed to be no signs of an intruder, I smiled at how the twins' personalities and where they worked had leached its way into their home. The entrance hall had a few assorted prints on the wall and a

wicker umbrella basket in the corner. Coat hooks were hung with a couple of coats, but also a wide brimmed hat with a floral scarf around it hung on the first hook.

Opening the first door, I entered a living room. The sofa was packed with assorted cushions: florals and pastel satin ones. The flooring was sanded and varnished floorboards, but a large, thick rug covered the area in front of the sofa. The pattern was enough to give me a headache. Boho-style I think they called it. Migraine-style, I'd have termed it. Yet it worked. It all came together and if you'd have asked me to imagine where Milly and Tilly lived, it would have been here.

Reassured that Wilder had not been downstairs, I headed upstairs. The first door I opened was Tilly's and nothing had changed there since I'd taken her to Mya's. I backed away and opened the next door, discovering a small bathroom. When the next door revealed a guest room, I knew that the one room left was Milly's. Suddenly, I felt awkward about seeing her bedroom.

You really do like the woman, I noted to myself.

I wouldn't allow my brain to think any further about what might have happened to her, or what the future could hold. Instead, I pushed open the door.

And was extremely surprised.

I'd expected a similar vibe to the living room, but Milly's room was clean and tidy and done in neutral tones. There was only one cushion that laid on the office chair she had up against a small desk. Knowing I shouldn't, but doing it anyway, I pulled open her wardrobe door. Milly had so many clothes and although there were some colourful ones, most of her outfits were creams, browns, etc. But I'd never seen her wear any of these in the shop. And believe me I'd looked.

Why in the shop was she flowery and vivid, when it seemed the real Milly was much more toned down?

It was a mystery I might never get answered.

And I felt the pain of that deep in my heart in that moment when my feelings for her became clearer than ever.

I knew then that if I got the chance to see Milly again, I would tell her how I felt. Regardless of what the future held; I needed her to know. I wanted to find out more about her: her interests, her hopes and dreams, and if I ended up back in Heaven, I'd ask my colleagues to send her the love of her life because she deserved it.

Walking over to her desk, I picked up the photo she had there of the two of them and my gaze lingered on every pixel of Milly Wood.

We needed her back immediately.

No more messing around.

It was time to find Wilder and deal with him once and for all.

I looked up at the sky and spoke, though I had no idea whether or not they'd hear me. "I will do everything I can to get Milly back. She's important to me," I said.

Needless to say, there was no answer, and I took myself away from the house and back to the shop.

Looking at my hand, I still had the photo in it. I knew I shouldn't have taken it, but I didn't want to leave it. Placing it on the shop counter, I told myself it was so anyone coming into the shop could be reminded of her lovely face in these sad times, when really it was so I could look at the face I was falling in love with.



The following morning, I received an urgent text from Tilly.

Tilly: can you come over? I have some interesting things to report from my dreams.

Kaf: Yes. I'll call at *Books and Buns* and bring breakfast. See you soon.

Leaving the shop and ensuring it was locked securely, I walked the short distance to *Books and Buns*.

"Kaf!" Callie greeted me. The hesitant smile on her face and the rise of her brows indicated she hoped for news on her friend. Her sister, Dela, who was delivering a coffee to a table, dashed back over to the counter.

"Any news?" Dela asked, her body so tense it appeared like she was holding her breath for the answer.

I shook my head. "Sorry, no." I watched the two of them deflate before my eyes.

"Is there anything I can do?" Dela enquired. "The twins let me stay with them in the past. They are two of my best friends and I feel impotent that I can't help."

"Who's impotent?" Lawrie, Callie's husband asked, coming out from the

back.

He stared at me.

“I wasn’t even sure if an angel could have sex, but that answers my question. Obviously, you can’t.”

“Hubby, Kaf isn’t impotent. Can you shut up and clear the tables.”

Lawrie stared at me some more.

In my mind I was wondering if I could have sex. I’d not tried since becoming an angel. Was I allowed? Surely, I was above all that—literally.

He smirked at me, and I knew then my guards had been down, and the wily vampire had read my thoughts.

“I said I felt impotent at not being able to help the twins,” Dela helpfully explained.

“Ah, that clears that up then,” Lawrie said. “And now I’ll clear the tables.”

He moved from behind the counter.

“Sorry about my husband,” Callie apologised. “He absolutely loves tormenting people. He tormented me for years before I actually fell in love with the idiot.”

“She’s so romantic,” Lawrie commented from his table.

“Bloody vamp hearing,” Callie retorted. Lawrie blew her a kiss.

“Let’s start again,” Callie said. “Good morning, Kaf. What can I get you?”

“Two lattes to go please, and two lemon cupcakes. Actually, make that two lemon and three chocolate, plus a red velvet for Mya.”

“Coming right up. Go take a seat, and I’ll bring them over,” she said. “Dela, can you pack up the cupcakes, and I’ll get the coffees.”

“Will do, sis,” she answered, and then she bit her bottom lip. “I miss Milly so much. Please pass on our thoughts to Tilly when you see her. Let her know if she’s up for company, she only has to call me.”

“I will.”

Turning around, I sat down at a table near the counter to wait for my order.

I’d only been there for a minute when Merrin came in. His girlfriend Ginny, who worked in the book side of the café, went running over to him and hugged him with such enthusiasm he banged into my table.

“Sorry,” he said, extricating himself from his girlfriend.

“This is a surprise.” Ginny grinned. “I didn’t know you were popping in

to see me.”

“Erm, I was passing and so thought I’d come see you were okay,” he said, looking at me.

Ginny stepped back and crossed her arms over her chest. “You’re not here to see me at all are you?”

Merrin looked around him, possibly for safety exits, before he admitted, “You’re a bonus to my coming into the café, but no, I’ve actually come to see Kaf.”

“Oh?” I queried, as Ginny went back to her book side in a huff and Merrin pulled out a chair next to me, sitting down.

What could Gnarly’s artist zombie want with me? Was he in some kind of trouble?

“I’m not sure if you’re aware, but I have visions from time to time,” he explained, making my ears prick up.

As this could be good news or bad news, I physically and mentally attempted to brace myself... and failed.

“You had a vision? What is it? Have you seen Milly? Do you know what happens?” I babbled out in a rush of words.

“This one came as part of a dream,” he explained. “I saw myself in this café handing you a sketch of the demon,” he said. “The vision showed me what the demon looked like from your viewpoint.” Merrin went into his pocket and brought out an A5 piece of paper. As he handed it to me, I saw the likeness of Wilder, just as I’d seen him. “You can put this on flyers around Gnarly, warning people of him and with a contact number for sightings,” Merrin suggested.

“That’s a fantastic idea,” I said. “Did you see what happens after I do that?”

He shook his head. “Had a bloody nightmare after that. Dreamed piled up furniture fell on me again.” He shuddered. “That’s all I got. To give you the sketch, and to tell you to put it around Gnarly.”

I relooked at the drawing. “You’re very talented. This is just like him.”

“We are just fortunate that as he’s still human he cannot change how he looks,” Merrin said. ‘As some demons can.’

I nodded. At that point Dela came up with my order. “There you go, Kaf. Give my best to Tilly, and please do tell her I’ll visit if she wants. I meant it.”

“I know, and I will.”

“Oooh, what’s that?” she asked, looking at the sketch.

“This is the demon. Merrin has done it to put on a poster for distribution around Gnarly. I’ll take it to Fen and see if she can make posters and hand them out.”

“I’ll take it to Fen,” Merrin offered. “Otherwise, those coffees will go cold.”

“Are you sure?” I double checked.

“Positive. I’ll just go and smooth things over with Ginny and then I’ll pop to see Fen.”

“I’m very grateful,” I said.

“We’re grateful that Milly has an angel on her side. She’s one herself, personality speaking.”

“Is that why you’re sketching demons? Because Milly is such an angel,” Ginny shouted over, her voice full of envy.

“Vampire hearing,” I said.

“She’s jealous that I might like a kidnapped woman. I guess it shows she cares,” he remarked, looking over at her. “You’re it for me,” he whispered, knowing that she’d hear him.

“I’d better go.” He held his hand out to take the piece of paper back and took a pen from his pocket. “Can you tell me what contact details you want on the poster?”

With that done, he went off to see Ginny. I stood and picked up my order ready to go to the Home of Wayward Souls.

Lawrie walked past. “When Callie made her first vanilla cupcake, she wasn’t sure if she should add a flake. You know, should push the flake into the sponge,” he said.

What on earth was he talking about?

“If it didn’t work, the bun would have been ruined, wouldn’t it? Then she realised she could always cover the hole with more buttercream, and everything would be okay. Turned out the flake and the vanilla cupcake worked out amazingly and all was well.”

“Huh?”

“Of course, the vanilla cupcake would need to be here,” he went on, “for the flake to be able to enter its sponge.”

“Ohhhhh.” Suddenly his meaning became very clear. Thank goodness angels didn’t blush or I’d have looked like I’d been in Callie’s oven for an hour.

“In summary, you need to try the flake. If it works, it’s a triumph. If not,

you can smooth things out and although things have been messed with, all will be fine.”

“Thank you, Lawrie,” I said. “I only hope I can admire the vanilla cupcake again soon.”

He patted my arm. “I hope so too. Obviously, I can’t advise you if your flake is in anyway melted.”

“I’d better leave before these coffees are cold,” I said, before Lawrie gave me any more cupcake analogies that might put me off my lemon one.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Tilly

When I'd woken from my nightmare, I'd sat up in bed attempting to grasp onto my recollections. I reached for the notepad and my pen. I quickly scribbled down.

Drawing Milly and then Wilder came and turned her into a doll.

But as the nightmare faded, I began to recollect a dream. I'd been talking to the hunky guy. Something in my body told me he was familiar in some way. I touched my cheeks and then my lips as I remembered I'd kissed him.

"Oh why is this man not real?" I whined. Then I immediately felt guilty as I remembered I was thinking of my dreams to help my sister, not to be kissing dreamboats.

I went back to looking at my notepad and looked at where I'd written Night Mare. The word Knight came unbidden so I wrote it down.

Knight?

The image of the man was fading again, so I drew him the best I could. It

was basically not much better than a stick man.

Then I sent Kaf a text to come to discuss my latest nightmare.

Nightmare.

Night mare.

Knight mare?

I quickly wrote down my thoughts as my mind puzzled the relevance. Then I went to the bathroom to get washed and ready.



“Morning,” Kaf said as I greeted him at the door. “I’ve brought us two a coffee, but cupcakes for all.”

“Well ain’t you just a true angel in every meaning o’ the word, lad,” Spence said from behind me.

“Give the man a chance to get through the door,” I joked, turning to face Spence and smiling. “The cupcakes really are that yummy though, aren’t they?” I turned back to Kaf. “Let him have first pick.”

Taking the coffee carrier from Kaf, I watched as he opened the box. “Actually, Tilly gets first pick,” Kaf told him.

“I honestly don’t mind,” I said.

“Can I take a lemon and a chocolate, then Jenny gets a choice too?” Spence asked.

“Of course.” I handed them over and Spence went on his way.

“We’re taking everything down to the kitchen here,” I explained, beginning to walk in that direction. “Mya and Death are there ready for the daily bulletin of trying to get my sister back.”

“How are you today?” Kaf asked me.

“I feel like my body and brain are in a race,” I answered. “I just want to do every single thing I can to get my sister back. I’ve had enough now. I feel frustrated and like my temper is rising towards this Wilder idiot.”

“Then let’s get this discussion under way and decide what we’re going to do today,” he said.



Mya was sitting at the kitchen table with a bottle of blood in front of her with

a straw in it. Death had a glass of water. Like Kaf, he didn't need either food or drink, but they still could eat, drink, and appreciate flavours.

"Chocolate or lemon?" I opened the cupcake box to Death, taking out the red velvet and passing it to Mya.

Mya took a bite and moaned in ecstasy.

"Lemon please. I had to deal with a man who accidentally drove into the back of a tipper van which was carrying manure. It suffocated him," Death said.

"What a shit way to die," Mya shot out before giggling.

"Mya!" Death scolded.

She looked contrite.

"His death did stink, it's true," he then added, and they both laughed some more.

I passed him the lemon cupcake and considered their frivolity. I guessed it would get you down if you focused on the dark side of death all the time.

When we all had food and drink in front of us, I began. "I want to talk to you all about my dream last night."

"No disrespect, Tilly, but I'll need to go deal with some more end of life cases soon. I'd rather we just kept to the subject of Milly," Death said.

"These are possibly related," Kaf explained. "Knight said he could only appear in her dreams."

My mouth dropped open. "Knight?"

"Yes, Knight Mare. He can only appear to you in your dreams, and you'll forget him."

"Why didn't you tell me about him before?" I snapped.

His head tilted and he looked at me with a raised brow.

"Oh. You have and I've forgotten?" I queried.

"Bingo. He causes nightmares and then thoughts of him fade. We'll probably have this conversation again tomorrow."

"Maybe not, because this time I can remember him... though it's very vague," I announced.

Kaf's mouth dropped open before he closed it enough to say, "That's impossible."

"Why is it? You know him."

"That's because I'm an angel and he's a demon."

"A demon?" I shouted out. "What?"

Was this true? The guy was a demon. Had he seduced me in my dream?

“Is he an incubus?” I asked, panicked.

Three sets of eyes focused laser-like on my face. “Why would you think this Knight is an incubus?” Mya asked, leaning in closer.

“Tilly.” Kaf got my attention. “Those two will forget him soon after we’ve talked about him. I obviously won’t. But do tell me why you think he might be an incubus. Did he try to seduce you?”

I shook my head. “No, but I kissed him in my dream.”

“In your nightmare?”

“Nope. In the dream I had before it turned into a nightmare. It’s what I wanted to talk about.” I opened my notepad. “I’ve been writing down the word nightmare and couldn’t think why. Then today I remembered the word knight and I wrote it down like this,” I showed Kaf where I’d written: *Knight mare*.

“That’s him. The ice cream man from the park.”

“What?” I said, dumbfounded again. Quickly, next to the word *Knight mare*, I wrote *demon who creates nightmares, also is ice cream man at Gnarly Park*, just in case I forgot this relevant information shortly.

“Now, it’s written down I can hopefully keep this in my brain,” I said.

“If not, I know he’s doing what he can to help,” Kaf stated. “What was the nightmare you had?”

“I wrote down that I was drawing Milly,” I said.

Kaf’s brow creased. “That’s strange because today Merrin called to see me in the coffee shop and said he’d received a vision as part of a dream to sketch Wilder. He was passing it to Fen.”

“Do you think Knight was responsible for Merrin’s vision?” I asked.

Kaf tapped his finger to his lips. “He’d know about Merrin and his being an artist, so yes, I absolutely do. In fact, Merrin said that after that he had a nightmare. I think it’s because of Knight we have this sketch to distribute around Gnarly,” Kaf surmised.

“Go, Knight,” I said cheerily.

Kaf smirked at me.

“Don’t you start with me, Kafziel,” I warned. He knew what I meant because he shut up before I ratted him out to the others about his feelings for my sister.

“Right, once those posters are around then hopefully we will get to know Wilder’s whereabouts and then we nab him,” Mya stated. “That’s our best next course of action. Unless I work out what the key is for.”

“Still nothing from Thea?” I asked.

“Other than complaining that she’s missed her date. She threw each curler at me as she took them out. Then apologised as she realised she needed a brush and a scrunchie.”

“Have you looked her up in The Book of the Dead?” I queried.

“I would,” Death answered. “But she won’t tell Mya her surname or where she was born. I can’t find anyone if I only have the name Thea. As you’re aware, there will be many.”

My temper got the better of me then.

“I don’t know why Hell bothered sending her to us. She’s no help. No help at all. Just probably more trickery from the demons.” I picked my notepad up and then slammed it back down on the kitchen table knocking over my coffee. “Great. The only thing I have of any use, and that’s teeny tiny, and I knock precious coffee on it.”

I saw Kaf reach for me, and I moved out of his grasp. “No, Kaf. I don’t want you to calm me down. I need to let this anger out because it’s eating me from the inside out. All this pain, and missing my sister, and demons are playing games, sending riddles with keys. I’m going down there to the basement. I’m going to make Thea tell me who she is.”

Mya gave me some kitchen roll. “To soak up the coffee,” she explained.

“I *am* going down there,” I insisted.

“Okay, I’ll come with you,” she said. “Just take a moment to compose yourself because a demon is going to be happy if you’re angry. Just think of that. You need to be calm when you approach her.”

“She hasn’t said she is a demon,” I pointed out.

“She’s as good as, if not. She was sent by the basement and has spent all night there,” Mya replied.

Dabbing the paper with the kitchen roll, I couldn’t believe my eyes when I saw how part of the coffee had fallen across the pad.

“Oh my god!”

“What?” Kaf asked.

I pointed to my pad to where the coffee had blotched across the words: The abyss. Or rather it had blotched across four letters of the words. **The abyss.**

Thea.

Thea was the abyss, or the key to opening it.

I’d launched myself out of the door before even a vampire could stop me.

Of course, Mya soon caught me up and together we made our way into the basement.

Thea turned around.

“Oh shoot. You’ve worked it out, haven’t you?” she whined. “Come on then, out with it.”

“Are you the abyss? Is my sister with you?”

“Yes, I am,” she confirmed. Then she turned towards the floor. “Sorry, they deciphered the puzzle. You lost this one.”

“What do you open, key?” I asked her.

“I open the room where your sister’s soul is kept,” she said.

I looked to Mya. “I can get my sister back,” I stated. I almost wept in relief.

Thea’s smile was unexpected.

Was she now on our side?

“Are you sure you want me to open the room they’re in?” she asked. “Because there are two people in that room, and when I open it, the other’s spirit will leave too.”

I turned to Mya, my hands in my hair, because we’d taken one step forward and were behind yet another riddle.

Thea had confirmed where Rosa was but had given us an element of doubt in asking her to unlock the abyss room.

Mya flew at Thea and yanked her scrunchie from her hair, taking a clump with her.

“Owwwwwww.”

“If you think we’re taking you to see Charity now for a blow dry you can think again,” she raged. “We’ll be back with our decision and in the meantime you’d better stay around.” She looked at the floor. “Reveal the demon who is working with Wilder,” she ordered. “Or I will create a spell that plays you Michael Bublé Christmas songs the whole year round. You hear me? I’m not bluffing.”

Nothing happened.

“Come on, Mya, let’s go. We need to figure things out,” I urged.

“Michael Bublé it is,” she announced.

“We will reveal our demon,” a spokesperson for Hell said into the room. “As long as you vow never to threaten us with that man’s songs again.”

“Done,” Mya agreed.

Again, nothing happened.

“Michael Bublé and Mariah Carey,” Mya yelled.

“They’ve done what they said,” Thea announced.

“You’re the demon who gave Wilder power?” I said through gritted teeth.

“Why do you think they made me the key, to even things out?” she said.

I’d just pulled out another clump of her hair before Mya pulled me off her, but Thea looked unperturbed.

“If you don’t figure this out, then Wilder gets your powers, and I get both twin souls and the other spirit,” she said with glee.

“And then you’ll go after Wilder, won’t you?” Mya deduced. “He has no clue.”

“The devil is in the details,” Thea said, “and Wilder is so cocky, he thought he could bargain with me.” She smoothed out her hair, a few more strands dropping to the floor. “The only people I have to answer to are my own demons. They said to be fair we had to offer you the key. It’s been offered. For now, my work here is done,” she said.

“Let’s get out of here,” I said to Mya. “We need to make a plan to get rid of Wilder once and for all.”

“When you’ve faced your darkest hours, filled with fear and terror, it will make your spirit all the more flavoursome for me to consume,” Thea drawled, laughing.

“She who laughs last laughs longest,” I shot out. “You remember that when I come back and all your plans are ashes.”

“Knowing Satan, you just might be too,” Mya told Thea.

She didn’t look so cocky after that.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Thea

The past...

*D*emons were alerted to evil intent in their vicinity, and I just happened to have been walking around Chester looking for fresh victims when I came upon Wilder Chadwick. I'd watched him light and drop the match which set his home ablaze.

I couldn't interfere with his actions, but I could certainly take advantage of his mindset.

Listening in, as he did his best impression of a shocked householder, in mourning for his accidentally deceased sister-in-law (who'd just happened to have been in the house at the time of the terrible tragic fire), I saw the potential in finding a new demon to join my staff in the abyss.

The body I held when I came to earth was just a shell. It resembled an older woman, approximately in her seventies. A deliberate act on my part as people always underestimated them. But really, I was a vast dark space, where I created pockets and prisons to keep the spirits and souls that fed me.

And Wilder Chadwick could help me find them. I'd been too late to collect this Augusta's, but I'd make him a deal for any more he cared to kill.



I followed him and studied him carefully, looking for his strengths and weaknesses, cloaking myself so he had no idea I was around. I would stand outside rooms listening as he comforted his niece, as he celebrated the magic that found her. She was so powerful. I could smell the power like the finest streak of energy, strong as a lightning strike, and I wanted it. But I knew, so did Wilder.

At the point where he began to plan for ways of killing his niece and taking the power for himself, I walked into a bar he'd gone into for lunch and a pint and asked to sit next to him.

He'd been about to say no...

"That's a shame. I was going to discuss your plans to murder your niece," I said, watching the blood drain from his face. I slid into the other side of the booth. "Changed your mind by any chance?"

"What are you talking about?" Wilder asked as he plucked at his jumper.

"I've been watching you. I know you murdered Augusta, that your niece inherited her magic, and that now you intend to murder her too. I'm guessing to acquire it?"

"Who are you?" Niceties weren't happening here. That was fine with me. They gave me the ick.

"My name is Thea and I'm a demon," I told him.

"Wh-what?" Wilder's head moved as he looked at how he might escape.

"Leave and I'll follow you and burn you to ashes," I threatened. "I can do that seeing as you're a murderer. You're fair game now for all demons."

His eyes widened and I saw the tremble in his right hand.

"What d-do you want with me?"

"I want to help. In return of course I'd like some payment. Tell me what you're attempting to do and we can come to an agreement. First of all though, I'd like a nice bottle of merlot. You might like another drink too," I told him. "Call the waitress over and order them."

Wilder did as asked, drinking down the pint in front of him and ordering another.

"Don't let your dinner go cold," I pointed out.

"I seem to have lost my appetite," he said.

With a taste from my first glass of wine, I sat back. "Okay, tell me everything," I ordered.

He didn't have a choice. He could explain freely, or I'd make him. Dastardly deeds were easily extractable by a demon, through mind games or torture.

"My niece has inherited an incredible power. The magic now within her is at its strongest as she's the seventh generation of the Whitlam witches. I want that power. If I kill her, I shall receive it."

"Why is she still alive then?"

"I've got rid of my wife undetected, my brother died in a terrible mugging where he got stabbed, and now my sister-in-law has perished in a kitchen fire. I'm treading carefully and have decided Rosa's death should appear a suicide. I haven't come all this way to not achieve my plans."

"I can help you. Not with the death, but with communication," I said, and I explained of my domain, the abyss. "If you kill Rosa, I can hold her spirit for you undetected. This means should anything go awry, you can still communicate with her. She'll be in a dark room with nothing to do, except peer out of windows which will make her feel worse as they will play on her fears. I can feed on her misery, but when you have her powers, my deal is that I get to absorb her spirit. To feed on it."

"That is all?" You want nothing else from me?"

I could see his quickened breaths and how his hands were so clammy he was wiping them on his trousers.

"That's it."

And so that was how the spirit of Rosa Whitlam came to be in my domain, having seemingly taken a rope to her own neck. That should have been that, except for two crucial details.

The first, that Wilder couldn't access Rosa's powers.

The second, that once he had them, I intended to kill Wilder and find a way to take that power for myself.

As a demon with the powers of generations of powerful witches I imagined I'd be able to turn the abyss into a place of sheer beauty and cruelty. An alternate hell. I might become so powerful as to gain vengeance on those who never allowed me to play in their crowd, who made me form my own dimension.



The fact Wilder couldn't gain Rosa's powers sent him into a rage. He used the charm I'd given him to come visit Rosa, and I peered through from the outside of my windows, watching the exchange.

"Why have I not been able to get your power?" Spittle leapt into the air such was Wilder's anger.

"How should I know? Maybe because you aren't a witch? Perhaps you can't obtain the power with just being a puny human."

"A puny human with a demon friend. I will work out why and I will gain everything. And then the abyss shall keep you and do what they like with your spirit."

He left, but I continued to watch Rosa. She'd been to the window just once and had seen the death of her mother at Wilder's hands. She'd not gone back since, but when he'd gone she approached and shouted.

"Who are you that keeps me here? Who would let that repugnant man carry on threatening me? I hope you all get what you deserve."

The window began to show a memory of a time long ago, when a young girl had brought dolls to life and had left them in a place called Gnarly Fell. Without being aware, she had given me an avenue to explore.

I informed Wilder and he went in search of the twins. Decided it must be those who were in the way of his plans. I gave him a little of my power so that he could banish the magic from their bodies.

All was going so well. I now had the soul of the blonde twin, mine to consume in time. Next, we needed the soul of the other twin, and then to access the seat of power in the cellar. I knew Wilder would be able to access it, once the other twin was gone.

But then they placed her in the Home of the Wayward. Made her known to the angels and also to the demons, to Hell. I found myself summoned to speak to Satan.

My actions meant that Satan had to offer the other twin via Mya a chance to get her sister back. He came up with the concept of the key, and I felt sure they'd not work it out.



But they had.

My only parting shot was to tell Tilly she could get her sister back, but it

would also free the spirit trapped with her. At that point the power would return to the cellar of the store.

I knew she'd use the key, and so now it would be a race against time to get to the cellar and for Wilder to try to kill the twins once and for all.

I would lose the spirits and souls promised and the chance of a greater power too. Unless I took a gamble and gave Wilder more of my demon energy. Made him stronger.

Maybe there was still a chance I could be victorious after all.

CHAPTER

EIGHTEEN

Tilly

Mya and I headed back to the kitchen where Kaf and Death waited for us. She got the two men quickly up to speed while I sat there in a daze, my mind whirling.

“We’re pretty sure it’s Rosa who is trapped in the abyss with Milly,” she said.

“If I free my sister, what happens to Rosa?” I asked Death.

“Her spirit will go straight to Heaven, and her powers will go straight to the cellar at the store,” he explained.

“Right. I guess that means we’d better not use the key then until we have a firm plan,” I said.

“You’ll need to be at *Seconds the Best* in the cellar, we know that much,” Mya said. “You and Milly need to be there to access your powers. Obviously, you’ll not be there alone, so we need to decide which villagers are best to form part of the battle team. I’ll be there, of course.”

“I shall be around ready to collect Wilder’s soul should he perish,” Death said.

“I need to think of how to exploit Wilder’s fears,” Kaf pondered. “In order to put us at an advantage.”

“Maybe we should invite Lawrie to threaten him with being ripped

apart,” Mya suggested. “A little light torture wouldn’t hurt.”

“The demon would probably enjoy that, but yes the human part would be afraid,” Death confirmed.

“I think we need a witch there with it being witch powers we’re accessing, so Chantelle?” I suggested.

Mya shook her head. “We have a much more powerful witch than Chantelle,” she said. “Jenny will come with us.”

“Of course.” I mock slapped myself in the forehead. “I’d totally forgotten she was a great witch.”

“I cursed all the hell because of the villager’s wrongdoings and the place and its house took care of me until Mya returned and I removed the curse,” Jenny said from the doorway. “As Wilder threatens my village, I will be there to do what I can.”

“Other than that, maybe we ask which other villagers wish to take part?” Kaf suggested.

“Good idea. Kaf, will you call Fen and get another quick village meeting together? We need to act quickly now.”

“All we need now is to find where Wilder is,” Mya said.

“He’ll be around,” I stated. “And if I put myself out in the open, he’ll appear.”

“Tilly, you need to be careful. One wrong move and Wilder wins,” Kaf warned.

Death tapped into the app. “Wilder Chadwick’s page keeps glitching. Between his death at the hands of various villagers, through his own actions, and through Thea, and then back to him remaining alive.”

He tapped some more.

“The Book of the Dead is not much use to us today. Different villagers are coming up as potentially losing their lives today.” He put down the app. “I am unable to protect the one I love and that is my deepest regret. Please excuse me a moment,” he said, getting up and leaving the room.

“Poor guy,” I said, forgetting about my own potential shitstorm for a moment.

“He can’t die, he’s Death himself. We could all go kaput today. As much as I love him, we need to focus on us right now and on our survival,” Mya lectured.

“Mya’s right,” Kaf added. “So I’m off to arrange the villages urgent meeting with Fen. I’ll call you as soon as I have everyone at the community

centre.”

With that, he spirited himself away.

“How are you feeling?” Mya asked me.

“Today I could get my sister back, or I could lose my own humanity.” I took a deep breath. “It’s all or nothing and that’s okay for me, because if I lose, then both my sister and I will be consumed by the demon and gone. There won’t be one without the other. I can make my peace with that, although I worry about the rest of Gnarly. What about you?”

“I’m going to kick arse and then I’m going to come back and cheer up my man,” Mya stated.

“Even at a time like this you can think of sex?” I shook my head in disbelief.

“No, silly. I mean I’ll tell him I want to set a date for our wedding,” she explained.

“Oh my god, really? We definitely, definitely need to kick demon arse now. Then I get my sister back and we both get to be bridesmaids.” I reached out the flat of my hand and Mya high-fived me.

“I’m off to look in my wardrobe for what kick arse vampire queens wear to protect their friends and their village,” she said. “You coming?”

“You go, and I’ll go talk to Death a little. Let him get things off his chest.”

“Okay. See you soon,” she said. We both left the kitchen and I walked towards Death’s office. He’d supported me throughout this ordeal and now I could afford a bit of time to do the same in return. I knocked on his door and waited for him to say, ‘Come in’.



“Hey,” I said. I saw my sister’s doll on top of The Book of the Dead still and felt reassured by its presence. Very soon, Milly would be back, though for how long I didn’t know.

“Are we leaving already?” Death asked.

“Not yet. Mya has gone to get ready, and I’ve come to talk to you.”

“Is it about what happens if you die? I’m afraid I don’t know, Tilly. You and Milly are unique.”

“I’ve come to check in with you. See how you are. About your frustration

that you can't help any of us. That as Death you're there to collect the souls of those who perish, even if that's the ones of those you love. Even if that's your queen."

"It makes me think that Death shouldn't seek happiness," he admitted. "Because of the pain it would cause should it be taken away. It's hard enough dealing with death on a daily basis when I don't know them. If it were Mya..."

"Then you would mourn. You would experience what those left behind do. You would lose Mya but gain empathy."

"Very wise words although they don't make me feel any better."

"I know. But I've been thinking a lot about dualities since Kaf has spoken of it. There would be a balance brought if you lost her. That's all I'm saying. Let's not let it happen though, hey? Mya's getting her best assassin like clothes on right now and you have chance to see her in what I guess is going to be a super-tight sweater and leggings."

That cheered him up.

"Thank you, Tilly, for coming to see me. I've always been a solitary character. It's very strange to find I have friends."

"Well, you do, and we're there for you. Unless of course we die and then you can be there for us."

"Duality," Death quipped.

Mya burst into the room. Sure enough, she was in tight black clothing, looking like she was ready to fight in *The Hunger Games*.

"Let's do this," she announced.

"Let's do this," Death and I replied.



It wasn't long before we were gathered once more at the community centre. Jenny was keeping an eye on Thea in our absence.

After explaining to the villagers present about what had been happening, Kaf asked if anyone who wished to be on the 'frontline' would make themselves available. While he dealt with those who offered, taking note of what their role could be, I saw Mya talk to first Callie and then Charity.

"What was that all about?" I asked her.

"Just sorting out a couple of offbeat ideas. Some extra grenades in our

arsenal.”

“Father reporting for duty,” Lawrie said, approaching Mya. “Let me know what I need to do.”

I left them to chat and found myself being hugged by Dela.

“Tilly, I am so there to help. I can make myself small and be disruptive,” she said. “Anything for two of my best friends.”

“Thank you,” I said, hugging her back.

“I just can’t imagine what you’re going through,” she said, tears forming at her lashes. “We will get her back, Tilly, and all will be well. It has to be.”

I gave her a sympathetic smile. She meant well, but it was the fact she was offering to help that mattered to me more than proffered words with no real weight.

“There’s a bunch of us sitting over there, who are Team Get Milly Back,” she said. “I’ll go join them as I’m sure you’ve lots to focus on right now, but if you need me just shout.”

“I will,” I replied. After another quick hug, Dela moved away.

Kaf returned to the microphone sometime later.

“The team going to *Seconds the Best* apart from myself, Mya, and Tilly, will be Lawrie Letwine, Dela Francis, and Charity Feeney. Jenny is also coming from the Home of the Wayward and we will have Thea there as the key. Once the key is used, we do not know what will happen, and many of you have offered to be outside the store if needed. I will now hand you over to Fenella Anderson.”

Fen took the microphone from Kaf. “It has been a long time since there has been such a great threat to our village. Should a demon take on the Whitlam power, it would leave the village at the demon’s mercy. The power grew within Rosa Whitlam to such an extent that it has become almost too strong. My belief is that this is not just because Rosa was a seventh-generation witch, but more because the Whitlam family abandoned their origins and the powers had to grow to seek Rosa out in her new home.”

Wow. I’d not thought of that. It made perfect sense. Once Augusta died, they needed to find Rosa because she did not come to collect them.

“We are however the villagers of Gnarly Fell, and when we need to come together, we always do. Wilder may try to best us, but I believe we will show him—show any threat to our village—just who they’re dealing with.” Fen’s eyes went red, and her fangs descended. She didn’t do it very often and I’d almost forgotten she was now a vampire.

“Sorry about that, folks. Hope I didn’t scare you,” Fen apologised, her body returning to normal.

“Hohohohoho. Red suits you as much as it does me, darling,” Stan joked.

She smiled at him and then went back to talking to the village.

“We’ve got this, Gnarly,” she said. “Let’s save those who need us and then we’ll have a huge celebration afterwards.”

Everyone cheered and then Fen dismissed people to their assigned roles.

This was it. My time here in Gnarly could be coming to an end. I found myself seeking out Kaf.

“If only one of us can be spared, you make sure it’s Milly,” I ordered him. “And then you absolutely better make sure you tell her how you feel. Are we clear?”

“It had better not come to that,” he said. “But, yes, Tilly Wood, if it does, I will tell your sister that I am falling in love with her.”

I gasped at his admission. *He was falling in love with my sister?* Then I threw myself at him in an enormous hug. Kaf opened his wings and I felt the calming influence of them. It helped me focus on what might lie ahead.

I stepped out of his embrace.

“I’m ready now,” I told him. “Whatever comes next. And if it’s my worst nightmare? At least I might see Knight.”

“You remember?” he said, shocked.

“Only because I keep looking at my notepad,” I explained. “I can’t remember what he looks like properly, but I’ve written enough that I know he exists.”

“Let’s go,” Mya said, coming over to us. “Jenny is meeting us at the store and bringing Thea.”

Our team assembled and we were on our way.

CHAPTER

NINETEEN

Kaf

We entered *Seconds the Best* and made our way down to the cellar, all standing around the edge of the room and waiting.

Before long, Jenny appeared with Thea at her side. I saw Tilly's eyes narrow on the woman who'd been holding her sister.

"It's like a game show, isn't it?" Thea teased. "Whoever's got the fastest fingers, or in this case powers."

"This isn't a game to me. It's my sister's life," Tilly spat out.

"You can't blame Thea for her excitement," Jenny said, taking us all by surprise with her support for the demon. "I've been reading up about her, and her life as a demon hasn't been the easiest."

Thea raised her voice, "What do you mean?"

"Just that I now know you've never had any friends and your constantly being ignored by fellow demons resulted in you developing this space, the abyss. Somewhere you could feed on the powers of other unhappy people and distract yourself from the fact no one in Hell liked you, or even hated you for that matter. They were all completely indifferent to you, like you didn't even exist." Jenny turned to us. "While I was keeping an eye on her, I heard Thea tell the basement that she was going to prove herself, by gaining the powers of the Whitlam family and making the abyss a place of terror and pain."

“You mean like Hell?” Tilly asked.

“Indeed. But there’s already one of those isn’t there? I’m not sure that news will have gone down too well with Satan.”

“You’re just messing with me,” Thea accused. “I don’t believe you. My peers and superiors will realise I am worthy of my place in the hierarchy, and I will stand amongst them.”

“Or they’ll still think you’re the most boring fart in history,” Lawrie said in a bored tone. “Like I do.”

“Take that back,” Thea snarled.

“Can’t. Just like a fart, you have the ability to clear a room. Actually, no, I will take that back, as at least a fart can leave a lingering impression.”

Mya’s phone beeped, interrupting the tension, and she quickly looked at it. “Wilder has been spotted and is on his way here. Barb and Delores gossiped near him and so he knows we’re here trying to get the power of the stones and that we have Thea with us.”

“Humanity making him still thick as shit,” Lawrie sighed. “Evil 101: be suspicious of information easily dropped in earshot.”

Then we all went quiet, because footsteps sounded upstairs. Footsteps we knew would belong to Wilder Chadwick.

The footsteps paused for a minute or two above us, and then began again. The sound of footsteps came down the stairs, and then Wilder appeared in the cellar, wiping his hand across his mouth before grinning.

“A welcoming committee. How lovely,” he said before his eyes fixed on Tilly. He took a step towards her, and she shouted, “Thea, unlock my sister and Rosa. NOW.”



Milly

Out of nowhere the abyss lit up.

“What’s happening?” I screamed, but then I saw why the room was suddenly light. We weren’t alone. There was an *angel* in the abyss. *How?*

“You’re free and therefore I’ve come to take the spirit of Rosa to Heaven,” the angel explained. He was so very beautiful, but not in a sexual way. Rather as if he was made from moonbeams and stars. His blue eyes

looked like they were made from the sky itself, his hair the white of clouds.

“You may take a moment to say goodbye,” the angel said. “I’ve frozen time for you to do so as you are needed back in Gnarly, Milly.”

Back in Gnarly.

I could have wept for joy. But then I looked at Rosa, our sister of sorts, and I felt a deep sorrow.

“It’s okay,” Rosa reassured me, and I watched as her shoulders loosened as the tension held in her body ebbed away. “I’m so very ready to move on, away from this place of darkness and into Heaven. I sincerely hope you beat Wilder and that you get to enjoy the rest of your lives in Gnarly with your true family,” she added.

She closed the space between us, and we embraced, crying. When Rosa met my gaze again her eyes seemed brighter. “I’m more than okay with this, Milly. It’s time,” she said, turning to the angel. “I’m ready to see my parents again.”

The angel stepped forward, his wings appearing. Wrapping them around Rosa, she was gone.

And then with a force like a hurricane, I was ripped from the abyss myself.



Kaf

A million things seemed to happen at once.

Jenny pulled the wooden doll from her inside pocket and the next thing, Milly appeared at the side of her. Meanwhile, there was a rumble, and the middle of the floor began to shake before mists swirled and seven stones began to emerge from the ground. Lights of purple and green flashed within and around the stones.

“Take more of my power, Wilder,” Thea yelled, but before she could send it, Jenny magicked up a black box around her. There was no time to ask the how or the why, as Wilder closed the gap between himself and Tilly.

Dela made herself into her small fae self and dashed about Wilder’s face like an annoying fly.

“Quickly,” Tilly ordered me. “Go protect, Milly.”

“What about you?”

“Remember our conversation. Go to Milly, *immediately.*”

I did so, gathering the confused twin into my arms and offering comfort, while watching all the activity around me.

Wilder managed to swat Dela, and she crashed into the wall, lying human sized and dazed.

With the others distracted, it meant that Wilder reached Tilly. He touched her, laughing in her face, but nothing happened.

“Huh?” he said, the smile dropping off his features pretty damn quick.

Lawrie stalked over, his stroll languorous and his smile wicked. “You, dickhead, lost your demonic assistance the moment that black box blocked Thea’s line of communication. But being a fuckwit you didn’t even notice. And you know what that means, don’t you?” he said. “It’s time you discovered what it’s like on the punishment side of Hell.”

Wilder tried to escape, but then clutched his head as he swooned a little. “What’s happening to me?”

“Mr Greedy Guts ate the chocolate cupcake on the counter didn’t he before coming downstairs,” Mya pouted, moving towards him, and talking to him in a baby voice. “But Callie the cupcake queen put sedative in it to make the bad man very, very sleepy. You could call it a fuc-upcake.” She smiled evilly and then kicked Wilder in the balls.

“Oww!” he exclaimed. “Please spare me. I’ll do anything. I don’t want to die.”

“Neither did Christa, or Monty, or Augusta, or Rosa,” Tilly said. “You weren’t bothered by that.” She turned to Mya. “What are we going to do with him now?”

“He’s going to be given to the Breedents at the Letwine mansion, the original vampires,” Lawrie said, clapping Wilder on the back. “And I’m going to make sure they enjoy every morsel. I shall return when he’s dealt with,” he said, and taking hold of Wilder he disappeared.

“My dad can be seriously badass,” Mya stated.



With Wilder gone, we looked over to Dela who was being cared for by Charity. “You okay?” Tilly asked, stepping to make her way over. But she

didn't get chance, a green light reached out for her, holding her in its grasp.

"No!" Jenny shouted. "It's too strong. It will destroy her."

"Let me get to her," Milly screamed, fighting at me to be set free. But I'd made my promise. "I can't. I told Tilly I would protect you over her."

Milly carried on trying to fight me, but she was no match against my strength and exhausted anyway from her ordeal. In the end, she slumped in my arms.

Jenny approached the circle.

"Whitlams of the past who power the stones, I ask that you allow me to transfer your power into the fell itself. It is a place of unexplained magic and the only creation strong enough to contain you now. I invite you to enter my body so that I can liaise with The Home of Wayward Souls and the fell, to transmute your power. We thank your family for its time in the fell, but you have no true descendants. The blood you seek is diluted between your created family and they are not strong enough to accept it. Should you persevere, Tilly and Milly Wood will perish, and your power will remain in this cellar, unhappy, forevermore. Become part of Gnarly, dearest Whitlam witches. It's where you belong."

The green light fell from Tilly, and she dropped to the floor. It caught Jenny and then the purple one wrapped itself around her too. We all watched as Jenny's eyes closed and then opened again, and a different voice came from her mouth.

"We have spoken."

"Rosa!" Milly shouted out, and Jenny's head turned her way.

"We are all in agreement. Our power will disperse amongst the powers of the fell itself. The past magic of deceased former residents lingers in the village and turns the branches of the trees gnarly to remind you we are still among you."

The light shot out through Jenny's body, out of the room, and was gone. There followed a small boom and shake like a mini earthquake. Then the ground shook more, as the stones retreated.

Jenny looked down and in her own voice said, "They are gone. The Whitlams have moved on."

"Now all we have to deal with is Thea," I said, as I let Milly out of my embrace so that the sisters could reunite.

"Oh she's dealt with. I just need to let Hell know to take her. Thea had plans to create an alternate hell. Her new role will be as Satan's chew toy."

The abyss will be no more,” Jenny said. “There’s just one more thing we need to do that Mya organised. If you will, Charity.”

Charity came over and brought a shaver from her pocket.

Jenny opened up one side of the black box where Thea sat transfixed watching out of what looked like a window.

“She’s seeing all the things that cause her fear, just like she did to others in the abyss,” Jenny explained.

“Do unto others,” I said.

“Indeed.”

“I hope that karma doesn’t mean I’m going to end up with my own head shaved,” Charity remarked, looking nervous.

“No worries. I’ll happily do it,” Mya said, taking the shaver from Charity. She then proceeded to hack at the demon’s hair. The more Thea tried to fight Mya off, the worse her hair looked. With long bits and short bits sticking out at odd angles, Mya looked satisfied, turned off the shaver and passed it back to Charity.

“That’s what you get for trying to kill my bridesmaids,” she yelled at Thea. “All done, Jenny.”

“Great. That’s me off then. Spence will be worrying.” The box closed back up.

Jenny left, and shortly afterward the illusion of flames licked up the black box before it vanished into thin air.

The rest of us stood around and glanced at each other.

“Is that it? Is it all over?” Milly asked.

I gave her a strong, decisive nod. “Yes, Milly, it is.”

With that, she ran towards her sister, the two hugging bringing many a tear to a villager’s eyes, including mine.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Milly

“I’m going to take Dela to the hospital, just to get checked over,” Nick, her boyfriend said. He’d been standing outside waiting to assist, and now was looking pensive.

“I’m perfectly fine,” Dela protested from where she was lying on a bed.

“You got knocked unconscious for a moment. You’re being checked over and that’s the end of it,” Callie insisted, having also come into the shop from outside.

Lawrie returned, and walked through to where we were all now sat amongst the furniture in the shop. “Wilder is no more,” he said simply. “Death delivered his soul to Hell, so we can delight in the fact that he can suffer for all eternity.”

“Are you okay?” Callie queried; concern etched on her features.

“I’m more than okay. The people I love are okay and safe.” He walked over to his wife and kissed her.

“Will you call me as soon as she’s been seen by a doctor?” Callie asked Nick.

He nodded.

“I’m right here, I can answer for myself. Honestly, sisters can be so bloody annoying,” Dela snapped.

Realising what she'd said, she turned to Tilly and me.

"Sorry, but you know what I mean."

"We do," I said, "and I'm sure in time, Tilly will do something that gets on my nerves, but right now, we're obviously just so happy to be back together in Gnarly, and our magic restored. Jenny thinks that we won't be able to be turned back to wooden dolls again as the magic that fuels us is part of Gnarly itself now and can't be extracted."

"That's fantastic news," Callie said.

"It really is. We've decided to shut the store for the rest of the week and just spend time together at home, the two of us. Talk about the few days we were apart and what we experienced and celebrate being back together."

"I'll continue to look after the store for the rest of the week. I've quite enjoyed it," Kaf said, from his chair nearby. We'd not had chance to talk since he'd held me in place to protect me, and right now, I was focused on being back with my sister and resting.

Shortly afterwards, Tilly and I returned home.



"It doesn't feel like I was only gone for three days," I said, after we'd shared the details of those days spent apart. "Time made no sense in the abyss."

"Being apart from you felt like a lifetime. I love you so much, Milly. I never want us to be apart again. That is in a 'one of us is in another dimension' way. We can be apart in Gnarly," Tilly clarified. "Like for instance, you can go on a lovely date with Kaf when he asks you."

I blushed.

"Or, you know, you could ask him. Either way, it's happening."

"Do you think so?"

"I do. If this hasn't shown you and Kaf you need to seize the moment, then I don't know what will."

"He could go back to Heaven at any time."

"And if he does, I'll be here to support you. But he also could be here for ages, so go get your man. Not right now, of course. Tonight, we are most definitely resting."

I thought about what she'd said. Maybe if I had a good night's sleep and felt okay tomorrow, I could pop into the store. Just to make sure Kaf was

getting on okay there.

“What about you, Tilly?” I probed, having just heard what Tilly had written on her notepad as part of the rescue efforts. “This Knight fella. I mean he doesn’t sound like a nightmare; he sounds like a Knight in shining armour. He stood in front of you and defended you from Wilder. If he’d not done that, we’d both have been gone. He potentially saved both our lives with everything he did to help.”

“I’m hoping he comes to visit me tonight,” Tilly said. “So I can remember him again. Even if he has to give me a bad dream, as long as it followed another kiss that would be okay.” She clutched my hand. “And then I’m going to take my notepad and go get an ice cream from Gnarly Park. Even if I only get to see Knight in my sleep, or in the park, and then I forget him over and over, that’s better to me than not seeing him at all.”

“Awww, Tilly, you’re in lurve,” I said, tickling her. She started tickling me back, and the sound of laughter permeated the air, dulling down some of the horror of the past few days.



“I’m going to pop to *Seconds the Best*,” I told Tilly after we’d enjoyed a cooked breakfast delivered by Fenella.

She grinned. “I’m so excited for you. Do not mess this up.”

“I’ll try not to.”

“What are you going to wear? That deep purple dress you have would look so pretty.”

I paused. “Actually, I’m going to wear some beige, wide-legged trousers and a cream blouse.”

“Oh,” Tilly said, tilting her head.

“I’ve got bored of boho,” I confessed. “I’ve been saving some more capsule wardrobe type pieces. I’m going to start wearing those if that’s okay with you?”

“Of course it’s okay with me,” Tilly said. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Because we’ve always kind of shared a style. Twinsie style.”

“It’s time for you to dress how you want. It’s time for us to make decisions for ourselves, independently. But we’ll always know that we have each other, no matter where we go or what we do.”

“Why, where are you going?” I asked her, biting my lip.

“Probably back to bed, because Knight didn’t appear in my dreams last night,” she said, frowning.

“Maybe you were too exhausted or something,” I suggested.

“Maybe. Anyway, I’m going nowhere, but I’m sure at some point we might like to take a holiday or something away from the other one, and that will be okay. If we can survive the abyss separating us, we can survive a fortnight in Greece.”

I giggled. “Talking of the abyss. One of the times I saw you, I knocked on the window and I thought you heard me.”

Tilly’s mouth dropped into an ‘O’ shape. “I did hear you. It woke me from my nightmare.”

“Really? That is so strange. Looks like even time and space can’t keep us apart,” I said.

“So very weird. Now go and get changed and get out of here,” my sister ordered.



I peered inside the store. Kaf sat behind the counter looking at a newspaper. There didn’t seem to be any customers on the ground floor, so with a deep breath I pushed open the door and walked inside.

“Milly! What are you doing here? You should be home and resting,” Kaf said.

“I have been, and I will be. There was just something I needed to take care of,” I informed him, walking behind the counter. This was it. I blew out a small breath in apprehension.

“I’ve put all the deliveries away and all the accounts are up to date. Is it the ledger you need?” he asked, turning to me.

I shook my head and closed the space between us.

“Kiss me, Kafziel,” I demanded. Hoping I wasn’t making the biggest mistake of my life.

But as his lips landed on mine, I knew it had been the right one.

“Are you sure, about this? Kissing me, maybe dating me?” Kaf asked in between kisses.

“Never been surer,” I replied. “The store seems really quiet right now. I

think we should close early, don't you?"

"Are you saying what I think you're saying, because I'm not altogether sure of my earthbound capabilities," Kaf confessed.

"Sounds like something we need to explore," I said. "Now go flip the sign and lower the blind."



"I can't sell this bed now, knowing what naughty things we've done on it," I told Kaf, while feeling my cheeks heat.

Kaf pulled me into his arms. "I need to find a place of my own, and I'll take it with me," he said. "Then we can continue to do naughty things on it."

"You're going to get a place in Gnarly?" I suddenly felt giddy.

He nodded. "Fenella offered me a small terrace a while ago. I'll see if it's still available."

"Why on earth didn't you accept it before?" I asked.

"Because then I wouldn't have seen you every morning, would I?" Kaf confessed.

As the penny dropped, I kissed him again, and then that led to other things.

"Kaf?" I asked afterwards.

"Yes?"

"What were you mumbling earlier? It sounded something like, 'I don't have a melty flake'."

He burst into laughter and explained what Lawrie had said.

"Talking about flakes, but one's that go in ice creams," I described. "I wondered if Saturday you might like to meet Tilly and I in the park. Because I'm still annoyed I didn't get that ice cream."

"Are you sure you want to go back there?" Kaf's brow wrinkled.

"I am. I refuse for the park to become a place linked to bad memories."

"And also Tilly can see Knight?"

"Knight?" That name sounded vaguely familiar.

"The ice cream man. He's cursed so you'll keep forgetting about him, but I think he and Tilly like each other."

"Really? Then definitely, Saturday let's go for ice cream."

"What happened to Friday," he asked.

“Friday, you’ll be busy moving into your own place,” I said, kissing the tip of his nose. “The shop can be closed for the day. I’ll certainly need an extra day off now to rest up.” I winked.

“Then Sunday we have the party on the boulevard that Fen’s organised in celebration of the fact the Wood sisters are here to stay,” he said. His face went solemn.

“Don’t do that. Don’t wonder about if you’re here to stay,” I insisted. “One second, one minute, one hour, one day at a time. Let’s make memories. The present is all anyone can have for sure.”

We spent the rest of the afternoon making a lot of memories that in future would come back to me when I was serving customers, making me smile.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Tilly

I'd only had to take one look at my sister's face when she'd returned home to know that she'd had an extremely positive response in going to see Kaf.

"Don't need the details. Get in the shower and then to bed," I ordered.

"I am beat," she said, grinning. "Before I go upstairs though, couple of things. Firstly, Kaf's probably getting his own place tomorrow, and Saturday, we're all going to the park for ice cream."

"I'm not sure about that. Look what happened last time," I said.

She thrust my notepad in my face. "Read it," she demanded.

"Ohhh, I kissed this Knight guy in my dreams and he's the ice cream man? Okay, I'm definitely up for that," I said. "If I wrote about him, he must be important."

"Good. Okay, I'm off for a bath and then bed. See you in the morning," Milly said, disappearing from view.

I looked at my notepad again. I'd had dreams about this guy and written them down, but I just couldn't remember him at all.



Knight

I'd gone into Charity's dreams and worked out that the twins had survived their ordeal. I did feel guilty about the nightmares I'd given her, but I was glad the sisters were reunited. I doubted I'd ever see Tilly again. They were unlikely to come back to the ice cream van after what had happened last time, and I remained banned from entering her dreams.

Even after just one night of not appearing I'd bet I was completely faded from her memory now.

Baal walked past me. "I don't know what is making you so miserable, but carry on, it's delicious," he praised.

He was in luck, because I doubted I'd be happy anytime soon.



Tilly

It was a beautifully hot day and Milly and Kaf had insisted that I be a third wheel and accompany them to the park.

We stood in line in front of the ice cream van and waited our turn.

"What can I get you?" the man asked, and I was struck by how gorgeous he was. What I needed was a fan to waft myself, but instead after checking with the others I said, "Three cones, with flakes, raspberry syrup and sprinkles please."

The guy began preparing things and I turned back to my sister and Kaf.

"Does he look familiar at all?" Kaf asked me.

"No. Should he?" I replied.

"Give her the notepad," he said to Milly.

As I took the pad, I looked at the words written there clearly in my handwriting. This guy's name was there, and the fact I'd kissed him in my dreams.

I turned to my sister frowning.

"Is this true?" I asked.

"No idea," she replied.

"Yes, it's all true," Kaf said, "When Milly was attacked Knight saved you, but he's cursed so you never remember."

The ice cream man began passing over the cones. I passed them onto my sister and Kaf.

“And here’s yours,” he said, handing me my favourite: chocolate ice cream with fudge sauce. He winked. “You need to ask for what you want,” he said.

“How do you know this is what I really wanted?” I asked.

“Because you told me in a dream. I know a lot about you, Tilly Wood. And though it will be like Groundhog Day, and you’ll keep forgetting, I’m willing to remind you however many times I need to.”

“I’m going to ask for something I want,” I stated, thinking of my notepad.

“Oh yeah?”

“I want a kiss from the ice cream man. I know it can only be a peck seeing as we’re in public, but I want to experience your lips on mine. It’s not fair that I can’t remember.”

“Get Milly to hold your ice cream,” he said.

I did so and watched as Knight got out of the ice cream van and walked around to me. Taking me in his arms, he tipped me back and kissed me hard, taking no notice of the rest of his queue. They all whooped and hollered, including my sister and Kaf.

“I’m sorry you’ll forget,” he said when the kiss ended.

“I forgive you,” I replied.

“What?” Knight looked shocked.

“I forgive you. It can’t be helped.”

“You forgive me?” he clarified.

“Yes, you’re worth it. I’d take all the nightmares if it meant I got to see you. It’s worth the pain.”

Suddenly he wasn’t there anymore, the whole ice cream van gone from the park and Knight with it.

“What’s happened?” I panicked.

“Don’t worry. I think you just broke the curse,” Kaf said. “Enjoy your ice cream and let’s wait around a while.”



An hour passed, and then another. After a third, we all agreed we would return home. Me to our house, and Kaf and Milly to his new flat.

I felt calm though because Knight hadn't faded from my memory at all. In fact, I could now recall every time I'd got an ice cream from him, and every single dream and nightmare.

All I could do now was wait.

I got home, made myself a drink and sat on the sofa.



I'd just finished my drink when the doorbell rang. I couldn't remember what time Milly had said she intended to come home, if at all. Opening the door, I found a smartly dressed ice cream man standing on the doorstep.

"You broke the curse. I'm here. If you want me," he said simply.

I threw myself into his arms. "Seriously, you're here. For good?" I asked.

"Yes. I no longer have to create nightmares in people, though of course they'll always be called that. I'm going to change my surname. You'll have to help me think of something."

"All in good time," I said. "Right now, I just want to kiss you over and over," I told him. "Because I remember now how good they are."

CHAPTER

TWENTY-TWO

Fen

I'd vowed to look after the twins, and I was so very grateful they were safe and well. Even better, it looked like both had now found their true loves.

Seeing the village benefit from the lifting of the curse had me feel all warm inside. Gnarly could now blossom.

I took to the microphone I had set up on the boulevard. "Thanks to everyone for coming together when two of our residents needed our help. Today we shall celebrate our amazing twins, Milly and Tilly Wood."

Everyone cheered. The two women looked a little embarrassed, but reassurance from their new boyfriends soon had them smiling.

"Enjoy the food, drink, and entertainment," I said. "Thanks to Death for once more taking to his decks to provide the tunes." Death gave a thumbs up.

I went and stood alongside Stan. Nick and Dela came up to join us.

"Such an amazing day," Dela said.

"You must have been so relieved that your friends are safe," Stan stated, patting her arm. "We're just glad you are. I'm glad the doctor gave you the all clear."

"You're sure they fully checked you over?" I fretted.

"Yes, I found someone who knows the fae," she confirmed. "Actually

though, there is something we found out that we didn't tell you about at the time."

"Oh goodness, what is it? Do you need a blood transfusion or a kidney?" I panicked.

Dela laughed. "Tell them, Nick."

"We're pregnant. Dad, you're going to be a grandfather. Fen, you'll be a step-grandmum."

"It's due at Christmas, fancy that," Dela said, laughing.

I squealed. People looked over at us. "That's amazing. What did Callie and Sheridan say?"

"They squealed too," Dela said. "Anyway, everything is okay and progressing well."

"A new baby in Gnarly," I said, feeling choked. "It's been so long."

"Hey, what about my twins?" Aria Letwine said, coming over. "I'm counting them as part Gnarly seeing as they were born here."

"Very true. I'm just so excited at this new generation," I said.

Then I became distracted as Mya grabbed hold of the microphone I'd vacated. Oh God, what was she up to?

"Can I have everyone's attention please," she requested loudly. Meanwhile Death had abruptly stopped playing his music and shared the same look I was no doubt wearing.

"I know we're here celebrating the twins, but I also want to celebrate someone else," she announced. Please tell me she wasn't going to share Dela and Nick's news? I stepped forward ready to yank the microphone off her if needed, but found myself intercepted by Tilly, who tapped my arm.

"It's okay," she reassured me. "Mya even asked me and Milly if it was alright for her to share our limelight."

"She did?"

Tilly nodded. Then she turned to look at Mya.

"The man at the side of me currently entertaining us all with music," Mya said, "felt frustrated that he couldn't do anything to save me, to save us, during recent events. Yet he did. He consulted The Book of the Dead to attempt to keep us informed. He agreed that Tilly could have a safe space with us." She paused to look at him. "I know what he'll say. That I could do those things without him, and that is why I'm on this stage right now. I don't want to do anything without you, Big D. Can you come and join me here?"

Tentatively, Death walked towards Mya, though he did so while checking

around him for any surprises that might appear. Mya was unpredictable.

“Death. Big D. My fiancé. I was hesitant about marriage. You know I don’t come from a great background, so it’s difficult for me to associate marriage with happiness. But you show me every day how happy I can be with you. Now it’s my turn to show you how I feel. You already proposed, but I’m here to say, “Will you marry me soon, Big D? You name the date and I’ll be there.”

Mya had shown her unpredictability again, but in the best of ways.

“October the thirty-first?” he asked. “I can’t think of a better day for Death to marry a vampire queen.”

“Halloween it is!” she agreed, and as they kissed to seal the deal, Gnarly once more erupted into applause.

And then the celebrations continued because right now the village was together and good things were ahead.

The End



Will Mya and Death’s nuptials go without a hitch? Find out in **Good Suck with the Wedding**. Out in 2024.

For release news on this book make sure to sign up to my newsletter:

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ABOUT ANDIE



Andie M. Long lives in Sheffield, UK, with her long-suffering partner, her son, and a gorgeous Whippet furbaby. She's addicted to coffee and Toblerone.

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OTHER

DARK AND TWISTED FAIRY TALES

Caging Ella

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Filthy Rich Vampires – Reverse Harem

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